

**THE EMBODIMENT OF SUBJECTIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY
MAGHREBI AND FRENCH CINEMAS**

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Abstract

This thesis examines a cluster of recent films that feature people of Maghrebi heritage and position corporeality as a site through which subjectivity and self-other relations are constituted and experienced. These films are set in and between the countries of the Maghreb, France and, to a lesser degree, Switzerland, and often adopt a sensual aesthetic that prioritises embodied knowledge, the interrelation of the senses and the material realities of emotional experience. However, despite the importance of the body in these films, no study to date has taken corporeality as its primary point of concern. Existing research in French and Francophone Studies focuses almost exclusively on the socio-political issues raised by the phenomenon of French “*beur*” cinema (films by and/or about young Maghrebi-French people), meaning that there has been no extended scholarly investigation into the importance of corporeality in recent films featuring people of Maghrebi heritage. Underpinned by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that interweaves corporeal phenomenology with theological and feminist scholarship on the body from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this thesis seeks to provide the first longitudinal and comparative account of how Maghrebi people of different genders, ethnicities, sexualities, ages and classes have been represented corporeally in post-millennial Maghrebi and French cinemas. Via its acute focus on images of people of Maghrebi heritage and how their representations show them engaging with their environments through their bodies, this thesis is the first to apply the recent turn to corporeal phenomenology in Film Studies and feminism to critical interrogations of Maghrebi identities in Maghrebi and French films since the new millennium.

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Declaration

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Introduction

Towards the middle of Tony Gatlif's road movie, *Exils*, a young Maghrebi-French woman and her French *pied-noir* boyfriend find themselves on a hot and crowded train on the way to Algiers.¹ Unlike her male counterpart, the young woman, Naïma (Lubna Azabal), seems agitated and sits on the floor, biting her nails anxiously. As she sits, the use of tight spatial framing combines with the increasingly invasive sounds of the train to communicate her feelings of claustrophobia and confinement. After a couple of seconds, the camera cuts to a low-angle medium close-up of a local veiled woman as a bead of sweat trickles down her forehead and onto Naïma's uncovered shoulder. As the bead of sweat hits the heroine's skin, the diegetic sound stops and a shot/reverse shot shows the two women looking at one another curiously. Not only is their intercultural encounter mediated through their bodies, but they are momentarily connected by the droplet of bodily fluid that passes between the surfaces of their skin.

The emphasis this sequence places on the body, the senses and the emotions is reflective of a cluster of recent films that feature Maghrebi and French (and to a lesser degree Swiss) characters of Maghrebi heritage, and position corporeality as a site through which subjectivity and self-other relations are constituted and experienced. These films are set in and between the countries of the Maghreb, France and, in some cases, Switzerland, and often adopt a sensual aesthetic that prioritises embodied knowledge, the interrelation of the senses and the material realities of emotional experience. However, despite the importance of the body in these films, no study to date has taken corporeality as its primary point of concern. In

¹ *Exils*, dir. by Tony Gatlif (Home Vision Entertainment, 2004). The term *pied-noir* refers to Europeans who settled in Algeria during the colonial era, the vast majority of whom later fled following the end of the Algerian War (1954-62).

the field of French and Francophone Studies, existing research focuses almost exclusively on the phenomenon of French “*beur*” cinema, probing the extent to which this body of films is able to negotiate a space for Maghrebi-French people in contemporary French society.² As a result, there has been less research into questions of subjectivity and no extended scholarly investigation has examined the importance of the body for expressing identity in recent films featuring people of Maghrebi heritage.

To begin to address this gap in the field, this thesis seeks to provide the first longitudinal and comparative account of how Maghrebi people of different genders, ethnicities, sexualities, ages and classes have been represented corporeally in post-millennial Maghrebi and French cinemas. This introduction begins by highlighting the key role that corporeality plays in articulating identity and the emotions in films featuring Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) people. It then outlines this study’s conceptual framework and summarises the reasons why an interdisciplinary approach that interweaves corporeal phenomenology and film theory with (feminist) scholarship on the body from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) can elucidate our understanding of the representations of embodied subjectivity in these films. Via its acute focus on images of people of Maghrebi heritage and how their representations show them engaging with their environments through their bodies, this thesis is the first to apply the recent turn to corporeal phenomenology in Film Studies and feminism to critical interrogations of Maghrebi identities in Maghrebi and French films since the new millennium.

² “*Beur*” cinema is a term used to refer to a number of documentaries, videos, Super-8 films and full-length features that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in France and were by and/or about young French people of Maghrebi heritage. These films often focused on young, heterosexual Maghrebi-French men who lived in the urban peripheries of major cities. “*Beur*” cinema is a contested term and nebulous category that has been rejected by many as essentialist. For a detailed examination of the arguments and issues surrounding the label “*beur*”, see: Will Higbee, *Post-Beur Cinema: North African Émigré and Maghrebi-French Filmmaking in France since 2000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 9-13.

Before examining the issue of corporeality as it relates to filmic representations of Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) subjectivities, it is necessary to provide some explanation of the terminology adopted throughout this thesis. Following Sylvie Durmelat and Vinay Swamy, I understand the Maghreb ‘to designate the former French colonies of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, north of the Atlas Mountains, and in contrast with the territories to the east, known as the *Machrek* (sometimes transliterated from the Arabic as *Mashreq* or *Machreq*)’.³ Throughout this study, I refer to people from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco as Maghrebi, but recognise that this label could be seen to be reductive as it groups people according to a regional identity that disregards other (ethnic, gendered, sexual, and national) modes of affiliation.⁴ I do not wish to homogenise important differences and understand that people in and from the Maghreb often identify more with national or ethnic identities (particularly those of Berber heritage). However, I believe that the term Maghrebi is useful shorthand for referring to people (or films) that originate from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco as it acknowledges their shared history, geography and culture.⁵

By contrast, I use the term Maghrebi-French/Swiss to refer to people of Maghrebi origin who were born and/or raised in France or Switzerland. For Will Higbee, this appellation is problematic because it implies a clear-cut division between ‘two distinct national histories, cultural identities and social realities, whose relationship (due to a shared colonial past) is contested, complex and uneven in

³ Sylvie Durmelat and Vinay Swamy, ‘Introduction’, in *Screening Integration: Recasting Maghrebi Immigration in France*, ed. by Sylvie Durmelat and Vinay Swamy (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2011), pp. 1-24 (pp. 118-19).

⁴ Will Higbee, ‘Le Cinéma maghrébin vu de l’autre côté de la Méditerranée: cinéma national/transnational/diasporique’, *Africultures*, 89 (2012), 102-14 (p. 103).

⁵ I expand upon the importance of understanding the Maghreb in regional terms on pp. 19-23 of this introduction.

terms of cultural, political and economic power'.⁶ Despite these potential pitfalls, however, Higbee argues that the term 'at least attempts to articulate the bi-cultural identity of French descendants of North African immigrants' and therefore enables us to '[move] beyond the generational specificity of the term *beur*'.⁷ Like Higbee, I recognise the problems with using an umbrella term like Maghrebi-French, but find it preferable to previous labels, such as "*beur*", which have largely been rejected as essentialist. Wherever possible, I try to use specific designations that take into account individuals' self-definitions and national or ethnic origins. Having outlined the terminology at use throughout this study, this introduction now outlines the integral role that the body plays in films featuring people of Maghrebi heritage in and across the countries of the Maghreb and France.

The Embodiment of Subjectivity in Contemporary Maghrebi and French Cinemas

The importance of corporeality for understanding Maghrebi cinemas has been confirmed in an interview with the key veteran Tunisian filmmaker, Nouri Bouzid. Despite Islamic aniconism, Bouzid argues that the body plays a 'fundamental' role in Maghrebi cinemas as it represents an 'extraordinary area of expression' and 'the most important vector of dramatic technique and conflicts, dramas, characters'.⁸ Since around the early 1980s, the body has been a crucial point of focus in much Maghrebi filmmaking with many key directors emphasising its expressive qualities and important role in communicating their protagonists' interior emotions. Whereas *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* represented the lived and embodied existences of rural Algerian women, *L'Homme des cendres* used the suffering and

⁶ Higbee, *Post-Beur Cinema*, p. 23.

⁷ Higbee, *Post-Beur Cinema*, p. 23.

⁸ Nouri Bouzid, 'On Inspiration', *African Experiences of Cinema*, ed. by Mbye Cham (London: British Film Institute, 1996), pp. 48-59 (p. 55).

emasculated bodies of its adult protagonists to criticise the sexual abuse they experienced as children.⁹ In *Les Silences du palais*, Moufida Tlatli foregrounded servant women's lived and material experiences of sexual exploitation in the palace of the Bey of Tunisia in the 1950s.¹⁰ Despite differences in approach, these canonical films positioned their protagonists' bodies as vehicles through which they could examine the socio-political realities of the present and those of the colonial past.

The importance of these examples notwithstanding, relatively few films were made in the 1980s and 1990s because of strict censorship laws and a lack of state support across the countries of the Maghreb.¹¹ Since the turn of the century, there has been a rise in production and a growing number of Maghrebi films have been able to tackle increasingly "taboo" topics, such as religion, women's rights and (male) same-sex desire. In *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, Roy Armes attributes this increased liberalism to the emergence of a new generation of Maghrebi directors, who were born after independence and 'have experienced the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and life under often brutal dictatorships'.¹² Unlike the first generation of filmmakers, these directors have no first-hand experience of colonialism and are therefore more concerned with criticising 'a maladministration occurring in the present' than the faults of the colonial past.¹³ Many of these directors are women, who have been educated abroad and, according to Armes, are '[changing] the way in which a whole array of aspects of Arab society are experienced and depicted'.¹⁴ To a greater degree than most of their predecessors, these new directors are unafraid to challenge

⁹ *La Noubia des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, dir. by Assia Djebar (1978); *L'Homme des cendres*, dir. by Nouri Bouzid (Arab Film Distribution, 1986).

¹⁰ *Les Silences du palais*, dir. by Moufida Tlatli (Capitol Films, 1994).

¹¹ Space prevents me from outlining the historical contexts of Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan cinemas in the 1980s and 1990s, but see: Roy Armes, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005) for a detailed overview.

¹² Roy Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 11.

¹³ Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 14.

dominant societal mores and often use their protagonists' embodied experiences to criticise societal inequalities in and across the countries of the Maghreb.

Though, as I will argue shortly, the work of this new cohort of Maghrebi filmmakers is one of the major reasons why we need to analyse post-millennial Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan cinemas in tandem with one another and their former colonial power, it is also important to consider how their representations of the body might be inflected by national histories, individual 'film [...] policies and economies as well as certain aspects of film aesthetics'.¹⁵ In post-millennial Algerian cinema, for instance, Ratiba Hadj-Moussa argues that women are the focal point and it is against '[their] bodies that all the contradictions of Algeria surface'.¹⁶ Whereas *Rachida* tells the story of a young Algerian school teacher who is shot in the womb by terrorists because she refuses to carry a bomb to the school where she works, *Viva Laldjérie* focuses on an urban woman called Goucem (Lubna Azabal) who spends the latter half of the film searching for the body of her murdered best friend and prostitute Fifi (Nadia Kaci).¹⁷ These films not only foreground women's lived and material experiences of the recent Algerian civil war, but also use their protagonists' abused or absent bodies as metaphors for the Algerian nation and the wider national tragedy.¹⁸

¹⁵ Patricia Caillé, "'Cinemas of the Maghreb': Reflections on the Transnational and Polycentric Dimensions of Regional Cinema', *Studies in French Cinema*, 13 (2013), 241-56 (p. 253).

¹⁶ Ratiba Hadj-Moussa, 'Marginality and Ordinary Memory: Body Centrality and Plea for Recognition in Recent Algerian Films', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 13 (2008), 187-99 (p. 192).

¹⁷ *Rachida*, dir. by Yamina Bachir-Chouikh (Global Film Initiative, 2002); *Viva Laldjérie*, dir. by Nadir Moknèche (Les Films du Losange, 2004). Armes points out that *Rachida* is the 'first 35mm feature film for cinema release to be directed by an Algerian woman'. Djebar made *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* in 1978, but this was a 16mm work for television release. See: Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Otherwise known as the "black decade", the Algerian civil war began in 1992 when the army cancelled the second round of parliamentary elections to stop the Islamist party, the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), gaining power. The civil war led to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians and forced many 'leading filmmakers, actors and technicians [...] into exile'. Armes, *Postcolonial Images*, p. 56. It officially ended in around 2000 when Bouteflika offered an armistice to guerrilla fighters. See Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (London: Yale University

In Tunisia, Robert Lang argues that filmmakers are quite unique in their ‘willingness to show the body’ and explore ‘public/societal problems in the private terms of sexuality’.¹⁹ Following Bouzid’s candid exploration of sexual taboos in *L’Homme des cendres*, Lang believes that Tunisian directors are ‘generally not interested in, nor perhaps even capable of, making films without the “body”’ or a frank depiction of sexuality.²⁰ This point is illustrated clearly by the subject matter and style of a number of recent Tunisian films. For instance, *La Saison des hommes* and *Le Chant des mariées* both adopt a deeply sensual aesthetic to represent the erotic desires of groups of Tunisian women.²¹ More recently, Mehdi Ben Attia’s first film, *Le Fil*, focuses on a cross-class love affair between a wealthy Tunisian man named Malik (Antonin Stahly Viswandhan) and his mother’s handyman Bilal (Selim Kechiouche).²² This latter film, in particular, foregrounds the extent to which desire is felt at the level of the body and causes its protagonists to act against the prevailing morality in contemporary Tunisian society. Though different in terms of context and content, all of these films offer candid representations of the body and are unafraid to highlight their characters’ “transgressive” sexual desires.

In the run up to and after the recent Tunisian revolution, a number of Tunisian films have interrogated the impact of religious fundamentalism upon their characters’ embodied existences and identities.²³ Whereas *Making of* uses an

Press, 2007), pp. 177-292. For more on the impact of the civil war on the Algerian film industry, see: Guy Austin, *Algerian National Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 141-46.

¹⁹ Robert Lang, *New Tunisian Cinema: Allegories of Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 38.

²⁰ Lang, p. 35.

²¹ *La Saison des hommes*, dir. by Moufida Tlatli (ICA Projects, 2000); *Le Chant des mariées*, dir. by Karin Albou (Cineuropa, 2008).

²² *Le Fil*, dir. by Mehdi Ben Attia (Cineuropa, 2009).

²³ In January 2011, the Tunisian nation rose up in protest against authoritarianism, corruption, youth unemployment, censorship and widespread human rights violations. After three weeks of protests, the Tunisian president, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, fled the country and left his prime minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, in charge. Following the collapse of the regime, the political landscape became increasingly pluralistic and previously banned parties, such as Al-Nahda, were allowed to partake in party politics. In Tunisia’s first democratic elections on 23 October 2011, Al-Nahda won 41% of the

experimental approach to represent a confused young break dancer who commits suicide after he is indoctrinated by Islamic fundamentalists, *Millefeuille* foregrounds two young Tunisian women who are struggling for the right to dress and define their bodies as they please after the uprising in 2011.²⁴ In both of these films, the representation of the central characters' bodies is directly impacted by recent socio-political events that have occurred within the Tunisian nation's borders.

In Morocco, a number of recent films have also started to criticise the restrictions that patriarchal religious traditions place upon women and men's embodied identities and desires. In 2005, Laïla Marrakchi's highly controversial film, *Marock*, foregrounded a sexual relationship between a Muslim girl and a Jewish boy in urban Casablanca.²⁵ The film was extremely popular with domestic audiences, but, as Sandra Gayle Carter points out, 'raised a hue and cry' in Morocco because it condemned the manner in which dominant religious discourses operate through women's bodies to place limitations on their corporeal behaviours and desires.²⁶ Similarly, Abdellah Taïa's landmark semi-autobiographical film, *L'Armée du salut*, sparked controversy because of its candid representation of a teenage boy's (homo)sexual awakening and corporeal alienation within the heteronormative structures of rural Moroccan society.²⁷ Though the film was heavily criticised in Morocco, it was still shown in cinema theatres across the country and was even

seats in parliament; however, many secularists feared that the party would implement strict Islamic laws and place increased restrictions on women's secular freedoms. The people thus called for the removal of Al-Nahda and, in October 2013, the party stepped down from power. In a fresh round of presidential elections in 2014, Beji Caid Essebsi of the secularist Nidaa Tounes party was elected as President. For more on the Tunisian uprising, see: *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

²⁴ *Making of*, dir. by Nouri Bouzid (Les Films de l'Atlante, 2006); *Millefeuille*, dir. by Nouri Bouzid (Cineuropa, 2012).

²⁵ *Marock*, dir. by Laïla Marrakchi (Cineuropa, 2005).

²⁶ Sandra Gayle Carter, *What Moroccan Cinema?: A Historical and Critical Study, 1956-2006* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 272-3. For more on the drama caused by *Marock* in Morocco, see: Valérie K. Orlando, *Screening Morocco: Contemporary Film in a Changing Society* (Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2011), p. 45.

²⁷ *L'Armée du salut*, dir. by Abdellah Taïa (Cineuropa, 2014).

nominated for the Grand Prix at the Tangiers Film Festival in 2014. Conversely, Nabil Ayouch's most recent film, *Much Loved*, was banned in Morocco because of its subversive representations of the exposed and sensuous bodies of a group of female prostitutes.²⁸

The banning of *Much Loved* notwithstanding, many Moroccan films are increasingly able to criticise the status quo because of the loosened restrictions on the Moroccan cinematic industry in recent years. Since the ascension of King Mohamed VI in 1999, censorship laws have been relaxed and the *Centre Cinématographique Marocain* (CCM) has actively supported a broad range of filmmakers, including women and Berbers. Moreover, Moroccan films have been generously supported by the Moroccan government and are starting to attract large domestic audiences. As Kevin Dwyer points out, 'a healthy number of films has been produced in the past few years and the Moroccan public' has welcomed them 'with great enthusiasm and support'.²⁹ By contrast, Tunisian films are rarely viewed by domestic viewers because of limited state support and the popularity of foreign products. Likewise, the Algerian cinema industry is largely dependent on foreign investment and has seen a sharp decline in the number of cinema theatres in operation across the country in recent years.³⁰ For Valérie Orlando, this combination of factors has allowed Moroccan cinema to '[surpass] its Maghrebian neighbours' in terms of 'quality, scope, and number of films produced per year'.³¹

²⁸ *Much Loved*, dir. by Nabil Ayouch (Pyramide Distribution, 2015). Elsa Keslassy, 'Cannes Exec "Stupefied" by Morocco's Ban on Prostitution Drama "Much Loved"', *Variety*, (2015), <<http://variety.com/2015/film/global/directors-fortnight-topper-denounces-moroccos-ban-on-nabil-ayouchs-much-loved-1201507995/>> [accessed 10 August 2015].

²⁹ Kevin Dwyer, 'Moroccan Cinema and the Promotion of Culture', in *North African Cinema in a Global Context: Through the Lens of Diaspora*, ed. by Andrea Khalil (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1-10 (p. 2).

³⁰ Caillé, pp. 245-6.

³¹ Orlando, *Screening Morocco*, p. 13.

Despite differences in terms of historical context and production histories, the films outlined above all offer subversive representations of the body and adopt a sensual filming style that accentuates the interrelation of the senses and the material realities of emotional experience. Crucially, this sustained attention to embodiment is also the feature of a number of recent films that foreground Maghrebi-French characters and are set in and between France and the countries of the Maghreb. As we saw at the beginning of this introduction, *Exils* shows its central protagonists leaving the French *métropole* to “return” to their (parents’) “homeland” in Algeria. Once in Algeria, the central heroine feels uneasy and her sense of alienation is articulated on her body and through her emotions. In the context of France itself, there has also been a rise in the number of films that foreground the bodies and desires of queer and cross-dressing men of Maghrebi heritage. For instance, films such as *Change-moi ma vie* and *Un fils* use their protagonists’ material corporeal exteriors to communicate their inner emotions and (repressed) sexual desires.³² This overview thus suggests that the concepts of the body and embodiment are crucial for understanding films from the countries of the Maghreb, but also those that feature Maghrebi-French people and are set further afield in France.

Because of their focus on embodied subjectivities, some of the films discussed above are included in the primary corpus for this thesis, which is comprised of eleven fictional films that feature people of Maghrebi heritage and are set in the countries of the Maghreb, France and, in one case, Switzerland. *Exils*, *Bled*

³² *Change-moi ma vie*, dir. by Liria Bégéja (Pan Européenne Production, 2001); *Un fils*, dir. by Amal Bedjaoui (Eurozoom, 2003). Following Nick Rees-Roberts, I understand the term “queer” to mean the destabilisation of ‘all normative or “straight” representations of gender and sexuality, hetero or homo’. I recognise that my usage of this term could be seen to be problematic as it runs the risk of imposing a Western sexual (dis-)identity category onto representations of non-Western subjects in and from the Maghreb. Though I use the term “queer” to refer to non-normative expressions of desire in this introduction, I explore the arguments surrounding its appropriateness for understanding the films and subjects in this corpus in detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Nick Rees-Roberts, *French Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 5.

number one and *La Fille de Keltoum* use their Maghrebi-French/Swiss protagonists' embodied encounters with their "homeland" to explore questions of identity and belonging; *Satin rouge*, *L'Enfant endormi*, *La Graine et le mulet*, *Amours voilées* and *Millefeuille* examine the impact of patriarchal and/or religious discourses upon Maghrebi(-French) women's embodied identities; and, *Tarik el hob*, *Un fils* and *L'Armée du salut* interrogate the relationship between space, sexuality and embodied notions of subjectivity in films that foreground men of Maghrebi heritage who desire other men.³³ Despite significant differences in approach, all of the films selected for this study's final corpus highlight the pivotal role that corporeality plays in articulating subjectivity, the emotions and self-other relations amongst representations of people of Maghrebi heritage.

However, if these films prioritise corporeality and the multi-sensuous, it may not have escaped the reader's attention that most of them foreground the bodies and desires of women and queer men of Maghrebi heritage. This focus is arguably reflective of broader trends in Maghrebi filmmaking, in which straight men are rarely represented corporeally, partly because such an approach could be seen to be feminising, and partly because their bodies and desires are not considered to be sources of contention in the patriarchal and heteronormative cultures of the Maghreb and France. Moreover, despite the sustained attention to women's rights in the films cited above, there are no explicit representations of queer women of Maghrebi heritage in Maghrebi and French cinemas as female same-sex desire appears to

³³ *Tarik el hob*, dir. by Rémi Lange (Arab Film Distribution, 2001); *La Fille de Keltoum*, dir. by Mehdi Charef (CineFile, 2002); *Satin rouge*, dir. by Raja Amari (Zeitgeist Video, 2002); *L'Enfant endormi*, dir. by Yasmine Kassari (Filmmuseum Distributie, 2004); *Bled number one*, dir. by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche (Les Films du Losange, 2006); *La Graine et le mulet*, dir. by Abdellatif Kechiche (Pathé Distribution, 2007); *Amours voilées*, dir. by Aziz Salmy (Les Films du Cléopâtre, 2008).

remain too taboo a topic to be tackled.³⁴ As a result, this study focuses predominantly on films featuring heterosexual women and queer men, but still seeks to illustrate the importance of the body for understanding a broad range of Maghrebi subjectivities.

The shortcomings of filmmaking in the region notwithstanding, it is worth reiterating that films featuring Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) people are increasingly able to offer diverse and challenging representations of the body and embodiment. As touched upon earlier, this increased liberalism is largely attributable to the fact that many of the films cited above are made by the new generation of Maghrebi directors who live in France and have studied in French or Belgian film schools, such as *La Fémis* or the *Institut Supérieur des Arts* (INSAS). Unlike their counterparts in the Maghreb, these directors are arguably more likely to tackle societal taboos, such as women's rights and homosexuality, because they are funded by French production companies and do not have to fear the threat of repercussions or state censorship. Their interstitial position might thus explain their ability to offer vocal criticisms of dominant societal mores in the Maghreb; however, it also problematises the notion of a "national cinema" and highlights the value of a transnational approach for understanding filmmaking in the region. In what follows, I examine the interstitial status of these directors (and their films) in greater detail in order to underscore the need for a transnational approach that looks at Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan cinemas in tandem with another, but also their former colonial power.

³⁴ One exception to this trend is *Bedwin Hacker*, dir. by Nadia el Fani (Cinema Libre Studio, 2003), which hints at the possibility of same-sex desire between women in the Maghreb. Outside of the Maghreb, *Caramel*, dir. by Nadine Labaki (Europa Corp, 2007) and *Circumstance*, dir. by Maryam Keshavarz (Homescreen, 2011) provide more daring representations of female same-sex desire; however, as a rule, lesbianism is under-represented in the cinemas of the Maghreb and the Middle East more generally.

From Transnationalism to Transvergence: Situating Maghrebi and French Cinemas

Although Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco are distinct countries with their own histories, cultures and (cinematic) traditions, it should be noted that they also share many commonalities, including their colonial past and arid desert landscape, the same official language (Arabic) and religion (Islam), and the longstanding presence of Berber and Jewish communities throughout their territories. Because the Maghreb was invaded by the Arabs in the sixth century and the French in the nineteenth century, Florence Martin argues that it has a ‘plural affiliation: to Muslim practices and cultural customs inherited from an Arabic past on the one hand, and to mostly French-inflected secular values on the other’.³⁵ Today, the region is largely made up of Arab Muslim subjects; however, Martin points out that it also ‘hosts other very significant groups’, such as ‘the Imazighen [or Berbers] [...] who have lived there since pre-Islamic times [...] and the Jews whose presence in the region ‘[dates] back to the foundation of Carthage (800 BC)’.³⁶ In tandem with the region’s shared cultural history and geography, the presence of both the Berbers and the Jews destabilises arbitrary national boundaries and undermines attempts to understand Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in isolation from one another or their ex-colonial power.³⁷

In terms of filmmaking itself, the recent rise in the number of émigré directors and Maghrebi filmmakers receiving formal film training in France highlights the continued connections between the cinemas of France and the Maghreb. Whereas émigré directors, such as Merzak Allouache and Mahmoud

³⁵ Florence Martin, *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women’s Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 3.

³⁶ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 5.

³⁷ For a detailed overview of this history of North Africa from the antiquity to the present, see Phillip C. Naylor, *North Africa: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

Zemmouri, live in exile in France, many of the new generation of Maghrebi filmmakers, such as Yasmine Kassari, Narjiss Nejjar, Laïla Marrakchi and Raja Amari, have attended prestigious film schools in France or Belgium. As mentioned earlier, these directors are often able to offer candid critiques of their home countries and frequently approach subjects, such as the body and sexuality, in a manner that is 'closer to their French contemporaries [...] than to traditional attitudes in the Maghreb'.³⁸ Furthermore, Higbee points out that the work of this new generation of directors is often purposely aimed at French spectators 'à cause de l'histoire coloniale partagée entre la France et le Maghreb, mais aussi parce qu'un grand nombre de cinéastes maghrébins vivent et travaillent en France depuis des années 1980'.³⁹ Because of France's colonial history and post-colonial relations with the countries of the Maghreb, Maghrebi films often include French dialogue or are subtitled in French and tend to be distributed in mainland France. What is more, France has long been the principal co-producer of filmmaking in the region and plays a powerful role in deciding which films are financially supported, produced and distributed. This funding relationship certainly confirms the enduring cultural and economic hegemony of the former colonial power; however, it also undermines national distinctions and underscores the complex links between the cinematic industries of France and the Maghreb. Armes thus concludes that national identity is an inappropriate concept in relation to Maghrebi films as they are rarely aimed at

³⁸ Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 13.

³⁹ Higbee, 'Le Cinéma maghrébin', pp. 104-5. Patricia Caillé backs up this point in a recent article, in which she states that '[a]n "Algerian" film draws on average 50,000 spectators in France, many more than in Algeria itself, where for a variety of reasons, distribution and exhibition are currently non-existent. Similarly a "Tunisian" film draws on average 44,000 spectators in France, again greater than in Tunisia, where there are only fifteen commercial cinemas in operation across the whole country. In contrast, a "Moroccan" film draws on average 26,000 spectators in France, whereas a popular Moroccan comedy with no prospects in Europe can attract 300,000 spectators in Morocco, due to the more favourable conditions for distribution and exhibition than in either Algeria or Tunisia'. See: Caillé, pp. 245-6.

local audiences (except perhaps in Morocco), are often funded by France, and are unlikely ‘to recover [their] costs in the domestic market’.⁴⁰

The value of a transnational approach for understanding films featuring embodied Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) subjects certainly seems to be axiomatic; however, Patricia Caillé argues that a transnational perspective can be seen to be homogenising as it ‘risks bypassing specific national histories’ and ‘individual national film histories, policies and economies’.⁴¹ Because a transnational approach could be criticised for overlooking local specificities and disregarding post-colonial imbalances of power, it may be more useful to examine these films through the lens of Higbee’s work on “transvergent cinema”. In ‘Beyond the (Trans)National: Towards a Cinema of Transvergence in Postcolonial and Diasporic Francophone Cinema(s)’, Higbee proposes his concept of a cinema of transvergence as a means to better understand ‘the complex relationship between national, transnational and postcolonial/diasporic cinemas’ in the Francophone world.⁴² Drawing upon Marcus Novak’s notion of transvergence and Deleuze and Guattari’s work on the rhizome, Higbee claims that transvergent cinema occupies multiple and shifting sites that offer an ‘open-ended challenge to the fixed positionings typically offered by hegemonic structures of knowledge and power’.⁴³ In contrast to (trans)national approaches, Higbee’s concept of transvergence highlights the critical role that post-colonial and diasporic histories play in the work of some of the directors who might be associated

⁴⁰ Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 19. Armes also points out that ‘[e]ven in Morocco, which has consistently produced a dozen or more features a year (with levels reaching two dozen by 2011), investment in local production amounts to barely a tenth of that invested annually by foreign production companies using Morocco as a location for films or television productions with quite alien values’. *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Caillé, p. 253.

⁴² Will Higbee, ‘Beyond the (Trans)National: Towards a Cinema of Transvergence in Postcolonial and Diasporic Francophone Cinema(s)’, *Studies in French Cinema*, 7 (2007), 79-91 (p. 79).

⁴³ Higbee, ‘Beyond the (Trans)National’, p. 85.

with transnational filmmaking. For Higbee, this intervention is important because it positions:

the notion of a cinema of transvergence as a powerful means of analysing postcolonial and diasporic cinema in terms of transcultural phenomena that operate on both a transnational level – the relationship between the global and the local – and within the context of specific national cinemas and films cultures.⁴⁴

Whereas a transnational approach might be seen to obscure national (cinematic) histories and blur the hierarchies of economic, cultural and political power that affect a film's production, consumption and distribution, Higbee believes that his concept of a cinema of transvergence exposes 'the discontinuity, difference and imbalances of power that exist between various film-makers, film cultures and film industries as well as the elements of interconnectedness that may bind a film-maker to a given film culture or national identity at a given time'.⁴⁵ To illustrate these points, Higbee examines the work of two émigré directors – Mahmoud Zemmouri and Merzak Allouache – who are influenced by French film history and aesthetics, but also foreground themes and socio-political issues that are reflective of their émigré status and Algerian heritage. For Higbee, the work of these directors occupies a 'position that, at different times and in different contexts, alternates "between" French and Algerian cinema, while still maintaining a distinct position "within" the two film cultures and industries'.⁴⁶ Higbee thus concludes that Zemmouri and Allouache illustrate 'how the concept of a cinema of transvergence can begin to tease out the complexities of diasporic and postcolonial cinema in the (trans)national context'.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Higbee, 'Beyond the (Trans)National', p. 87.

⁴⁵ Higbee, 'Beyond the (Trans)National', p. 87.

⁴⁶ Higbee, 'Beyond the (Trans)National', p. 88.

⁴⁷ Higbee, 'Beyond the (Trans)National', p. 90.

Higbee's work is vital for this thesis as many of the films that constitute this study's central corpus are international co-productions, have received French funding, and/or are made by directors of Maghrebi origin who live and work or study in France or Belgium. Understanding these films in purely national or transnational terms could be seen to be reductive as it might neglect to take into account the legacy of colonialism or the continuing impact of post-colonial imbalances of power on their directors' cinematic practice. Following Higbee, I therefore understand the films in this corpus to be "transvergent" insofar as they function and produce meaning both within and across national and regional contexts, but also in relation to post-colonial and diasporic histories between France and the Maghreb.

Surveying the Literature: Cinematic Representations of People of Maghrebi Heritage

Despite the transvergent dimensions of filmmaking in the region, current research into cinematic representations of people of Maghrebi heritage often concentrates on either the individual countries of the Maghreb or France. In the context of the Maghreb, this emphasis on the national is somewhat surprising as Roy Armes – one of the main pioneers of research in this field – has long championed the value of a regional (and even transnational) approach for understanding films and filmmakers from the Maghreb. In a series of important books, including *Post-Colonial Images: Studies in North African Film*, *African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara* and, most recently, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, Armes provides a set of comprehensive introductions to key directors, films, aesthetic trends and historical moments in post-colonial filmmaking in and across the countries of the Maghreb

(and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East more broadly).⁴⁸ His work has played a crucial role in articulating the regional dimension of Maghrebi cinemas, identifying a corpus of canonical films and introducing readers to previously unknown directors from the countries of the Maghreb.

Since the new decade, critics have built upon the foundations established in Armes' work by attempting to expand scholarly knowledge of the individual national cinemas of the Maghreb. For instance, *Screening Morocco: Contemporary Film in a Changing Society* focuses on Moroccan films that have been made since the death of King Hassan II in 1999; *Algerian National Cinema* provides an overview of Algerian cinema from independence to the present day; and *New Tunisian Cinema: Allegories of Resistance* analyses the allegorical tendencies in Tunisian filmmaking since the 1980s. In contrast to these three studies, *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema* draws on the work of Maghrebi feminists, as well as post-colonial and transnational theorists, to examine how films made by and/or about women from the Maghreb 'use the screen to project women-made images of women and play with the polysemy of the hijab'.⁴⁹ This latter book provides an important precursor for this study as it adopts a regional perspective and examines women's important, yet overlooked role in Maghrebi cinemas. However, *Screens and Veils* also differs significantly from the overarching approach of this thesis as it focuses solely on women, does not include films that are set in France and, most importantly, does not take the body as its main point of focus.

⁴⁸ Armes, *Post-Colonial Images*; Roy Armes, *African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*.

⁴⁹ Orlando, *Screening Morocco*; Austin; Lang; Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 3.

In the context of France, as mentioned earlier, existing research has focused predominantly on the socio-political issues raised by French “*beur*” cinema.⁵⁰ In her ground-breaking monograph, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France*, Carrie Tarr argues that “*beur*” cinema is androcentric and assimilationist, but nonetheless holds the potential to ‘[reframe] the way in which difference [has been] conceptualised’ in republican France.⁵¹ Building upon Tarr’s pioneering research, Sylvie Durmelat and Vinay Swamy’s edited collection, *Screening Integration: Recasting Immigration in Contemporary France*, assesses the extent to which recent films by and/or about Maghrebi-French people might be able to ‘trace new paths to defining and inhabiting Frenchness’.⁵² More recently, Higbee’s monograph, *Post-Beur Cinema: North African Émigré and Maghrebi-French Filmmaking in France since 2000*, uses critical debates on (trans)nationalism in Film Studies to examine the developments in Maghrebi-French and North African émigré filmmaking since the year 2000.⁵³ Higbee argues that what he terms ‘Post-Beur Cinema of the 2000s embraces a far greater range of narrative themes and genres than before, as well as representing a more diverse spectrum of socio-economic spaces and geographical locations’.⁵⁴ For all of these critics, post-millennial films featuring Maghrebi-French characters are not only able to address a broader range of

⁵⁰ Research into the cinematic representation of people of Maghrebi heritage is largely concentrated in French and Francophone Studies because of France’s colonial history and contemporary migration patterns, but also because Maghrebi-French people have been a relatively prominent presence on French cinematic screens since the 1980s. Middle Eastern Studies has often overlooked the Maghreb, because of its unique geographical position in-between the East and the West.

⁵¹ Carrie Tarr, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 2. Tarr recognises the problems with categorising films by and/or about Maghrebi-French people under the label of “*beur*” cinema, but argues that ‘individuals of Maghrebi descent (a heterogeneous and permeable category) have experienced sets of social relations and discourses which potentially inflect their cinematic production differently from those of their white peers. The grouping of their films not only draws attention to their achievements but provides a perspective on the (changing) significance of ethnic difference at a particular period in French/film history’. See Tarr, *Reframing Difference*, p. 13.

⁵² Durmelat and Swamy, p. 8.

⁵³ Higbee, *Post-Beur Cinema*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Higbee, *Post-Beur Cinema*, pp. 24-5.

subjectivities and spaces, but are increasingly ‘[moving] away from topics and characters strictly related to their socioethnic [*sic*] and historical heritage’.⁵⁵

Taking note of this trend, a small number of articles and book chapters have emerged that attempt to account for the recent diversification in filmic representations of people of Maghrebi heritage. Whereas Patricia Geesey examines representations of Maghrebi-French women in France, critics like Denis M. Provencher, Nick Rees-Roberts and Darren Waldron all interrogate the recent increase in the number of French films featuring queer male characters of Maghrebi heritage.⁵⁶ These three critics agree that ‘films involving the intersection of both ethnic and sexual differences hold the radical potential to challenge the French universal model’, but remain wary of a recurrent tendency in French cinema to eroticise and exoticise the difference of queer male characters of Maghrebi heritage.⁵⁷ The work of these scholars provides a valuable starting-point from which to examine the interrelations of gender, ethnicity and desire in (self-)representations of Maghrebi-French women and men; however, once again, none of them take the body as their primary or sustained point of concern, despite the many recent films featuring Maghrebi-French characters that privilege corporeality’s role in the constitution of identity and intersubjective interactions.

Informed by philosophical debates on phenomenology and its concordant concepts from the MENA, this thesis aims to counter the conceptual lacunae in the current field of research by providing the first detailed analysis of how

⁵⁵ Durmelat and Swamy, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Patricia Geesey, ‘A Space of their Own? Women in Maghrebi-French Filmmaking’, in *Screening Integration*, pp. 161-77; Denis M. Provencher, ‘Maghrebi-French Sexual Citizens: In and Out on the Big Screen’, *Cinéaste*, 33.1 (2007), 47-51; Rees-Roberts; Darren Waldron, *Queering Contemporary French Popular Cinema: Images and their Reception* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); Darren Waldron, ‘Sexual/Social (Re)Orientations in Liria Bégéja’s *Change-moi ma vie* (2001) and Amal Bedjaoui’s *Un fils* (2003)’, in *Screening Integration*, pp. 178-93.

⁵⁷ Provencher, ‘Maghrebi-French Sexual Citizens’, p. 51. Space prevents me from defining and discussing French republican universalism here, but see: Maxim Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism, and Citizenship in Modern France* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) people of different genders, ethnicities, sexualities, ages and classes have been represented corporeally in a discrete corpus of eleven Maghrebi and French films since the year 2000. In doing so, it offers the opportunity to answer a number of key, yet largely unaddressed issues: what is the role of the body in films featuring people of Maghrebi heritage? To what extent are the films selected for this study's final corpus reflective of this focus on subjectivity as it is articulated on and through the body? In what ways do gender, ethnicity, desire, age and class interact and operate with reference to how embodied subjects appear in these films? What is the impact of external discourses, such as religion and patriarchy, upon Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) characters' embodied existences and identities? Are there times when the mind-body connection is ruptured? If so, when and why? Are Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) people positioned as passive objects for the spectator, or do they escape objectification and transcend the spectator's, at times, totalising gaze? Does the emphasis on the corporeal and the multi-sensuous allow these films to subvert the totalising (Western) sense of sight? And finally, to what extent can certain tropes and representational strategies be identified locally, regionally and even transnationally?

In order to answer these questions, this thesis is underpinned by a profoundly interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws upon the discourses of corporeal phenomenology and recent research on the body and embodiment by feminist and theological scholars in and from the MENA. Each theorist and theoretical concept is explained in detail throughout the course of this study; however, I summarise briefly below why this conceptual framework is appropriate and will enlighten my analysis of the corpus.

Understanding Maghrebi Embodiment: Corporeal Phenomenology, Islamic Mysticism and Feminist (Film) Theory

The body has been the subject of much scholarly attention across the Arts and Humanities over the past few decades; however, it has often been approached through a discursive or social constructivist framework that disregards questions of materiality and overlooks everyday lived experiences.⁵⁸ In recent years, critics have thus turned to phenomenology – and, in particular, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty – in order to (re)establish a connection between lived reality, corporeality and thought. Such an approach is arguably vital for this thesis because of the attention that recent films featuring Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) people pay to the body, the senses, and the lived and material dimensions of human existence. However, using a phenomenological framework here could also be seen to be problematic because it runs the risk of imposing a strand of philosophical thought that has evolved within a specifically Western conceptual space onto the non-Western context and subjects of the Maghreb. I am fully aware of the limitations of such an approach and do not wish to reinforce neo-colonial hierarchies of knowledge and power by applying a discourse that has origins in privileged (white) (male) French academic culture to images of often poor or rural women and men of Maghrebi heritage in the countries of the Maghreb. However, I feel that a phenomenological approach is necessary here because the films I study emphasise the body and appear to come from a culture where corporeality, the embodied and the multi-sensual are foregrounded. In the following section of this introduction, I trace the connections between (corporeal) phenomenology and feminist and theological thought on the body in and from the MENA in order to show that phenomenological concepts of the body and

⁵⁸ See, for example, Michel Foucault's work on the body as a site of discursive power in *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), or Judith Butler's writings on gender in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

embodiment are not only crucial for understanding the films in this corpus, but might already be present in aspects of Maghrebi culture and in contemporary cinematic practice in and from the Maghreb.

In *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues against Cartesian dualism that the mind and body are not separate entities, but are intimately interrelated. Taking corporeality as his starting point, Merleau-Ponty claims that ‘[l]e corps est le véhicule de l’être au monde, et avoir un corps c’est pour un vivant se joindre à un milieu défini, se confondre avec certains projets et s’y engager continuellement’.⁵⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, the body mediates all of our perceptions, experiences and sensations, and cannot be divorced from the specific spatio-temporal context(s) in which it is located. However, if the body is our principal means of engaging with the world of objects and others, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is not like any other object in the world precisely because ‘[il] se présente toujours à moi sous le même angle [...] il est toujours près de moi, toujours là pour moi [...] il demeure toujours en marge de toutes mes perceptions, [...] il est *avec moi*’ (emphasis in the original).⁶⁰ In other words, the body is always present and perspectival, and can never appear as a discrete object for the subject as s/he can never view it in its entirety.

In addition to privileging the body’s sense-making capacities, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is only through inter-corporeal interaction with other embodied beings that the subject is able to confirm her/his own being-in-the-world. For Merleau-Ponty, our bodies exist in a kind of primordial harmony with one another, but are also experienced as distinct from and different to each other’s bodies. As Sara Ahmed explains, in Merleau-Ponty’s work, those experiences that ‘make the body

⁵⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 97.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, p. 106.

“my body” [...] are the very same experiences that open my body to other bodies [...] In this sense, “my body” does not belong to me: embodiment is what opens out the intimacy of “myself” with others’.⁶¹ In other words, Merleau-Ponty believes that the subject cannot be understood as a discrete and separate being because s/he comes into existence through interaction with the exterior world and other embodied beings. In Merleau-Ponty’s work, the body thus plays a crucial role in the formation of subjectivity and self-other relations, but can never be viewed as an object for the self as it is always lived, apprehended and experienced subjectively.

Merleau-Ponty’s work offers a fruitful lens through which to understand cinematic representations of embodied subjects for several reasons. Firstly, it encourages us to (re)conceptualise consciousness as incarnate and to understand representations of people of Maghrebi heritage in relation to their specific spatio-temporal contexts. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the body exists as both object (for others) and subject (for the self) can help us to see that Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) characters can be positioned as objects for the film spectator, but also transcendent subjects in their own right. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the emphasis Merleau-Ponty places on the mind-body connection is crucial because it enables us to destabilise the dominant (neo-)colonial discourses that privilege a (white) (male) thinking subject and reduce the Maghrebi body to an object of fascination and degradation. Rather than reinforcing reductive neo-colonial assumptions, Merleau-Ponty’s attention to “the body”, and questions of embodiment’ might therefore enable us to challenge what Katharina Lindner terms

⁶¹ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 40.

‘the taken-for-granted orientations, perspectives, and [...] points of view’ of dominant (disembodied) Western-centric discourses.⁶²

Because of its emphasis on subjectivity as it is experienced and manifested through the body, phenomenology chimes with certain traditions and cultural practices that are found throughout the countries of the Maghreb. One obvious example is Sufism, which forms part of the mystical branch of Islam and, as Sossie Andézian explains, ‘privilégie l’expérience sensible de la foi tout en demeurant fidèle à la Loi coranique’.⁶³ Sufism is often understood as the esoteric dimension of Islam and encourages its adherents to follow the ‘inner path (*tarīqa*) that allows [them] to attain the goals of ethical and spiritual cultivation’.⁶⁴ In contrast to Salafism, Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle argues that Sufis believe that it is possible to experience God in this world and refute ‘theologians’ reliance on rational intellect to apprehend God as purely transcendent’.⁶⁵ Sufism is thus an embodied theology that privileges the experiential dimensions of human existence and positions the body as a crucial tool for experiencing and apprehending God.

Precisely because Sufism favours the immanent and the experiential, a number of Islamic scholars and theologians have started to highlight its ability to subvert the dualistic doctrines of rationalistic philosophies and theologies. In *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabī, Gender, and Sexuality*, Sa‘diyya Shaikh argues that Sufism posits a non-dualistic conception of subjectivity that ‘[deconstructs] rigid binaries of experience and theory, emotions and rationality, embodiment and

⁶² Katharina Lindner, ‘Situated Bodies, Cinematic Orientations: Film and (Queer) Phenomenology’, in *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, ed. by Saër Maty Bâ and Will Higbee (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 152-65 (p. 152).

⁶³ Sossie Andézian, ‘Dire la transe en islam mystique: de l’expérience au langage autorisé’, *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, 111 (2000), 25-40 (p. 25).

⁶⁴ Sa‘diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabī, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 2012), p. 10.

⁶⁵ Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 2007), p. 4.

knowledge, subjectivity and objectivity'.⁶⁶ Tracing the links between Sufism and feminism, Shaikh argues that the work of the thirteenth century Sufi mystic, Ibn 'Arabī, challenges patriarchal theologies because it is underpinned by auspicious assessments of women and the body.⁶⁷ In contrast to dichotomous (Western) philosophies, Shaikh argues that Ibn 'Arabī believes that there is 'a mutual dependency between the [...] spirit and body' and that '[h]uman wholeness and completion are possible only through their union'.⁶⁸ For Shaikh, Ibn 'Arabī's work privileges the mind-body connection and champions 'the everyday mundane nature of human experience as the living canvas of spiritual praxis'.⁶⁹ From Ibn 'Arabī's perspective, the body is not only a tool to serve God, but, as Shaikh observes, the very 'locus of God's presence. In this ideal state, the human body is fully permeated with God's being, a view that radically resists [the] inclinations of a body-denigrating theology'.⁷⁰ Though Shaikh does not explicitly associate Ibn 'Arabī's theology with the insights of corporeal phenomenology, her work helps us to see that it shares many similarities with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy insofar as it undermines dualistic thought, emphasises the lived and experiential dimensions of human existence, and foregrounds the importance of the body for engaging with the world.

If Shaikh's re-reading of the work of Ibn 'Arabī posits Sufism as a non-dualistic philosophy, Kugle argues that Sufism's 'affirmation of God's immanence and fascination with God's presence [...] causes [it] to value the body in ways fuller and deeper than other Muslim authorities'.⁷¹ In *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam*, Kugle attempts to understand Sufi

⁶⁶ Shaikh, p. 97.

⁶⁷ Shaikh, p. 17.

⁶⁸ Shaikh, p. 132.

⁶⁹ Shaikh, p. 97.

⁷⁰ Shaikh, p. 135.

⁷¹ Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies*, p. 4.

conceptualisations of the body by comparing ‘the advances in the theory of embodiment presented by Western phenomenology’ to the work of a contemporary Moroccan scholar called Farīd al-Zahī.⁷² In a similar manner to phenomenology, Kugle argues that Al-Zahī (re)integrates the body and the mind and offers a holistic vision of corporeality that positions it as the core of human experience.⁷³ For Al-Zahī, the body is at once physical and social insofar as ‘its inner, personal needs and drives find fulfilment only in connection and cooperation with others’.⁷⁴ Like Merleau-Ponty, Al-Zahī positions the body as a means by which the subject is able to engage with the world and others; however, in contrast to phenomenology, Al-Zahī argues that the embodied subject has a spiritual dimension, or soul, ‘that comprehends our embodiment in a body that dies and also transcends (or struggles to transcend) its inherent limitations’.⁷⁵ Al-Zahī thus uses Islam’s cultural and spiritual heritage to destabilise the dominant (Western) idea that ‘Islam grants a special importance to body parts and organs but does not comprehend the embodied human being as a holistic entity’.⁷⁶

Kugle’s translation of the work of Al-Zahī is crucial for this thesis because it establishes explicit connections between phenomenological philosophy and aspects of Islamic culture and theology. Though clearly different in many ways, Kugle shows that phenomenology and Sufism both hold the potential to destabilise the dominant (Cartesian) ideal of a ‘hierarchically split human self, where the body and emotions are viewed as the descending and irrational [...] dimension of reality that obstructs the actualization of the spirit’.⁷⁷ His work makes a vital intervention into

⁷² Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies*, p. 16.

⁷³ Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies*, p. 17.

⁷⁴ Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies*, p. 19.

⁷⁵ Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies*, p. 20.

⁷⁶ Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies*, p. 21.

⁷⁷ Shaikh, pp. 135-6.

phenomenological thought on the body as it highlights its associations with Eastern spiritual theologies and shows that it can be used to undermine the dualistic thinking that characterises dominant theological and philosophical traditions in both the East and the West. Kugle's approach thus resonates with the wider aims of this thesis, for it stresses the importance of embodiment in Islamic cultures, and enables us to trace a sense of continuity between aspects of Eastern and Western thought that were previously considered to be incompatible.

Having explored the resonances between Western phenomenological thought and embodied spiritual traditions in the MENA, it is arguably necessary to identify some of the crucial limitations of phenomenology as a philosophical discourse. In *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur L'Extériorité*, Emmanuel Levinas criticises Merleau-Ponty for what he views as his persistent assimilation of the alterity of the "other" to the sameness of the self. For Levinas, phenomenology – and Western philosophy in general – attempts to 'neutraliser l'étant pour le comprendre ou pour le saisir. [La relation avec l'être] n'est donc pas une relation avec l'autre comme tel, mais la réduction de l'Autre au Même'.⁷⁸ In contrast, Levinas believes that the "other" is fundamentally enigmatic and unknowable and cannot be understood in terms of symmetry or a mirroring reciprocity. He argues that self-other relations are inevitably fraught because the "other" destabilises the subject's sovereignty and forces her/him to recognise that the world is not hers/his alone. However, rather than creating a hierarchical relationship between the self and the "other", Levinas believes that this radical inequity is actually more ethical as it refuses to reduce alterity to sameness and therefore allows difference to remain intact. Levinas thus advocates a respectful attitude to difference that decentres the subject and destabilises the

⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'Extériorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 16.

superiority of the self. His ethical approach to self-other relations is important as it enables us to counter the dominant (neo-)colonial discourses that emphasise the superiority of the Western subject and reduce Maghrebi people to objects with limited capacity for agency or self-consciousness. In Chapter Two of this thesis, Levinas' work helps us to see how certain films in this corpus might establish more egalitarian modes of representation that refuse to reduce their protagonists to objects for the consciousness of the (Western) spectator.

If Levinas criticises Merleau-Ponty's inattention to "otherness", Frantz Fanon exposes his complete disregard for different modes of ethnic or racial embodiment. In *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Fanon combines psychoanalysis with existential phenomenology to examine how the unconscious dimensions of racism cause the black (male) subject to understand himself as an object-for-others.⁷⁹ Because the black man is denied any subjectivity in 'le monde blanc', Fanon argues that he faces 'des difficultés dans l'élaboration de son schéma corporel', such that any conceptualisation of his body becomes 'une activité uniquement négatrice'.⁸⁰ Under the racist gaze of the white man, the black man's corporeal schema begins to crumble and is replaced by 'un schéma historico-racial', which strips him of his subjectivity by fixing him in terms of his visible difference and forcing him into a position of internalised objecthood.⁸¹ Fanon's work is extremely useful for research into representations of Maghrebi ethnicity on film as it bridges the East-West divide,

⁷⁹ In keeping with Fanon, I refer only to black male subjects in this passage; however, I recognise the highly problematic nature of Fanon's eradication of any form of black female subjectivity. For further criticisms of Fanon's masculinist stance, see: Lola Young, 'Missing Persons: Fantasising Black Women in *Black Skin, White Masks*', in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. by Alan Read (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996), pp. 27-101.

⁸⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 89. Fanon is using the term 'corporeal schema' in the sense developed by Merleau-Ponty to refer to 'the crux or reference point that establishes a stable perceptual background against which I perceive and respond to changes and movements in my environment, and thereby opens me onto a world of other selves'. See: Taylor Carman, 'The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty', *Philosophical Topics*, 27 (1999), 205-26 (p. 220).

⁸¹ Fanon, *Peau Noire*, p. 90.

exposes the importance of the gaze in instating hierarchies of power, and helps us to understand the extent to which visible ethnic difference is often “felt” as inescapably material and permanent’.⁸² His notion of identity as externally determined, yet internalised is valuable when analysing the occurrence of outwardly imposed and orientalist stereotypes in some of the films by directors of Maghrebi heritage in this corpus.

If Fanon helps us to apprehend different modes of ethnic embodiment, the work of feminist phenomenologists can enrich our analyses of the large number of films that foreground Maghrebi women’s bodies. In *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz criticises Merleau-Ponty’s universalising and masculinist tendencies, but argues that his work can provide salutary tools for feminist philosophy insofar as it enables us to (re)locate subjectivity in corporeality and to destabilise the positive and negative values ascribed to male and female bodies respectively.⁸³ Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the incorporated mind, Grosz develops her concept of the Möbius strip in order to ‘[problematize] and [rethink] the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject, its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior’.⁸⁴ Like the twisting Möbius strip, Grosz believes that the mind and the body are not separate entities, but repeatedly collapse into one another in an endless cycle of repetition. For Grosz, the “natural” and the “social” are enmeshed and the body is envisioned as ‘neither brute nor passive, but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification and

⁸² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 152.

⁸³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. vii. Other feminist philosophers that have used Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy to productive means are: Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment, and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1994) and Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁸⁴ Grosz, pp. 18-19.

representation'.⁸⁵ As will be seen, Grosz's work is critical for this thesis as it undermines the dominant disembodied (Western) philosophical tradition that privileges the maleness of reason and champions the supremacy of the (white) male cognisant subject.

If Grosz provides a welcome corrective to Merleau-Ponty's disregard for gendered modes of being-in-the-world, it should be noted that her work focuses predominantly on the lived and embodied experiences of (privileged) (white) women in and from the West. As such, it is arguably more valuable for this thesis to turn to the work of feminist scholars from the Maghreb and the Middle East who have discussed the importance of embodiment for shaping local women's lives. Though it was written over twenty years ago, Marnia Lazreg's monograph, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*, is a key text here as it uses existential philosophy and genetic structuralism to criticise Western feminism's tendency to overlook the impact of 'historical events and structures' upon Algerian women's lives.⁸⁶ According to Lazreg, feminist scholarship in and from the West often objectifies "different" women as the unmediated "other", the embodiments of cultures presumed inferior and classified as "traditional" or "patriarchal".⁸⁷ Rather than attempting to understand the diversity that characterises Algerian women's lives, Lazreg contends that Western feminism subsumes Algerian women under the 'less-than-neutral labels' of "Arab" or "Muslim" and envisions them as the helpless victims of an oppressively patriarchal system.⁸⁸ In order to offset such damaging views, Lazreg argues that we need to introduce a 'phenomenological dimension' to the field that '[relies] on the lived experiences of women rather than textual

⁸⁵ Grosz, pp. 18-19.

⁸⁶ Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

⁸⁷ Lazreg, p. 7.

⁸⁸ Lazreg, p. 7.

injunctions and prescriptions made for them' by feminist discourses in the West.⁸⁹

Lazreg's championing of a phenomenological model not only echoes the broader approach of this thesis, but also encourages us to view Maghrebi women as situated embodied subjects and to consider their representations in relation to their specific socio-political surroundings.

Whereas Lazreg exposes Western feminism's tendency to objectify non-Western women, Islamic feminists, such as Leila Ahmed, Suad Joseph and Mounira Charrad, analyse the impact of patriarchal Islamic discourses upon women's lives and existences in the Maghreb and the Middle East.⁹⁰ Ahmed claims that patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur'an* have disempowered women and reduced them to their bodies, while Joseph and Charrad argue that contemporary Islamic discourses expect women to embody the patriarchal values of their societies and place restrictions on their capacity to interact with others and in (male) public spaces. Like Lazreg, the work of these scholars not only helps us to contextualise the relationship between gender and oppression, but encourages us to acknowledge the impact of patriarchal and religious discourses upon Maghrebi women's embodied identities and existences. Their ideas are expanded upon in Chapter Three of this thesis in order to ascertain the extent to which contemporary Maghrebi cinema resists or reinstates the patriarchal Islamic discourses that reduce Maghrebi women to the materiality of their bodies.

If the writing of Islamic feminists helps us to understand representations of Maghrebi women in context, Sara Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology offers us

⁸⁹ Lazreg, p. 15.

⁹⁰ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. by Suad Joseph (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Mounira M. Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

a useful theoretical framework for analysing films that foreground queer men of Maghrebi heritage. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed contends that phenomenology can provide ‘a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness [...], and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds’.⁹¹ Taking issue with social constructivism, Ahmed argues that sexual orientations are often experienced as ‘inherent and bodily’, and can ‘feel “as if” they come from inside and move us out toward objects and others’.⁹² She believes that desire should be understood as a powerful and dynamic energy that pulls us in certain directions and can be ‘compelling enough to resist the force of compulsory heterosexuality’.⁹³ Ahmed thus concludes that sexuality is a fundamental component of existence insofar as it determines who or what we come into contact with and how we inhabit the world.

Ahmed’s insights are applicable to the films in Chapter Four of this thesis as many of them construct desire as a force that compels their characters to subvert dominant societal mores by deviating away from the “straight” path of heterosexuality. However, as Ahmed tends to focus on sexual subjects in the West, it is arguably necessary to supplement her ideas with those of scholars that look at same-sex desire as it is lived and embodied in the MENA. Whereas Joseph Massad examines the applicability of Western identitarian categories of desire to marginal sexual subjects in the MENA, Samar Habib focuses on the lived experiences of many modern-day Muslims and Arabs who identify with Western models of sexuality because of a seemingly “inherent” attraction to members of the same sex,

⁹¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects and Others* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 2.

⁹² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 80.

⁹³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 94.

human rights activism and globalisation.⁹⁴ Examined in greater detail in Chapter Four, the work of these scholars provides critical analytical tools, both for understanding the conceptualisation of same-sex desire in the Islamic cultures of the Maghreb and for analysing the recent rise in the number of films that foreground men of Maghrebi heritage who desire other men.

If the work of phenomenologists and Islamic theologians and feminists has wider implications for this thesis, film theory's recent (re-)orientation away from psychoanalytic gaze theory to a focus on non-sight-based spectatorship and the haptic can help us to grasp the multi-sensuous and bodily dimensions of many of the films in this corpus. In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Vivian Sobchack draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty to argue that films become meaningful not in spite of, but precisely because of the materiality of our bodies.⁹⁵ In contrast to psychoanalytical gaze theory, Sobchack claims that film viewing is a multi-sensory and bodily experience that encourages the spectator to '[feel] his or her literal body as only one side of *an irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity* that has as its other side the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen' (emphasis in the original).⁹⁶ In other words, despite an inability to literally taste, smell, or touch what is being represented in the film, Sobchack believes that the spectator is able to share the experiences of the embodied "other" on screen through a process of reciprocity and mimetic bodily empathy. Sobchack thus concludes that film spectatorship not only undermines fixed boundaries between the self and the world, but destabilises 'the very notion of

⁹⁴ Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); *Islam and Homosexuality: Volume 1*, ed. by Samar Habib (California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2010).

⁹⁵ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (London: University of California Press, 2004), p. 60.

⁹⁶ Sobchack, p. 79.

onscreen and *offscreen* as mutually exclusive sites or subject positions’ (emphasis in the original).⁹⁷

Though this thesis looks primarily at representations and not reception, Sobchack’s work is important here as it helps us to comprehend the many films in this corpus that encourage the spectator to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the image that breaks down intersubjective barriers and minimises the distance needed for objectification. Furthermore, Sobchack’s emphasis on the multi-sensuous dimensions of cinema is particularly useful for this thesis as the films in this corpus are often driven by a desire to evade the objectifying gaze and frequently draw on senses other than vision to represent embodied subjects. Because Western societies are ocular-centric and vision continues to be associated with a Western, (neo-)colonial desire to categorise, “know” and control the (post-)colonial subject in the Maghreb, Sobchack’s phenomenological film theory helps us to understand how filmmakers in and from the Maghreb might invoke the multi-sensuous as a means to subvert the dominance of visuality and destabilise hegemonic hierarchies of visual power.

The significance of Sobchack’s work notwithstanding, Laura Marks’ monograph, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, is arguably more valuable for this thesis as it concentrates specifically on “intercultural cinema”, which Marks defines as films (and digital videos) that are made in the interstices of cultures and often have a limited distribution and spectatorship.⁹⁸ For Marks, such films challenge arbitrary distinctions between cultures and ‘represent configurations of sense perception different from those of Euro-American societies, where optical visuality has been accorded a unique

⁹⁷ Sobchack, p. 67.

⁹⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xii.

supremacy’.⁹⁹ She thus sets out to uncover how these films might ‘represent the “unrepresentable” senses’ by adopting a haptic gaze, which emphasises the sensation of touch and undermines the authority of optical visibility.¹⁰⁰ Marks’ focus on both the haptic and the intercultural is invaluable here because, ‘in the sensuous geographies of Arab and North African cultures [...], touch and smell play [...] important roles’, but also because the films in this corpus negotiate a complex and transvergent space (in-)between the national and the transnational, the local and the global.¹⁰¹

The importance of touch in intercultural and diasporic filmmaking has also been explored by Hamid Naficy in *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Here, Naficy develops his concept of an “accented cinema”, which he defines, broadly, as films that are made by displaced, diasporic or exilic filmmakers and use artisanal modes of production.¹⁰² According to Naficy, these films often adopt a “tactile optic”, which uses textures, sensuality and olfactory experiences as a means to communicate the ‘[memories], nostalgic longing, and multiple losses and wishes that are experienced by [...] diegetic characters, exilic filmmakers, and their audiences’.¹⁰³ Naficy’s concept of “tactile optics” is particularly relevant as the films in this thesis are often made in the interstices of cultures, on small budgets and using artisanal modes of production. In tandem with Naficy’s theorising, many of them favour a tactile mode of address as the most effective means of articulating their characters’ memories, emotions and subjective feelings.

⁹⁹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. xiii.

¹⁰⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. xvi.

¹⁰¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 160.

¹⁰² Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.

¹⁰³ Naficy, p. 29.

If the haptic appears to be a crucial representational strategy in filmmaking from the Maghreb, Marks claims that it was initially an Islamic aesthetic that travelled westwards over time. In *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, Marks argues that classical Islamic art invited an embodied response on the part of the spectator because it was characterised by aniconism, abstract lines and haptic spaces. Through detailed analysis of Islamic and Western art aesthetics from antiquity to the present day, Marks convincingly suggests that the embodied properties of classical Islamic art became enfolded into the artistic practices of the West and are now a common characteristic of new media art. Marks thus concludes that the aesthetic quality of new media art in the West is ‘a latent, or deeply enfolded, historical inheritance from Islamic art and thought’.¹⁰⁴ Though Marks mainly discusses art and not cinema in *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, her work is central to this thesis as it not only acknowledges the Islamic heritage of the haptic aesthetic at use in many of the films in this corpus, but because it establishes a ‘broad continuity between Islamic and Western aesthetics’.¹⁰⁵ In line with Marks’ approach, this thesis attempts to explore points of convergence and inter-connection between Eastern and Western thought on the body in order to suggest that phenomenological notions of embodiment are already apparent in the films and culture of the Maghreb.

A Note on Chapter Structure and Corpus Selection

The remainder of this thesis is divided into four chapters that examine, in turn, how cultural, gendered, religious and sexual identities are articulated on and through the body in cinematic representations of people of Maghrebi heritage. Chapter One

¹⁰⁴ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, p. 5.

focuses on three films that chart the “return” journeys of young Maghrebi-French/Swiss characters from France or Switzerland to their (parents’) “homeland” in Algeria: *La Fille de Keltoum*, *Exils* and *Bled number one*. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological model of Orientalism, this chapter argues that all three films position corporeality as a site for the articulation of (cultural) identity and intercultural relations, but queries the extent to which they might be said to reinforce dominant negative stereotypes of the Maghreb.¹⁰⁶

Chapter Two looks at films that are mainly set in the Maghreb and focus on belly dancing or entranced women of Maghrebi heritage. Building upon the themes of movement and mobility established in the road movies in Chapter One, this section compares and contrasts representations of belly dance in *Satin rouge* and *La Graine et le mulet* with the final sequence of *Exils* as it foregrounds an extended Sufi trance ritual. It argues that all three films represent the (female) body in motion as a site of subjectivity and a source of resistance to the hegemonic male gaze. This chapter integrates recent work on belly dance in the MENA with research into “kinesthetic empathy” and screendance to probe the extent to which these films resist or reinstate orientalist ideas about Maghrebi(-French) women’s bodies.¹⁰⁷

Retaining a focus on women in the Maghreb, the third chapter of this thesis looks at films that foreground the impact of patriarchal religious discourses upon Maghrebi women’s embodied identities. Engaging with the existential phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir and scholarship on the body by Islamic feminists, this chapter argues that *L’Enfant endormi*, *Amours voilées* and *Millefeuille*

¹⁰⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 112-20.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Lois Ibsen al Faruqi, ‘Dance as an Expression of Islamic Culture’, *Dance Research Journal*, 10.2 (1978), 6-13; Virginia Keft-Kennedy, “‘How Does She Do That?’ Belly Dancing and the Horror of a Flexible Woman’, *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 34 (2005), 279-300; *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol: Intellect, 2012); Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

all construct their protagonists as agentic embodied subjects who reject patriarchal religious attempts to reduce them to their bodies.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, this chapter questions the extent to which these films might be seen to reinforce dominant negative stereotypes of Islam as a patriarchal religion that places restrictions upon women's existential freedoms.

Chapter Four departs from a focus on women to examine three films that detail the influence of patriarchal discourses upon queer Maghrebi(-French) men's embodied identities and desires: *L'Armée du salut*, *Tarik el hob* and *Un fils*. Underpinned by Merleau-Ponty's work on the sexual schema and recent research on marginal sexualities in the MENA, this chapter argues that these three films all articulate sexual identity through the body and suggest that it is heavily influenced by external factors, such as space.¹⁰⁹ Beginning with films that are set in the Maghreb and returning full circle to focus on those that take place in France, this chapter examines how these films represent the impact of space upon sexuality, self-other relations and internal notions of subjectivity. In each chapter, the films are not only judged against wider trends and previous representations, but are also examined in relation to the work of scholars in and from the Maghreb (and the Middle East) who have written on the specific historical, cultural and spatio-temporal contexts from which they originate.

In selecting my final corpus, I purposely chose to include films that offer subversive or challenging representations of the body and cover a broad array of embodied subjects and spaces. Perhaps because of the historically more favourable conditions for men in the cinematic industries of the Maghreb and France, many of the films I study in the chapters outlined above are directed by male filmmakers.

¹⁰⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: L'Expérience Vécue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949); Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

¹⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty; Massad.

However, I have endeavoured to include films by the new generation of women directors in and from the Maghreb (such as Raja Amari, Amal Bedjaoui and Yasmine Kassari), by self-identified gay filmmakers (such as Abdellah Taïa and Rémi Lange), and by directors of Maghrebi heritage who live both inside and outside the Maghreb (Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, Nouri Bouzid, Mehdi Charef, Tony Gatlif, Abdellatif Kechiche and Aziz Salmi). While I do not wish to reduce these films to the subject positions of their directors, I included work by filmmakers of varied backgrounds in order to facilitate a diversity of embodied perspectives and representations.

Finally, as I am unable to speak Arabic, all of the films I analyse in this thesis are subtitled in either English or French and are accessible on DVD or at research institutions in the UK or France. As outlined earlier, Armes argues that such films often adopt themes that please Euro-American funding companies and tend not to be ‘directed primarily at local filmgoers but have a wider intended audience outside the Arab world’.¹¹⁰ In the chapters that follow, I assess the extent to which the films I study deploy tropes and representational strategies that are designed to appeal to international audiences, or whether they challenge neo-colonial discourses by depicting their protagonists as agentic embodied subjects who subvert dominant Western misperceptions and fantasies. This latter objective is, of course, a subsidiary concern of this thesis, appended to its overall interest in probing the extent to which recent Maghrebi and French films portray Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) characters as embodied subjects who experience an intimate connection between their bodies and their minds. Bearing this overarching aim in mind, the first chapter of this thesis now turns to interrogate how notions of subjectivity as embodied relate to cinematic

¹¹⁰ Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 3.

representations of Maghrebi-French/Swiss people who are displaced or in exile in
Algeria.

1. Images of Exile and Embodiment in Tony Gatlif's *Exils*, Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's *Bled number one* and Mehdi Charef's *La Fille de Keltoum*

Introduction

One of the principal aims of this thesis is to ascertain the extent to which films featuring people of Maghrebi heritage mediate their characters' subjectivities and interactions with the "other" through their bodies. In order to do so, the first chapter of this thesis examines the recent rise in the number of films that are set in-between France, Switzerland and the countries of the Maghreb and represent the body as a privileged locus for the articulation of cultural identity and intercultural relations. Whereas films such as *Salut cousin!* and *Adieu* depict the clandestine journeys of undocumented migrants from the Maghreb to France, the films *La Fille de Keltoum*, *Exils*, *Ten'ja* and *Bled number one* all show young Maghrebi-French people making forced or voluntary "returns" to their (parents') country of origin in Algeria and Morocco.¹ For Higbee, the films in this second group negotiate a space in-between Maghrebi and French cultures that '[brings] into question supposedly fixed notions of the here and there of host and homeland in the diasporic imaginary'.² They are of particular importance to this thesis because they use their protagonists' lived and embodied encounters with the people and culture of their country of origin to mediate intercultural relations between France (and French-speaking Europe) and the Maghreb.

¹ *Salut cousin!*, dir. by Merzak Allouache (Les Films du Roseau, 1996); *Adieu*, dir. by Arnaud Des Pallières (Les Films d'Ici, 2004); *Ten'ja*, dir. by Hassan Legzouli (Pierre Grise Distribution, 2005). Though I refer to this body of films as "return" narratives, the journeys featured in them are mostly undertaken by characters that have never visited the countries of the Maghreb and do not consider them "home".

² Will Higbee, "Et si on allait en Algérie?" Home, Displacement and the Myth of Return in Recent Journey Films by Maghrebi-French and North African Émigré Directors', in *Screening Integration*, pp. 58-76 (p. 59).

In their recent edited volume, *Open Roads, Closed Borders: The Contemporary French-language Road Movie*, Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt divide what they term French-language road movies ‘into two fundamental categories that might be labelled – provisionally – as “positive” and “negative”’.³ They argue that films in the “positive” category of road movie ‘use travel motifs to celebrate the possibilities of transnational identity’, whilst those in the “negative” category ‘engage with a darker side of transit by turning their lenses towards travellers in distress, be they clandestine refugees, economic migrants or asylum seekers’.⁴ This chapter focuses on three recent French-language road movies that foreground young French and Swiss people of Maghrebi heritage who are journeying from France or Switzerland to Algeria: Tony Gatlif’s *Exils*, Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche’s *Bled number one* and Mehdi Charef’s *La Fille de Keltoum*.⁵ Whereas *Exils* incorporates many of the qualities of the “positive” category of road movie and celebrates its protagonists’ freedom of movement and ability to (re)connect with Algeria through their bodies, *Bled number one* and *La Fille de Keltoum* are infused with many of the characteristics of the “negative” category of road movie and concentrate on their characters’ distress, loss of mobility and overwhelming sense of (corporeal) alienation in rural Algeria. Such significant differences notwithstanding, all of these films use the road movie genre to examine the lived and embodied experience of exile, as well as the politics of being displaced to a new space and time.

³ Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt, ‘Introduction’, in *Open Roads, Closed Borders: The Contemporary French-language Road Movie*, ed. by Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

⁴ Gott and Schilt, p. 3.

⁵ Both *Exils* and *Bled number one* were nominated for prestigious awards at the Cannes Film Festival. Whereas *Exils* won the prize for Best Director, *Bled number one* won the *Prix de la Jeunesse* and was nominated for an award in the *Un Certain Regard* section of the festival. All three films were made on modest budgets and generated small audience figures in France. See: Higbee, ““Et si on allait en Algérie?””, p. 72.

‘Je suis une étrangère de partout’: The Material Realities of Exile in Tony Gatlif’s *Exils*

Tony Gatlif’s road movie, *Exils*, follows Zano (Romain Duris), the French son of *pieds-noirs*, and Naïma, a young Algerian-French woman, on a spontaneous journey of (self-)discovery that begins in Paris, passes through Spain and Morocco, and concludes in Algeria. Taking little money and few possessions, Zano and Naïma travel along alternative routes (North-South, non-touristic trails) that bring them into contact with marginalised subjects (clandestine migrants, illegal workers, gypsies, refugees), peripheral spaces (closed borders, slums, illegal passageways), and an assortment of different cultures and traditions. The film’s concentration on exilic subjects, liminal spaces, music and multilingualism imbues it with a transvergent dimension that enables Gatlif to produce a novel perspective on the themes of exile and displacement, identity, embodiment, belonging and home.

The transvergent dimension of the film is arguably the result of Gatlif’s own upbringing and lived experiences. Born in Algeria to a Romani mother and an Algerian father, Gatlif moved to France at the age of fourteen where he lived a hand-to-mouth existence on the streets of Paris and Marseille. After struggling to enter the film industry, Gatlif released a popular musical called *Latcho Drom*, which examined the music and culture of gypsy populations around the world.⁶ Since the success of *Latcho Drom*, Gatlif has made a series of films that foreground the Romani gypsy community and seek to overturn dominant negative stereotypes of their lifestyles. With *Exils*, Gatlif departs from a focus on his gypsy heritage to explore his birthplace from his own unique standpoint as a displaced and exilic subject of Algerian heritage.⁷

⁶ *Latcho Drom*, dir. by Tony Gatlif (Acteurs Auteurs Associés, 1993).

⁷ In an interview about the film, Gatlif states that *Exils* did not ‘originate from a mere idea’, but from ‘my yearning to consider my very wounds. It has taken me 43 years to return to the land of my

In his analysis of the film, Higbee argues that *Exils* constructs its protagonists' "return" journey as 'one of discovery and intercultural dialogue between France and the Maghreb'.⁸ In a similar manner to Higbee, Conn Holohan examines the use of space in the film to show that *Exils* repeatedly 'recasts the oppositions such as inside/outside and centre/periphery through which western spatial privilege is maintained'.⁹ Taking a different approach to these two scholars, Tanja Frantović explores the film's construction of exilic subjectivity and argues that Gatlif 'inaugurates movement as the key identity principal and mode of being in the world'.¹⁰ Building upon the work of these three scholars, this chapter uses phenomenological models of orientation, identity and affect to argue that *Exils* positions corporeality as a crucial lens through which it examines its central protagonists' feelings of displacement, alienation and, eventually, (re)connection with their culture of origin.

In a statement accompanying the DVD version of *Exils*, Gatlif demonstrates a profound awareness of the embodied nature of experience and the material realities of exile:

[a]s far as EXILES goes, I had to stand as close to matter as possible [...] I meant to encompass the characters' physical sensuality. Characters exploring or escaping from each other's bodies. Bodies hardly touched or clinging to each other. Tense or lustful bodies, perspiring and revealing themselves by the skin or scars.¹¹

This emphasis on the body's sensuousness and sense-making capacities is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's attempts to (re-)establish a connection between lived

childhood – Algeria. Almost 4,500 miles on the road, by train, by car, by boat or just walking'. Tony Gatlif, 'Director's Statement', *Exils*.

⁸ Higbee, "'Et si on allait en Algérie?'" p. 69.

⁹ Conn Holohan, 'Wrong Turns: Radical Spaces in the Road Movies of Tony Gatlif', *Transnational Cinemas*, 2 (2011), 21-35 (p. 22).

¹⁰ Tanja Frantović, 'Exiles on the Road: The Role of Cinematic Journeys in the Creation of New Structures of Belonging and Cultural Knowledge', *ARS Aeterna*, 1 (2009), 53-62 (p. 55).

¹¹ Gatlif, 'Director's Statement'.

experience, corporeality and thought. As outlined in the introduction, Merleau-Ponty believes that the body mediates all of our perceptions, experiences and intersubjective interactions, and cannot be divorced from the specific spatio-temporal contexts in which it is located. In line with Merleau-Ponty's theorising, Gatlif promotes a notion of subjectivity as embodied and privileges the body's ability to mediate his characters' perceptual experiences and intersubjective encounters. His fascination with corporeality is evidenced from as early as the opening sequence, which begins with an extreme close-up of Zano's skin, before tracking backwards to show his naked body looking out of the window at the busy urban metropolis below. The juxtaposition between the vast urban landscape and Zano's bare naked body is amplified as he calmly drops a part-full pint-glass of beer into the sprawling urban abyss below him. Following this careless act, Zano turns around to Naïma, who is naked on the bed eating melted cheese, and opens the film with a statement of his desire to go to Algeria: '[e]t si on allait en Algérie?' From the very first sequence in the film, Zano and Naïma's subjectivities are constituted through their bodies and a striking contrast is created between their nakedness and the artificial urban exterior of the high-rise apartment building.

However, if this opening sequence foregrounds corporeality and establishes a distinction between nature and artifice, Conn Holohan argues that Zano's statement also constructs Algeria as a phantasmatic space and a remedy for the alienation triggered by life in the West.¹² The notion of the East as an answer to perceived Western deficiency and lack has been theorised by Sara Ahmed in her work on corporeality and (dis)orientation. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects and Others*, Ahmed provides a phenomenological reading of the verb "to orientate",

¹² Holohan, p. 28.

in which she ‘considers the significance of “the orient” in orientation’.¹³ Drawing on Edward Said, Ahmed focuses on how the Orient, or the East, has been constructed as a place of desire and intrigue, not only because of how it is “known” and represented in the West, but also because it is imagined as having qualities, such as exoticism, eroticism and sensuality, that the West appears to lack.¹⁴ According to Ahmed, ‘[t]his fantasy of lack, of what is “not here”, shapes the desire for what is “there”, such that “there” becomes visible on the horizon as “supplying” what is lacking’.¹⁵ Desire thus orientates embodied subjects in certain directions, pushing them ‘toward that “not”, which appears as an object on the horizon’.¹⁶ In *Exils*, Gatlif charts the line of Zano’s desire by following his physical re-orientation towards Algeria and the East. For Zano, Algeria is envisioned as an answer to the boredom of daily life and a space that can supply what is lacking for him in the West. This point is reinforced in the later scene in which Zano and Naïma meet two young siblings, Leila (Leila Makhoul) and Habib (Habib Cheik), who are travelling clandestinely from Algeria to Europe, and who ask Zano why he is leaving France. The protagonist’s response that he has nothing there anymore once again positions Algeria as a phantasmatic space onto which Western desires and fantasies are projected, and to which embodied subjects turn in search of what is missing for them in the West.

If *Exils* initially seems to repeat the (neo-)colonial discourses that construct Algeria in terms of fantasy and desire, such a romanticised vision is destabilised in

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 113.

¹⁴ Said uses Foucauldian discourse theory to argue that the Orient, or the East, has been constructed through Western intellectual discourses as “other” and inferior in order to guarantee Western superiority and facilitate colonial power relations. According to Said, the Orient and the Occident are mutually interdependent discursive inventions that stand in antithetical opposition: the Orient existing for the West solely as a means by which to demarcate its superiority and justify the aims of imperialism. Though Algeria is geographically south of France, I use the term the “East” in the metaphorical sense developed by Said in his study. See: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

¹⁵ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 114.

¹⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 114.

the narrative that follows. Rather, the film use the tropes of movement and mobility to remind us that Zano and Naïma are privileged embodied subjects whose journey runs counter to traditional migratory flows. For instance, in the scene in which the central duo first meets Leila and Habib, the two young siblings are unable to comprehend why anyone would want to leave their desired destination and seem bemused by the older couple's plans to "return" to Algeria. Furthermore, although Zano and Naïma are travelling with little money and no fixed itinerary or transportation, they are relatively safe and are privileged in their ability to return to France at any point. By contrast, Leila and Habib's search for a better future is coded as arduous and even perilous. Moreover, their movements are restricted and Gatlif repeatedly contrasts their inability to roam freely with Zano and Naïma's supreme mobility and autonomy. For example, in the scene in which the quartet first parts ways, Leila and Habib sit passively in the dark interior of a truck, whilst Zano and Naïma's freedom of movement is achieved through their bodies and they walk freely along the open road. Not only does this sequence establish a direct link between corporeality, agency and movement, but it highlights the westernised protagonists' very different abilities to move and interact in the world of objects and others. Consequently, although Gatlif draws some parallels between these four characters and positions them all as exilic subjects, he uses their embodied experiences to articulate their different forms of exile and is careful to situate their (in)capacity to move within the context of their specific socio-political and cultural histories.

In addition to the encounter with Leila and Habib, Zano and Naïma's privileges are stressed in the sequence in which their passports are stopped and checked by the police when travelling through Southern Spain. In her work on (dis)orientation, Ahmed develops a theory of the passport as an object that both

enables and restricts bodily mobility. She argues that, '[f]or some, the "passport" is an object that extends motility and allows them to pass through borders'.¹⁷ For others, however, "passports" do not work in this way [...] Motility for some involves blocking for others'.¹⁸ The passport scene in *Exils* gives perfect expression to Ahmed's argument by contrasting the central duo's freedom of movement with the limited mobility of those around them. Whereas Zano and Naïma are able to pass with ease because of their French passports and the privileges afforded them by their nationality, the migrant workers they are with are arrested and Leila and Habib must smuggle themselves past the police by hiding on the wheels of a passing truck. This scene thus demonstrates the passport's ability to '[orientate] bodies in specific directions, affecting how they "take up" space', while also reinforcing an awareness of Zano and Naïma's advantaged position and unconventional experience of exile.¹⁹

Despite the duo's apparent spatial privilege and greater bodily mobility, their journey is fraught with misdirections and they repeatedly find themselves waylaid or pulled off course. Just over mid-way through the narrative, the two main characters hide on top of a truck in order to sneak onto a ferry they believe is heading to Algeria. As they run excitedly around the deck of the boat, the non-diegetic music grows in volume and the celebratory refrain 'Algeria, Algeria' is repeated on a loop. Like the two stowaways, we are duped into believing that Algeria is nearly in sight and are equally surprised when a local man amusedly reveals that they have taken the ferry to Morocco instead of Algeria. Consequently, although Zano and Naïma suffer fewer official restrictions on their movements, they still depend heavily on local assistance and, as Holohan argues, are repeatedly required 'to enter into a more

¹⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 140.

¹⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 140-1.

¹⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 111.

uncertain relationship with the spaces they encounter'.²⁰ This point is confirmed in the following scene in which Zano and Naïma take a local bus through the Moroccan desert to cross to Algeria. When the bus breaks down unexpectedly, the couple's dejection is articulated corporeally and they slump despondently at the side of the road. Furthermore, upon learning that another bus will not pass until the following day, the duo are reliant on the guidance of a young Moroccan boy who informs them that the border between Morocco and Algeria has been closed for four years and takes them to a trafficker so that they can pass through clandestinely. While the frustration that is displayed on Zano and Naïma's bodies constructs this mishap as a major inconvenience, it also reasserts an awareness of their relative security and privilege by reminding us that the consequences would be far more serious (if not disastrous) were Leila and Habib to take a wrong turn.



Figure 1. Zano and Naïma arrive in Algeria in *Exils*

In addition to Zano and Naïma's increasingly ambiguous relationship to space, they look gradually more misplaced the closer they get to Algeria. In her

²⁰ Holohan, p. 29.

writing on displacement, Ahmed argues that when embodied subjects ‘arrive that seem “out of place”, it involves disorientation: people blink and then look again [...] The proximity of such bodies makes familiar spaces seem strange [...] Bodies stand out when they are out of place’.²¹ In *Exils*, Gatlif uses framing devices and filming techniques to single Zano and Naïma out, such that they look misplaced in relation to their surroundings and stand out from those around them. For instance, in one of the film’s most memorable scenes, the couple are shown walking in the opposite direction to the mass of migrants who are leaving Algeria.²² Elsewhere, Gatlif depicts them running through the streets of Algiers, whilst the people around them stand in total stillness. Zano and Naïma are therefore distinguished from the other characters in the film because of their privileged capacity to move and through their different bodily demeanours and actions. Consequently, even though Gatlif constructs his two main protagonists as displaced in Algeria, he repeatedly emphasises their privileges by foregrounding their greater mobility and freedom with their bodies than many of the local characters they encounter.

Though the scenes outlined above establish ostensible parallels between the two westernised protagonists, their embodied and emotional responses to their arrival in Algeria differ significantly. In contrast to Naïma, Zano becomes increasingly animated the nearer they get to the capital and his excitement is displayed on his body and through his mobility, energy and restlessness. For instance, in the scene on the train approaching Algiers, Zano can barely stay still and paces through the crowded carriages in search of bottled water. Likewise, upon the discovery of the apartment his family lived in before they fled from Algeria, Zano

²¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 135.

²² In May 2003, a devastating earthquake in Algiers killed over two thousand people, injured thousands more and led to mass internal displacement. The film’s production date indicates that the above scene could be read as a reference to this tragic event. For more on the 2003 earthquake in Algiers, see: Evans and Phillips, p. 273.

bounds up the stairs to his familial home with speed and agility. Once inside the apartment, certain objects, such as the piano and the collection of family photographs, evoke memories that enable him to situate himself within a familial narrative. However, these objects and this space are only invested with meaning through the physical presence of Zano's body, which, as Holohan observes, connects them across space and time to his family's personal history and private narrative of displacement.²³ He is instantly able to identify a picture of his grandmother and remarks to Naïma that the furniture is in the same place as in the family photographs he has seen of the apartment. However, if Zano's visit to his familial home is rewarding because it allows him to (re)connect with both his past and his "homeland", it is also cathartic as it forces him to confront some of the (painful) emotions he suppressed following his parents' sudden death in a car accident. When leafing through the collection of photographs left behind by his family, Zano's emotions operate on and through his body's surface, such that his hands shake and he bursts into tears and has to be consoled by Naïma and the Algerian women who now occupy the apartment. In this scene, Zano's body is thus constructed as a crucial presence that enables him to reconcile with his roots and (re)integrate the repressed traumas of his past.

Whereas Zano's "return" to Algeria is represented in a coherent manner and appears to allow him to anchor his identity within a recognisable familial lineage, Naïma's "return" is constructed in far more phenomenological terms and her responses to Algeria are figured on and through her body. From the outset, Naïma is uncertain about returning to her "homeland" and the film hints that she has a troubled relationship with Algeria. She laughs when Zano suggests they go to

²³ Holohan, p. 33.

Algeria and wonders what on earth he wants to do there: ‘[q]u’est-ce que tu veux aller foutre en Algérie?’ Not only does her reaction undermine Zano’s romanticised vision of the country, but it reminds us that their subsequent voyage is not one that she chose to embark upon herself. In a later sequence, Naïma’s pre-reflective fear of her “homeland” is implied via the dream that she arrives in Algiers to find the city covered in blood. Elsewhere, her inability to speak Arabic and casual dismissal of the etymological origins of her name imply a degree of disconnection from her culture of origin. Algeria is thus constructed as an ambivalent space for the heroine and the film suggests that her “return” will be tarnished by trauma and the arousal of repressed and painful memories.

Given Naïma’s seemingly troubled relationship to her “homeland”, it is unsurprising that she becomes increasingly anxious, apprehensive and introverted the closer she gets to Algeria and the capital. The heroine’s mounting unease as she approaches Algiers can be understood using Ahmed’s work on emotionality and affect, in which she argues that everyday lived emotions ‘move us “toward” and “away” from [...] objects’.²⁴ For Ahmed, ‘[t]he attribution of feeling toward an object (I feel afraid because you are fearsome) moves the subject away from the object, creating distance through the registering of proximity as a threat’.²⁵ In other words, if something makes us happy we are likely to move towards it, whereas if something makes us sad or scared we would probably move away from it. In the case of fear in particular, Ahmed contends that ‘the world presses against the body’, such that ‘the body shrinks back from the world in the desire to avoid the object of fear. Fear involves shrinking the body; *it restricts the body’s mobility*’ (emphasis in the

²⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 2.

²⁵ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 2.

original).²⁶ In the train scene discussed at the beginning of the introduction to this thesis, Naïma sits crouched in the corner of the carriage with her knees pulled up to her chest anxiously biting her nails. Her distress is illustrated by her body's shrunken position, whilst her sense of the world pressing in on her is conveyed via the overbearing sounds of the train and the use of close-ups bursting with people. Whereas Zano is pulled towards Algeria in excitement and anticipation, Naïma's increased proximity to this fearful land causes her to become withdrawn, inhibited and even frightened. Not only is Naïma's fear manifested on her body, but it actively constructs relations of proximity and distance between her body and the world of objects and others.

Naïma's unease reaches its pinnacle upon her arrival in Algiers and is primarily expressed in terms of her body. Unlike Zano, Naïma's body becomes a site of contestation and she is verbally berated in the street for revealing too much flesh. Though she initially covers up in respect of local practices, Naïma feels suffocated and soon throws off her head-scarf and robe, protesting that she needs 'un peu d'air'. Furthermore, in the sequence at Leila and Habib's home, Naïma fearfully admits to Zano that she feels exiled and like a stranger everywhere she goes: '[j]e me sens pas bien. Je me sens étrangère. Je suis une étrangère de partout'. This terrified utterance not only reveals Naïma's severe state of disconnection from her country of origin, but also her overwhelming sense of alienation from her body and her self. Sobchack's phenomenology of embodiment can help us to understand Naïma's sense of corporeal estrangement in *Exils*. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack argues that 'our bodies are the essential *premises* of our being in the world' and are often understood 'as that part of ourselves that stands substantially as our "home" – that is

²⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 69.

a place that protects us and is familiar and intimately responsive to our intentions and desires’ (emphasis in the original).²⁷ In these (felicitous) cases, ‘our bodies are *lived* as our permanent if mutable address, as our primary if self-displacing abode’ (emphasis in the original).²⁸ However, in certain (infelicitous) cases, Sobchack claims that ‘many of us have experienced our bodies neither as *lived* nor even as *lived in*. Rather, we metaphorically apprehend them as a material limit, a “prison house” to be *endured* [...] Indeed, in the worst circumstances our bodies seem not to belong to us at all’ (emphasis in the original).²⁹ In *Exils*, Naïma does not live her body as a protective and familiar home space, but as a site of exile and trauma that must be endured. Like Algeria, which she associates with silence and repressed memories (‘[mon père] ne voulait pas qu’on parle de son pays’), Naïma’s body exhibits reminders of past violence and abuse (she is unable to speak about the scar on her back). In parallel with Sobchack’s theorising, Naïma’s experience of exile is thus profoundly corporeal and her body is lived as an alienating space that houses the unspoken, yet deeply disturbing memories of her past.

If Naïma feels exiled from her body in *Exils*, Frantović argues that her ‘flights into [...] intense bodily sensations can be read as her attempts to regain a connection to the body, as it remains the site of a perpetual battle for control’.³⁰ The first shot of Naïma depicts her naked on Zano’s bed eating melting cheese, whilst other sequences show her disappearing overnight with a Spanish man, whispering sexual innuendos into Zano’s ear and making love to him in an orchard where they are supposed to be fruit picking. These scenes certainly foreground Naïma’s sensuality and attempts to (re)connect with her body through the senses; however,

²⁷ Sobchack, pp. 182-3.

²⁸ Sobchack, p. 183.

²⁹ Sobchack, p. 183.

³⁰ Frantović, p. 61.

they also construct her in heavily sexual terms that risk reiterating damaging orientalist stereotypes of women of Algerian heritage as erotic and/or exotic. Rather than confronting reductive archetypes, this representational strategy arguably echoes the patriarchal discourses that position women's bodies as sites upon which to negotiate tensions between West and East, North and South, Occident and Orient.³¹ To a far greater degree than that of Zano, Naïma's body is constructed as a space where the latent anxieties attached to Algeria and the East by dominant Western-centric discourses in France and the West are enacted and played out. This argument is evidenced in the sequence in which Naïma is encouraged to cover up in a dark cumbersome veil that is more reminiscent of an *abeya* than a traditional *hijab*. Instead of engaging in a nuanced discussion about the veil in Algeria, this scene feeds Western (mis)conceptions about veiling and arguably threatens to (re)instate normative attitudes regarding women's dress and the veil in the East. Thus, by constructing Naïma's body as a metonymic signifier for Franco-Algerian relations, Gatlif arguably risks repeating the patriarchal and (neo-)colonial discourses that transform the (material) female body into a discursive space upon which to negotiate intercultural tensions and (male) power relations.

The use of Naïma's body as a space where East-West relations are mediated emerges most clearly in the penultimate sequence, in which the heroine visits a Sufi mystic who tells her she needs to (re)connect with her body in order to overcome the traumas of her past: '[m]ême si tu es là, ton esprit est ailleurs. Il faut que tu remettes tes pieds sur la terre. Il faut que tu retrouves tes repères. Il faut que tu te retrouves'. The camera then cuts to a scene in which we see Naïma taking part in a Sufi trance

³¹ An obvious example of such discourses is the way that the veiled female body has been used as a privileged (and contested) symbol for larger debates surrounding the tensions between secularism and Islam, tradition and modernity, and oppression and liberation in France. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see: Michela Ardizzoni, 'Unveiling the Veil: Gendered Discourse and the (In)Visibility of the Female Body in France', *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*, 33 (2010), 629-49.

ritual that seems to allow her to abandon the realm of the cerebral by surrendering to her body and the corporeal.³² By engaging in the intense physical movements of the trance ritual, Naïma seems to be able to exorcise her demons, (re)incorporate her mind and overcome her alienation from her culture of origin. At the end of the scene, Naïma appears to have moved from feeling alienated and displaced to feeling incarnate, in place and (re)connected with her country and culture of origin.

Exils concludes in the cemetery where Zano's grandfather is buried. In a final gesture of closure, Zano places his headphones onto his grandfather's gravestone, whilst Naïma peels an orange, shares it with Zano and smiles, before the two young lovers walk off into the distance hand in hand. At the end of the film, intercultural dialogue has succeeded and both protagonists have achieved a degree of (re)conciliation with their roots through their bodies. However, rather than suggesting that Zano and Naïma can now return home fulfilled and certain of their identities, this final sequence (re)affirms their status as nomadic, exilic subjects with no definitive sense of belonging and no secure notion of home.³³ Consequently, although *Exils* initially seems to respond to the phantasmatic appeal of the "homeland", it refuses to fix its protagonists' fluid identities and ends by championing their nomadic mode of being-in-the-world. The end of the film thus corresponds to the tropes of the "positive" category of road movie insofar as it endorses intercultural connection and celebrates its protagonists' transvergent identities.

³² This scene is discussed in detail in the second chapter of this thesis on dance and performance.

³³ Higbee, "Et si on allait en Algérie?", p. 72.

Physical Displacement and Corporeal Alienation in Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's *Bled number one*

In contrast to Gatlif's celebration of wanderlust, movement and mobility, *Bled number one* constructs exile as an imposed condition that is severely debilitating and disorientating. Like Gatlif, Ameur-Zaïmeche was born in Algeria, but moved to the notorious Parisian *banlieue* of Seine-Saint-Denis at a young age.³⁴ His first film, *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?*, is set on this housing estate and uses a naturalistic filming style to explore the daily life of Kamel (Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche), a disenfranchised youth who feels excluded from dominant French society.³⁵ Similar to *Wesh wesh qu'est-ce qui se passe?*, *Bled number one* details the fate of a young Algerian-French man called Kamel (again played by Ameur-Zaïmeche) who is forcibly "returned" to his familial village in rural Algeria after being released from imprisonment in France.³⁶ The film offers a rare portrait of Algeria shortly after the civil war and an extensive critique of the harmful effects of France's *double peine* law.³⁷ It either precedes or follows *Wesh wesh qu'est-ce qui se passe?*, which starts with Kamel returning home to France after deportation and ends with him being chased by the police and potentially expelled (again) to Algeria. For Higbee, the ambiguity of this film's ending renders it unclear as to whether *Bled number one* is a prequel or a sequel to *Wesh wesh qu'est-ce qui se passe?*, thus

³⁴ The *banlieue* is a term used to refer to run-down outer-city housing estates in France that are routinely associated with violence, masculinity and ethnic separatism in dominant French media and political discourses. For an analysis of the increasingly desperate situation in the French *banlieues*, see: Alec Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2007). See also: Mireille Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 240.

³⁵ *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?*, dir. by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche (Haut et court, 2001).

³⁶ *Bled number one* could arguably be read as a sequel to Merzak Allouache's *Salut cousin!*, in which the central "beur" protagonist, Mok (Mess Hattou), is arrested and deported to Algeria at the end of the film. Whereas Allouache's film merely hints at the devastating consequences of Mok's deportation, Ameur-Zaïmeche openly criticises the damaging effects of enforced exile. The progression between these two films is perhaps indicative of a shift in the subject matters Maghrebi-French/émigré filmmakers feel comfortable addressing in the new millennium.

³⁷ France's *double peine* law refers to a legal practice whereby prisoners of Maghrebi heritage can be expelled from France to their "homeland" following incarceration.

enabling the director ‘to reinforce a reading of Kamel as caught in a perpetual cycle of exclusion from both Maghrebi and French society’.³⁸

In his work on exilic and diasporic filmmaking, Naficy argues that ‘traumatic forms of expulsion and exile’ often throw ‘the certainty and wholeness of the body (and of the mind) [...] into doubt’.³⁹ According to Naficy, exile and displacement undermine the ‘body’s integrity’ and can be ‘experienced [...] both at quotidian and profound and at corporeal and spiritual levels’.⁴⁰ In *Bled number one*, Kamel’s forcible uprooting from France causes him to experience an overwhelming sense of disorientation and he enters into a state of severe alienation that is “felt” physically as well as psychically. In parallel with *Exils*, the film thus uses the “return” journey of a young, westernised Maghrebi-French character to explore Franco-Algerian relations and to demonstrate how (forcible) exile operates at both reflective and pre-reflective levels and is not a purely cerebral matter, but one that is grounded in carnal realities.

In *Bled number one*, Kamel’s physical and psychical alienation is evident from as early as the opening sequence, which begins with an extended documentary-style tracking shot that travels the length of a local street in a village in rural Algeria. This lengthy establishing shot introduces the spectator to the “bled” of the film’s title and is imbued with an aura of documentary authenticity because of Ameer-Zaïmeche’s use of natural lighting, a hand-held camera, limited editing and a seemingly detached and observational gaze. After a significant amount of time, the

³⁸ Higbee, “‘Et si on allait en Algérie?’”, p. 65. This ambiguity is made clear on the front of the DVD case, which introduces *Bled number one* as ‘[a]vant ou après *Wesh Wesh*’, and in Ameer-Zaïmeche’s own comments in an interview. ‘All I know is that Kamel is a victim of “la double peine” – a jail sentence then deportation – so there was scope to make a second film. Two punishments, two films! [...] Whether it’s a prequel or a sequel isn’t important. Why always think of time strictly in chronological terms?’ See: Claire Vassé, ‘Interview with Rabah Ameer-Zaïmeche’, *Press Dossier for Bled number one*, (2006), 4-11 (p. 4).

³⁹ Naficy, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Naficy, p. 28.

traditional music playing in the background fades to introduce the ambient sounds of the local village and the camera shifts to a high-angle shot that fixates on a taxi travelling down the road. The camera then moves to the interior of the taxi where we see the silhouette of a man (Kamel) in the front seat and an image of a young boy running alongside the moving vehicle. Finally, a long shot shows the protagonist descending from the taxi where he is greeted by a group of local men. Unusually, the character's face is obscured from vision and the men's conversation is drowned out by the privileged sounds of passing traffic and bleating sheep. These (modernist) filming techniques resist spectatorial identification with the central protagonist, whilst the series of shorter takes invokes a sense of confusion and disorientation because they are filmed from a variety of different angles and perspectives. Like Zano and Naïma in *Exils*, the young protagonist's arrival provokes fascination amongst the local villagers who stare intently and inquisitively at his approaching taxi. However, rather than simply objectifying Kamel with their gazes, many of them look directly into the camera's lens, surpassing the space of the diegesis and fixing the (Western) spectator as "other", intruder and (ethnographic) voyeur. Despite his Algerian heritage, Kamel is thus constructed as out of place and the director's filming techniques invite us to share his affective sense of alienation, "otherness" and physical dislocation.

For Higbee, the atmosphere of distancing that infuses this opening sequence is 'embedded in the aesthetic structure of *Bled number one*' and enables Ameer-Zaïmeche to communicate Kamel's embodied experience of alienation to the film's (Western) spectator.⁴¹ It is conveyed visually via long shots, closed spaces, and blocked and impeded vision, but also aurally, such that the spectator is often

⁴¹ Higbee, "Et si on allait en Algérie?", p. 66.

‘denied access to what the characters are saying during [...] key and intimate exchanges’.⁴² For instance, in one early sequence, an extreme long shot depicts Kamel walking to the Zerda with the women and children.⁴³ The camera then cuts to a medium close-up that shows him talking with his cousin, Louisa (Meriem Serbeh), to the left of the screen; however, in parallel with the opening sequence, we are refused access to their conversation and more mundane sounds, such as the breeze and the birds, are privileged. This combination of visual distance and aural obtrusion destabilises spectatorial authority and impedes our ability to understand the narrative fully. At the same time, it plunges us into Kamel’s immediate experience of the world and enables us to share his subjective feelings of alienation and displacement. Similarly, in the scene depicting the feast of the Zerda, Kamel helps to pull the bull from the truck, but thereafter hangs back hesitantly and adopts a largely passive role. While his sense of detachment is articulated through his corporeality and bodily (in)actions, it is also conveyed via Ameer-Zaïmeche’s eschewal of subjective point-of-view shots and deployment of an observational gaze that avoids exoticisation, yet amplifies spectatorial distance from the images we see on screen. Ameer-Zaïmeche thus uses alienating filming techniques that enable the spectator to share his central protagonist’s pre-reflective and corporeal experience of the world around him.

If Ameer-Zaïmeche’s filming style enables him to communicate Kamel’s lived experience of the *bled*, it also risks perpetuating dominant negative stereotypes of Algeria as an alienating and fundamentally “unknowable” land. This latter point is intensified via the use of realist aesthetics (natural lighting, location shooting,

⁴² Higbee, “‘Et si on allait en Algérie?’”, p. 66.

⁴³ Houcine Bouslahi defines the Zerda as ‘[une] fête populaire et [une] cérémonie religieuse. Elle est le lieu où sacré et profane se côtoient. Contrairement aux rites officiels et sérieux, elle se caractérise par son rapport au temps joyeux, celui qui interrompt momentanément le cours de l’histoire, marquée particulièrement par les difficultés de la vie, pour permettre à la communauté laborieuse de jouir d’un moment de répit’. See: Houcine Bouslahi, ‘Le Festin ou la Zerda dans la culture populaire tunisienne: Essai de lecture sociocritique d’une manifestation populaire’, *Etre et devenir*, 31-4 (p. 31).

organic dialogue, ambient sound, professional and non-professional actors, limited editing), which invite the (Western) spectator to view the film in terms of documentary authenticity and to accept – perhaps unquestioningly – its (rare) perspective on Algerian society today. Consequently, although *Bled number one* immerses the viewer in the experience of being alienated and displaced, its unobtrusive, documentary feel threatens to solidify an understanding of Algeria as an incomprehensible place that is estranging to its westernised protagonist and Western spectators alike.

The film's ambivalent attitude towards Algeria is most evident in the embodied intercultural encounter between Kamel and the local people and customs of his "homeland". In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Sara Ahmed argues that encounters between people and cultures are 'played out *on* the body and [...] *with* the emotions' (emphasis in the original).⁴⁴ For Ahmed, such encounters often '[end] with the reconstitution of bodily space',⁴⁵ whereby 'familiar bodies [are] incorporated through a sense of community – being together as like bodies – while strange bodies are expelled from bodily space – moving apart as unlike bodies'.⁴⁶ In *Bled number one*, Kamel's bodily demeanour marks him out as "other" and he is visually and verbally distinguished from the villagers from his very first appearance on-screen. He wears an orange hat, speaks solely in French, does not pray, enjoys socialising with the women and is referred to by the local community as 'Kamel la France'. Yet, despite his clear distinction from the rest of the villagers, Kamel is initially welcomed as a "familiar body" and seeks to engage in the community's local practices and traditions. He participates in the Zerda, dances with the local men and is supportive of the villagers in their battle against Islamic

⁴⁴ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 50.

fundamentalism. For instance, after a group of young fundamentalists invades the local café and berates the men for playing dominoes, drinking alcohol and smoking, Kamel sympathises with the locals' decision to set up a border system that polices access into the community. However, despite Kamel's concerted attempts to partake in local traditions, he is unable to accept the community's sex-gender system or practices of gendered segregation. He laughs when the men tell him that he cannot eat with the women and physically challenges his cousin, Bouzid (Abel Jafri), for beating up his sister, Louisa. From this point onwards, Kamel is treated as a "foreign object" that the community no longer welcomes, but must expel. He is (r)jected from the bodily and social space of the men and is referred to as 'Kamel le voleur' in place of 'Kamel la France'. Thus, as Ahmed explains, '[t]he bodies that come together, that almost touch and co-mingle, slide away from each other, becoming relived in their apartness. The particular bodies that move apart allow the redefinition of social as well as bodily integrity'.⁴⁷



Figure 2. Kamel sits on the mountainside in *Bled number one*

⁴⁷ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p. 39.

Following Kamel's ostracism from the space of the men, he becomes increasingly withdrawn and his sense of alienation augments. In an article on the effects of (enforced) exile on everyday experiences and emotions, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf argues that '[a]ny form of displacement from the locus of significance (the "home place") can lead to a shift in mood', whereby embodied subjects 'no longer feel connected to a familiar geography which grounded their identity and gives them meaning'.⁴⁸ According to Bakare-Yusuf, 'being *displaced* or *out-of-place* may have serious experiential and existential consequences [...] Because one is no longer *in* a geographical setting that is familiar, one can lose a deeply felt habitual connection to the world' (emphasis in the original).⁴⁹ In *Bled number one*, Kamel's enforced displacement causes him to undergo a drastic shift in mood and he becomes increasingly solitary and introverted as the film progresses. He is repeatedly filmed in isolation and there is an alteration in his bodily comportment, such that he becomes withdrawn and inhibited and his capacity to act is severely diminished. Moreover, Kamel grows increasingly detached and his loss of connection to the world is expressed via the inclusion of surreal, dream-like sequences that contrast sharply with the documentary-style aesthetic of the rest of the narrative.⁵⁰ For instance, in the scene directly following his conflict with Bouzid, a beautiful panning shot shows Kamel wandering beside a lake while Rodolphe Burger plays electric guitar on the hillside behind him. In line with Gatlif's portrayal of Naïma in *Exils*, Kamel's "return" to Algeria radically alters his emotional well-being and causes him to lose his intuitive and habitual connection to the world around him. Through the character of Kamel, Ameer-Zaïmeche thus suggests that exile is not an abstract or

⁴⁸ Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, 'Rethinking Diasporicity: Embodiment, Emotion, and the Displaced Origin', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 1 (2008), 147-58 (p. 150).

⁴⁹ Bakare-Yusuf, p. 152.

⁵⁰ Higbee, "'Et si on allait en Algérie?'" , p. 67.

incorporeal experience, but a lived and material condition that is grounded in physical realities.

In addition to the sense of detachment that permeates the film's aesthetics, *Bled number one* is marked by stasis and an atmosphere of (enforced) immobility. In contrast to the bodily motility of Zano and Naïma in *Exils*, Kamel's movements are inhibited and he is repeatedly shown in passive positions (sitting, waiting, watching) that stress his lack of agency and inability to move freely through spaces (across borders, between gendered places). Furthermore, in direct opposition to the energetic pace of Gatlif's film, Ameer-Zaïmeche uses long takes with little action to emphasise the stilted passage of time for Kamel in rural Algeria. While these techniques function to express Kamel's subjective experiences of time, they also reinforce an idea of the country as unchanging and mired in the past. This reading is supported by Ameer-Zaïmeche's own reflections on Algeria in an interview in which he claims that he 'sensed that things hadn't really moved on, that time goes by more slowly over there'.⁵¹ In addition to appearing alien and "unknowable", Algeria thus emerges as a backwards, almost a-temporal land and Kamel is envisioned as a liminal figure that is eternally out of place. He is excluded from the space of the men, but not fully accepted amongst the women; he is expelled from France, yet estranged and unable to integrate fully in Algeria. The film thus suggests that Kamel is trapped between two conflicting identities and unable to fit into either French or Algerian societies.⁵²

Though Ameer-Zaïmeche empathises with his central protagonist's plight, Higbee argues that *Bled number one* is 'as much about the marginalization of Louisa in a patriarchal society that refuses to acknowledge her right to independence as it is

⁵¹ Vassé, p. 8.

⁵² Higbee, "'Et si on allait en Algérie?'" , p. 65.

about Kamel's alienation as a hybrid subject who cannot fit in'.⁵³ From the outset, a number of aural and visual parallels are established between the two protagonists' bodily conduct in order to express their mutual estrangement in patriarchal Algeria. They wear hats, speak primarily in French, are frequently framed in isolation and refuse to comply with the community's local practices. However, unlike Kamel, who is alienated in Algeria because he has grown up in France, Louisa feels estranged in her homeland because her embodied existence is dictated by the patriarchal values of her family and community. She first appears in the film with her young son after having left her husband (Ramzy Bedia) because he will not allow her to pursue her dreams of becoming a singer. Yet, rather than receiving support from her immediate family, Louisa is chastised by her mother (Meriem Ameer-Zaïmeche) who tells her that she must return to her husband and unhappy marriage, stating: '[i]l faut que tu retournes chez ton mari [...] Ne viens pas ici avec ces idées. Je ne le supporte pas. Reste chez toi, débrouille-toi'. While this reaction shows that (older) women (as well as men) are responsible for the perpetuation of sexist structures of power in Algeria, it is nonetheless Louisa's husband and brother who carry out the most explicit abuses of male patriarchal authority in the film. In one alarming sequence, Louisa's husband hits her, abandons her on the side of the road and abducts her son, whilst another distressing scene shows her brother violently beating her for bringing shame to the family. Louisa is thus disempowered in Algeria and her body is constructed as a site across which patriarchal and familial honour are enacted and secured. The film hence demonstrates Pinar Ilkkarcın's argument that, in conservative Islamic

⁵³ Higbee, "Et si on allait en Algérie?", p. 67.

societies, '[t]he security of the social order is linked to that of a woman's virtue [...] Social order [...] requires male control of women's bodies and sexuality'.⁵⁴



Figure 3. Louisa in *Bled number one*

Given that Louisa is marginalised in Algeria due to her status as a woman, it is unsurprising that she experiences her body a site of imprisonment and subjugation. Like Kamel, Louisa's distress is expressed corporeally and she becomes increasingly withdrawn, inhibited and jaded following the abduction of her son. However, by contrast to Kamel, Louisa feels entrapped inside her own body and experiences it as a sort of "prison-house" that impedes her access to the world of objects and others.⁵⁵ Her sense of corporeal imprisonment is articulated via Ameur-Zaïmeche's decision to frame her behind doors, bars and fences, and culminates in a suicide attempt after which she is admitted to a ward in a psychiatric hospital for abused women. Ironically, however, the asylum is the sole space in which Louisa's voice

⁵⁴ Pinar Ilkkarcan, 'Women, Sexuality and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb', *Social Research*, 69 (2002), 753-79 (p. 757).

⁵⁵ Sobchack, p. 183.

can be articulated and she is able to feel at ease in her own body. In one of the film's most poignant scenes, Louisa defies society's silencing of her voice and takes to the stage in a long, black dress to sing a beautiful melancholic blues number to her fellow patients. Consequently, although Louisa's internment needs to be understood as a depressing and damning indictment of women's disempowerment in conservative Islamic society in Algeria, the asylum also emerges as a feminist space of tolerance and rejuvenation where women's voices can be heard and spoken. *Bled number one* thus lends a degree of perspicacity to the abused women's repeated assertions that it is not them, but the exterior world that is "fou".

If Louisa's confinement enables Ameur-Zaïmeche to critique Algeria's intransigent gender politics, it also links the country to the discourses of madness and insanity. This connection is reinforced by Kamel's admission that he will go crazy if he stays in Algeria any longer ('[j]e vais devenir fou si je reste'), and has been explored in the work of Frantz Fanon. In his writing on Algeria, Fanon examined the damaging psychological effects of colonialism and argued that madness was a direct result of the traumas experienced during colonial rule and the struggle for liberation.⁵⁶ Though *Bled number one* addresses a different time period to the one discussed by Fanon, Louisa's descent into madness could arguably be understood as an oblique reference to the Algerian civil war and its traumatic after-effects on the Algerian populace and contemporary Algerian society. The potential aims of this representational strategy notwithstanding, Louisa's purported madness threatens to re-ignite damaging (neo-)colonial stereotypes of Algeria as a (feminine) space of insanity and unreason that is diametrically opposed to the reason and rationality of the (masculine) West. Moreover, although Louisa plays a pivotal role

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1961).

in the narrative, she is given very little agency and the film repeats the patriarchal and (neo-)colonial trope that links women's bodies, insanity and the space of the nation.

Bled number one ends less optimistically than *Exils*. In the final scene, Kamel is pictured wandering alone on the hillside to the discordant sounds of Burger's blues guitar. This closing image provides an explicit representation of the young protagonist's exilic dislocation and isolation. At the end of the film, intercultural dialogue is shown to have failed and normative assumptions regarding the incompatibility of Western/Eastern and French/Algerian perspectives are upheld. Algeria emerges as a dystopic place that is hostile to women and still threatened by latent Islamic fundamentalism. It is an unliveable space and the final scenes see Kamel making plans to return to France clandestinely.

Embodied Encounters in Mehdi Charef's *La Fille de Keltoum*

Like *Bled number one*, *La Fille de Keltoum* focuses on a young Swiss heroine of Algerian heritage whose decision to "return" to Algeria causes her to feel alienated and displaced. Born in Maghnia in the north-west of Algeria, Charef moved to France at the age of ten where he grew up in the Parisian *banlieue* with his parents. His first full-length feature, *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède*, was released in 1986 and was largely credited with being the first "beur" film to reach a mainstream French audience.⁵⁷ Following the success of *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède*, Charef went on to make a number of films that concentrated on the lived experiences of different groups of disenfranchised people living in France. Whereas *Miss Mona* focuses on an inter-ethnic friendship between an elderly transvestite named Mona (Jean Carmet)

⁵⁷ *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède*, dir. by Mehdi Charef (Cinecom Pictures, 1986).

and an undocumented migrant called Samir (Ben Smaïl), *Marie-Line* details the day-to-day life of a white French working-class cleaner called Marie-Line.⁵⁸ With *La Fille de Keltoum*, Charef moves away from a focus on the socio-political realities of life in metropolitan France to examine the people and culture of his country of origin. Similar to *Exils* and *Bled number one*, *La Fille de Keltoum* not only “returns” the director to his diasporic “homeland”, but uses the device of the westernised (female) traveller to explore the themes of gender, embodiment, identity, home and displacement.

La Fille de Keltoum shows a young Swiss woman of Algerian heritage named Rallia (Cylia Malki) “returning” to her birthplace to find the biological birth mother who gave her up for adoption as a new-born baby. The film begins with Rallia’s arrival at her familial home in the Atlas Mountains in Algeria. Here, she meets her grandfather (Brahim Ben Salah) and aunt Nedjma (Baya Belal), and attempts to adapt to daily life in the rural desert community in which they live. After waiting in vain for her mother Keltoum (Deborah Lamy) to return from the coast, Rallia decides to leave her ancestral home and embarks upon a journey to find her long lost mother herself. Fearful of the perils that await her niece, Nedjma accompanies Rallia on her quest and the two women set off on a dangerous journey that takes them across inland Algeria to El Kantara on the coast.⁵⁹ In parallel with *Bled number one*, *La Fille de Keltoum* uses Rallia’s emotional and affective responses to her birthplace to criticise supposedly conservative attitudes in the country to gender and the female body. However, in contrast to Ameur-Zaïmeche’s

⁵⁸ *Miss Mona*, dir. by Mehdi Charef (Acteurs Auteurs Associé, 1987); *Marie-Line*, dir. by Mehdi Charef (Rézo Films, 2000).

⁵⁹ In his analysis of the film, Waldron points out that ‘Rallia and Nedjma’s journey is difficult to track. Their destination is depicted as a coastal resort which, given Algeria’s geography, must be on the northern coast, and yet the real El Kantara is completely landlocked’. See: Darren Waldron, ‘Troubling Return: Femininity and Algeria in *La Fille de Keltoum*’, in *Open Roads, Closed Borders: The Contemporary French-language Road Movie*, pp. 71-86.

film, Charef promotes a dualistic feminist logic that privileges French/Western rationality and reduces Algerian women to their somatic alterity.

At the outset of the film, Rallia is shown to look misplaced to many of the local people in rural Algeria because of her westernised appearance. The disjunction between Rallia and the rural Algerian landscape can be understood using Bronwyn Davies' work in *(In)scribing Body/Landscape Relations*, in which she argues that landscapes should be 'understood as bodies and as co-extensive with bodies'.⁶⁰ Though critical writing often considers the body in isolation from its surroundings, Davies contends that bodies and landscapes are in a constant process of interchange and that embodied subjects need to be seen 'as taking up their material existence within landscapes, and as landscapes'.⁶¹ She sees the relationship between bodies and landscapes as primordial and argues that 'belonging in landscape is achieved in the double sense of becoming appropriate and being appropriated with/in [...] landscapes'.⁶² However, since the links between bodies and landscapes are intuitive, Davies contends that they only become apparent when embodied subjects find themselves in 'an entirely different discursive or physical landscape' to those to which they are accustomed.⁶³ In these instances, "bodyscapes" are broken and embodied subjects look (and feel) misplaced in the physical environments in which they find themselves. In the opening sequence of *La Fille de Keltoum*, Rallia is immediately constructed as out of place and her body is shown to be incongruous with its external surroundings. The scene begins with a hazy shot of a yellow bus travelling through the arid Atlas Mountain range. The camera then cuts to the interior of the bus where Charef uses a shot/counter shot structure to show a traditional

⁶⁰ Bronwyn Davies, *(In)scribing Body/Landscape Relations* (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2000), p. 11.

⁶¹ Davies, p. 11.

⁶² Davies, p. 11.

⁶³ Davies, pp. 15-6.

Algerian woman looking curiously at Rallia because of her cropped hair and Western t-shirt top and trousers. Not only does Rallia's corporeal appearance mark her out as "other" from the local inhabitants, but the Algerian woman's gaze immediately functions to construct her as out of place in her physical surroundings. In parallel with Davies' theorising, the opening sequence of *La Fille de Keltoum* thus suggests that Rallia is not "appropriate" or "appropriated" within the Algerian desert landscape from which she originates.

However, if Rallia appears to be misplaced in rural Algeria, the next few minutes of the scene suggest that she feels an almost intuitive corporeal connection to the arid desert landscape that surrounds her. After Rallia descends from the bus, a medium long shot shows her pausing to listen to the sound of birds squawking in the distance. The camera then tracks forward to focus on her face as she breathes in the scent of the desert air and gazes up at the vertiginous mountain range in front of her. This emphasis on the heroine's sensuous engagement with her environment can be understood via Sobchack's work on the acculturated sensorium, in which she argues that the senses operate in unison to inform our perceptive experiences of the world around us. Drawing on the writing of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack claims that 'the senses each provide discretely structured modes of access to the world', but also interact with one another to create our lived and embodied experiences of the phenomena in our environments.⁶⁴ In the opening minutes of *La Fille de Keltoum*, Rallia not only engages with her new environment through all of her senses simultaneously, but seems to feel emplaced and at home in this previously unknown desert landscape. This point is reinforced in the later scene in which we see an extended shot of Rallia standing at the mountainside, seeming to take in this new

⁶⁴ Sobchack, p. 71.

space through all of her senses, not just sight and sound. Consequently, although Rallia is viewed as “other” and out of place by the local woman on the bus, this opening sequence constructs her as an embodied subject who “(re)connects” with her birthplace via all of her senses simultaneously.



Figure 4. Rallia arrives in rural Algeria in *La Fille de Keltoum*

Despite the fact that Rallia engages with Algeria through her body, her displacement is again articulated in the scene in which she meets her aunt Nedjma for the first time. Having arrived at her destination, Rallia introduces herself to her biological grandfather and wanders around outside her familial home. As she looks down a disused well, the off-screen sound of screeching becomes apparent and Charef follows Rallia’s gaze to focus on a woman (Nedjma) atop a nearby ridge who is throwing stones and shouting frantically. Completely unperturbed by Nedjma’s distressed behaviour, Rallia stares at her curiously, before turning around calmly and walking back towards her familial home. Not only does this scene use Nedjma’s reaction to Rallia’s presence to (re)instate a notion of Algeria as a primitive space that is isolated from modernity and impervious to outside influences, but it adopts a

shot/reverse shot structure to privilege Rallia's point-of-view and align the spectator with her displaced perspective as a westernised outsider. Consequently, although this scene suggests that Rallia looks misplaced in rural Algeria, it also uses her embodied encounter with her aunt Nedjma to articulate a sense of her superiority to the local inhabitants she encounters.

Rallia's incongruity within rural Algeria notwithstanding, she initially attempts to integrate into her family's community by partaking in local traditions and activities. She changes from her westernised attire into a traditional dress and *hijab*, helps Nedjma to collect water, picks asparagus bulbs from the bushes with her grandfather and carries heavy sacks up the mountainside for her Uncle Tahar. However, despite Rallia's best efforts to integrate, she is consistently differentiated from those around her through her reluctance or inability to speak Arabic and via Charef's consistent privileging of her embodied experiences and perspective. For instance, in the scene in which Rallia helps her old uncle Tahar, Charef uses a reverse-angle shot to foreground her exhausted face as she pauses halfway up the mountain and exhales heavily. This emphasis on Rallia's physical exertion invites the spectator to "feel" a sense of her fatigue and weariness, but also gives perfect expression to Sobchack's work on embodied spectatorship. As outlined in the introduction, Sobchack asks us to reconsider 'the processes of identification in the film experience, relating them not to our secondary engagement with and recognition of either "subject positions" or characters but rather to our primary engagement [...] with the sense and sensibility of materiality itself'.⁶⁵ For Sobchack, cinematic images often encourage their spectators to 'find them sensible in a primary, prepersonal and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete

⁶⁵ Sobchack, p. 65.

and localized'.⁶⁶ In the aforementioned sequence in *La Fille de Keltoum*, Charef transforms the spectator's visceral empathy with Rallia's emotional and affective state of weariness into a more ideologically-motivated mode of identification with her subject position. In inviting the audience to empathise with Rallia's embodied and affective responses to her "homeland", *La Fille de Keltoum* ultimately strengthens spectatorial alignment with her privileged status as a displaced and westernised outsider.

If the first section of the film focuses on Rallia's attempts to integrate into her family's rural community, the next segment of the narrative shows her and her aunt Nedjma leaving their familial home and embarking upon a journey to find Keltoum themselves. Over the course of their travels, Rallia discovers the difficulty of daily life in Algeria and encounters a number of local women who are disempowered because of their gender in contemporary Algerian society. In one scene that takes place in the sweltering desert heat, Rallia meets a woman (Fatima Ben Saïdane) who has been repudiated by her husband and is chased from a road-side café for daring to ask for a glass of water with her head uncovered. Shortly afterwards, the two heroines encounter a group of fundamentalist terrorists who kill the repudiated woman because she recognises one of them to be the son of her neighbour. During the next leg of their journey, Rallia and Nedjma witness a Belgian woman (Samira Draa) being beaten for wearing make-up, and narrowly escape being shot and then raped by a violent truck-driver (Habib Zrafi). These scenes enable Charef to criticise contemporary gender relations in Algeria; however, they also use their characters' embodied experiences of physical abuse, rape, repudiation and murder to suggest that gendered oppression operates at the level of the body in the patriarchal society

⁶⁶ Sobchack, p. 65.

constructed in the film. In a similar manner to *Bled number one*, *La Fille de Keltoum* thus represents Algeria as a conservative country that does little to protect its female citizens from the various forms of misogynistic violence that are perpetuated against their bodies on a day-to-day basis.

Though the above scenes condemn contemporary gender relations in Algeria, they are sensationalist and threaten to (re)inscribe dominant Western stereotypes of Algerian women as helpless victims of their socio-economic situations. *La Fille de Keltoum* could therefore be seen to adopt a dualistic feminist perspective that places “Eastern” women in diametric opposition to their more “liberal” and “liberated” counterparts in the West. As discussed in the introduction, Lazreg criticises such an approach for its propensity to construct Algerian women as the living ‘embodiments of cultures presumed inferior and classified as “traditional” or “patriarchal”’.⁶⁷ For Lazreg, certain branches of Western feminism ignore ‘the interface between historical events and structures’ and frame Algerian women in de-historicised terms that allow them very little voice or agency of their own.⁶⁸ In order to overcome such homogenising impulses, Lazreg encourages us to focus on the phenomenological reality of Algerian women’s lived experiences, rather than the reductive stereotypes imposed upon them by dominant feminist discourses in the West.⁶⁹ According to Lazreg, such an approach would enable us to better contextualise the relationship between gender and oppression, and could therefore create a greater understanding and ‘appreciation of the *complexity* of [Algerian] women’s lives’ (italics in the original).⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Lazreg, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Lazreg, p.1.

⁶⁹ Lazreg, pp. 14-15.

⁷⁰ Lazreg, p. 14.

Contrary to Lazreg's recommendations, *La Fille de Keltoum* de-contextualises its representation of Algerian femininity and imbues its local female characters with very little agency, autonomy or ability to resist male patriarchal authority. In the same way that the repudiated woman makes little fuss when she is callously dismissed by her husband, Nedjma unquestioningly performs all of the arduous manual labour in her local community. In contrast, Rallia is constructed as liberated (she boldly enters the café for a glass of water) and liberating (Rallia, Nedjma and the repudiated woman run away from the café-owner laughing hysterically), and appears to be impervious to harm. She steals the violent truck-driver's lorry and dissuades him from shooting and then raping her by simply meeting his gaze. *La Fille de Keltoum* thus privileges its westernised character and frames her Algerian counterparts within a de-historicised narrative of oppression, subjugation and endemic patriarchal violence. Rather than representing his Algerian heroines as situated embodied subjects, Charef constructs them as the material incarnation of dominant (Western) stereotypes of "Eastern" women as submissive and/or subjugated.

Because of the patriarchal oppression Rallia witnesses in her journey across Algeria, she becomes increasingly withdrawn and taciturn the more the film unfolds. While Rallia's physical withdrawal is used to express her growing sense of alienation in Algeria, it also has an ideological function insofar as it allows Charef to suggest that patriarchal Algeria mutes women's voices and suppresses their ability to be outspoken. This point is underscored by the fact that it is only when Rallia meets a fellow Westerner in a local *hammam* (bathhouse) that she is able to open up and engage in an extended verbal exchange. As she talks to a young Belgian woman, Rallia admits that she feels completely lost and de-sensitised in Algeria, stating:

‘[j]’avoue que, pour le moment, c’est comme si je voyais rien, j’entendais rien. Je suis complètement paumée’. Not only does Rallia’s admission link her physical desensitisation to her spatial displacement, but it suggests that her alienation is manifest in her inability to perform the bodily acts of seeing and hearing. In parallel with the representation of Naïma in *Exils*, Rallia’s body is thus constructed as the principal site upon which her feelings of estrangement and alienation are constituted and expressed.

Following this scene, Rallia begins to enter into a state of acute alienation, during which her mind seems to take over her body and she starts to feel increasingly disconnected from her environment. The young heroine’s increased alienation is evidenced in the scene in which she tells her aunt Nedjma to leave her alone because she reminds her too much of the local population, stating angrily: ‘[n]e me suit plus. Reprend ta route. Je préfère continuer seule. Quand je te vois, tu me rappelles des gens d’ici. Je [ne] peux plus les voir’. The use of the verb “voir” here is significant because it implies that Rallia has undergone a shift from sensing through the body to seeing and knowing through her rational mind. In contrast to the earlier scenes in which Rallia engages with her environment via all of her physical senses simultaneously, this sequence suggests that her sense of alienation in her surroundings has caused her body to become relegated to a mind that thinks and sees, rather than senses.

If Rallia enters into a state of corporeal alienation in *La Fille de Keltoum*, Nedjma’s embodied existence is reduced to little more than a discursive allegory for the post-colonial Algerian nation. In *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, Radhika Mohanram examines the place of women in discourses on the nation and argues that women are often ‘located [...] as transmitters of ideology and the culture;

as signifiers of ethnic/racial/national differences; and as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles'.⁷¹ Developing these ideas, Margaret Flinn argues that Maghrebi filmmaking is often characterised by an 'impulse to envision North African women as allegories for their societies'.⁷² She points to the manner in which Maghrebi women are frequently required to stand in for their cultures and cites a number of contemporary films in which their bodies are metonymically linked to the space of the nation.⁷³ However, despite the prevalence of this mode of representation, Flinn argues that allegory can have damaging 'consequences in terms of the relationship [it allows] to be imagined between women and their bodies'.⁷⁴ For Flinn, allegorical representations not only divorce women from their lived materiality, but tie them to 'the specificities of physical and economic violence that may be visited upon [their bodies] (rape, unwanted pregnancy, prostitution, forced marriage)'.⁷⁵ Flinn therefore concludes that 'the allegorized female body is at once embodied and disembodied, caught between the narration of a national or international political history [...] and a social violence which crushingly reduces [women] to the acts wrought upon [their bodies]'.⁷⁶

In line with broader trends in Maghrebi filmmaking, Nedjma is represented in disembodied terms that reduce her to an allegory for the space of the nation. Unlike Rallia, Nedjma is deferential and submissive, behaves in an almost animalistic manner and is repeatedly referred to as 'une sorcière' and 'folle'. She forages for food and rubbish, attempts to drink petrol from the pump of a truck and is shown

⁷¹ Radhika Mohanram, *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 60.

⁷² Margaret C. Flinn, 'Giving a Face to the Conflict: Contemporary Representations of Women in Franco-North African Film', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 14 (2011), 339-63 (p. 340).

⁷³ See, for instance, *Les Silences du palais*, *Rachida*, *Viva Laldjérie* and, most recently, *Millefeuille*, which is discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

⁷⁴ Flinn, p. 343.

⁷⁵ Flinn, p. 342.

⁷⁶ Flinn, p. 344.

casting a spell to stop a local bus from moving. These physical attributes metonymically associate Nedjma with (neo-)colonial visions of Algeria as a space of exoticism, sorcery and madness; however, as Waldron observes, they also position her as a metaphor for ‘a nation whose women are subjugated into a life of destitution, whose only tool is their body and sole purpose is servitude’.⁷⁷ This latter point is evidenced in the penultimate sequence of the film, in which Rallia and Nedjma reach the luxury hotel where Keltoum works and Keltoum reveals that she is not Rallia’s biological birth mother. Having become sterile after selling her own baby to buy a water pump for the village, Keltoum forced Nedjma to sleep with soldiers in the mountains so that she could sell her baby (Rallia) to traffickers in exchange for a donkey. This narrative twist exposes Rallia’s birth mother to be the aunt that has accompanied her throughout the film; however, it also constructs Nedjma and Keltoum as metaphors for a nation that exploits women’s bodies and did little to protect them during the civil war years when rape was rife. Consequently, although *La Fille de Keltoum* uses Nedjma and Keltoum’s material experiences to criticise Algeria’s neglectful treatment of its female population, it nonetheless reduces them to their bodies and constructs them as little more than metonymic signifiers for women’s disempowerment within the barren and (sexually) exploitative space of the post-colonial Algerian nation. *La Fille de Keltoum* thus reiterates the traditional mind-body split by relegating its Algerian heroines to a space of immanence that is not constitutive of embodied existence.

⁷⁷ Waldron, ‘Troubling Return’, p. 75.



Figure 5. Rallia (left) and Nedjma (right) in *La Fille de Keltoum*

Despite the problems of de-subjectification and disembodiment associated with allegory, Charef's decision to use it as his predominant mode of representation arguably encourages us to read his film as a metaphor for contemporary power relations between France and Algeria. Though Rallia is Swiss-Algerian and there are very few references to France in the narrative, Waldron points out that 'France is omnipresent in the film's production: Charef has always worked there, Cylia Malki was born in Paris and much of the financing came from French production companies'.⁷⁸ For Waldron, France's strangely spectral space in the film therefore enables us to interpret it as an allegory for 'the anxieties attached to Algeria within dominant [...] discourses' in France.⁷⁹ In the same way as the conspicuous absence of references to France (and French colonial rule) can be understood as a metaphor for contemporary Franco-Algerian relations, the relationship between Rallia and Nedjma can arguably be interpreted as the embodiment of an encounter between the former colonial power and its ex-colonial stronghold. Not only does the representation of these two protagonists reinstate regressive stereotypes of women from France (and

⁷⁸ Waldron, 'Troubling Return', p. 78.

⁷⁹ Waldron, 'Troubling Return', p. 78.

French-speaking Europe) and Algeria, but it reinforces dualistic assumptions surrounding the superiority of rational French (and Francophone) culture and the inferiority of “irrational” Algerian culture. To a far greater extent than *Exils* or *Bled number one*, *La Fille de Keltoum* positions the female body of Algerian heritage as a discursive site upon which to negotiate Franco-Algerian relations and highlight the “supremacy” of French and Western ideals.

The final scenes of the film are ambiguous. Having discovered that Nedjma is her birth mother, Rallia chases her onto the beach shouting ‘maman’ repeatedly. Seeming to remember momentarily, Nedjma turns, calls Rallia by her birth name (Aïcha) and embraces her, sobbing. The two women’s emotional reunion suggests that Rallia has overcome the dominance of her mind and regained a sense of connection with her body and her “homeland”. However, rather than metaphorically suggesting that a rapprochement between French and Algerian cultures is possible, the final scene of the film shows Rallia leaving Algeria, unable to adapt to her country or culture of origin. As the bus departs, Charef uses a shot/reverse shot to show some local passengers laughing, before Rallia looks out of the window to see Nedjma running next to the bus and waving. Though it is unclear whether Rallia is embarrassed or feels a kind of empathy with her mother, the ending encapsulates many of the film’s limitations insofar as it returns to the privileged perspective of the westernised outsider and reinforces the perceived distinctions between France (and French-speaking Europe) and Algeria. In contrast to Naïma, who is able to overcome her earlier scepticism and (re)connect with Algeria through her body, the final scene of *La Fille de Keltoum* suggests that Rallia is ultimately unable to overcome the dominance of her mind and (re)unite with her country of birth.

Perhaps because it was made during the Algerian civil war, *La Fille de Keltoum* endorses contemporary French fears of Algeria as a violent and misogynistic space where women are unable to think for themselves (Nedjma) or have abandoned thinking altogether through resignation (Keltoum). Despite Charef's ostensible sympathy for the plight of his Algerian heroines, his film is underpinned by a dualistic and reductive feminist logic that privileges Western rationality and reduces Algerian women to their bodies. To a greater degree than *Exils* or *Bled number one*, *La Fille de Keltoum* thus contributes to dominant misconceptions of Algeria as an unforgivingly patriarchal space that stands in antithetical opposition to the more "liberal" values that are metaphorically embodied by Rallia, France and the West.

Conclusion

Exils, *Bled number one* and *La Fille de Keltoum* all foreground the "return" journeys of young characters of Maghrebi heritage from France or Switzerland to Algeria. Despite differences in style and approach, these three films all explore questions of identity and belonging through the body and use their protagonists' embodied experiences to express their displacement in (rural) Algeria. Whereas Zano and Naïma's mobility is constructed as a symbol of their agency and marks them out from those around them, Kamel's (enforced) displacement diminishes his capacity to move and interact in the world of objects and others. In *La Fille de Keltoum*, Rallia is consistently differentiated from the local characters through her corporeal comportment and appearance, but also because of her privileged ability to navigate space. These films not only establish a correlation between corporeality, agency and

mobility, but use their protagonists' embodied experiences to communicate their lack of belonging in contemporary Algeria.

Because these films privilege their characters' corporeal and affective responses to their "homeland", they arguably risk (re)producing dominant neo-colonial anxieties about Algeria and the East. In all cases, the central protagonists feel estranged in Algeria and their distress is conveyed by modifications in their bodily comportment, such that they become withdrawn and inhibited and their ability to interact in the world is altered or diminished. Naïma becomes introspective and jaded upon her arrival in Algiers, Kamel begins to lose his habitual connection to the world around him, and Rallia feels alienated the longer she stays in Algeria. In *Bled number one* and *La Fille de Keltoum*, in particular, the central characters feel estranged because of the Islamic sex/gender system and the patriarchal oppression they witness in mainland Algeria. Consequently, although these three films complicate facile distinctions between "positive" and "negative" category road movies, they risk feeding dominant negative stereotypes of Algeria as a patriarchal space that is at odds with Western morality and debilitating for its westernised protagonists.

If these films criticise gender relations in Algeria, they nonetheless repeat the patriarchal and (neo-)colonial discourses that position the material female body as a vehicle through which to explore intercultural tensions and Franco-Algerian relations. Whereas Naïma's body is positioned as the principal site across which an intercultural dialogue is negotiated in *Exils*, Louisa's body is envisioned as a vehicle for the articulation of male patriarchal authority in *Bled number one*. In *La Fille de Keltoum*, Rallia emerges as the embodiment of Western emancipation and Nedjma is constructed as the material incarnation of Algeria and the East. To a far greater

extent than the other two films in this chapter, *La Fille de Keltoum* is underpinned by a dualistic feminist logic that (re)instates normative binary distinctions and constructs its Algerian heroines as metaphors for women's disempowerment in patriarchal Algerian society.

Finally, these three films differ significantly with regards to the fate they construct for their protagonists. In *Exils*, Zano and Naïma are able to (re)connect with their country and culture of origin through their bodies. Such a fate does not befall Kamel, who feels corporeally alienated in his "homeland", or Rallia, who is unable to overcome the dominance of her mind and reconcile with her birthplace. For Higbee, 'the impossibility of reconciliation and breakdown of cross-cultural Franco-Algerian dialogue in *Bled number one* could be interpreted as a consequence of Ameer-Zaïmeche's own position as Maghrebi-French: born in Algeria but raised in France from a young age and somewhat ambivalent to the emotional and cultural pull exacted by the diasporic "homeland"'.⁸⁰ In the same vein, the ambiguous representation of Algeria in *La Fille de Keltoum* might be understood as the result of Charef's subject position as a filmmaker who lives and works in France and produced his film at a time of violent unrest in Algeria. By contrast, the more positive representation of identity and intercultural relations in *Exils* is arguably attributable to Gatlif's own nomadic upbringing and lifestyle as a gypsy traveller. Without wishing to essentialise subject positions, the directors' own lived experiences could arguably be used to explain their films' different responses to the possibility of "returning" and the irreconcilability of French/Western and Algerian/Eastern perspectives.

⁸⁰ Higbee, "Et si on allait en Algérie?", p. 73.

Such significant differences notwithstanding, *Exils*, *Bled number one* and *La Fille de Keltoum* all construct their protagonists' bodies as privileged sites for the exploration of cultural identity and intercultural interactions between France (and French-speaking Europe) and Algeria. In different ways, these films use their characters' embodied encounters with their (parents') country and culture of origin to tackle Franco-Algerian relations and to explore questions of identity and belonging. The next chapter of this thesis builds upon the themes of corporeality and movement by examining three films that feature Maghrebi(-French) women and show their protagonists (re)claiming their identities through their bodies and the embodied practices of belly dance and trance.

2. Performing Bodies: Representations of Belly Dance and Trance in Raja Amari's *Satin rouge*, Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le mulet* and Tony Gatlif's *Exils*

Introduction

In the previous chapter of this thesis, I examined three films that explore questions of cultural identity through the body and use the tropes of movement and mobility to articulate their characters' agency. In the section on *Exils*, dance emerged as a key theme and the entranced body was constructed as a vehicle through which the central protagonist was able to (re)connect with her country and culture of origin. Building upon the idea of movement as a means to achieve identity, this chapter examines *Satin rouge*, *La Graine et le mulet* and the final sequence of *Exils* in greater detail in order to suggest that all three films position belly dancing or entranced women's bodies as sources of agency, subjectivity and female (sexual) empowerment. However, if these three films show their characters (re)claiming their (gendered) identities through the embodied practices of belly dance and trance, this chapter queries the extent to which they reflect or resist orientalist images of Maghrebi(-French) women. This section begins by providing a contextual overview of the histories of belly dance and trance; it then furnishes a detailed exploration of their representations in *Satin rouge*, *La Graine et le mulet* and *Exils*.

From Exoticism to Empowerment: Belly Dance in Islamic Culture

Belly dance, or *raqs sharqi* as it is known in Arabic, is a personalised and expressive dance form that originated in the Middle East and North Africa and was traditionally

performed at tribal rituals, celebrations and/or communal gatherings.¹ During the (French) colonial period, however, belly dance was transformed from a traditional indigenous art form into a degraded dance practice that was performed by women of low social status for (male) scopical pleasure.² Belly dancers were defined in terms of their somatic alterity and their bodies were constructed as sites of sensuality, lasciviousness, eroticism, exoticism and even danger. As Virginia Keft-Kennedy explains, ‘the dances of traditional Middle Eastern and North African women were condemned as gratuitous sexual display, fetishised into a sign of the “Orient’s” sensuality and abandon, deemed grotesque, and immoral, censored and altogether banned’.³

Despite their widespread degradation, belly dancers provoked fascination amongst the white (male) coloniser and images of *la danse du ventre* were widely disseminated in the colonial *métropole* via orientalist artworks and postcards.⁴ Not only did these images tie belly dancers to the discourses of Eastern exoticism and “otherness”, but they constructed their bodies as sites of corruption and fear because they did not conform to dominant patriarchal notions of feminine beauty and bodily

¹ Andrea M. Moe, ‘Reclaiming the Feminine: Bellydancing as a Feminist Project’, *Congress in Research on Dance Conference Proceedings*, 40 (2008), 181-92 (p. 181). Though “belly dance” is a contested term, I use it here following Andrea Deagon’s justifications: “[b]elly dance” seems to have originated in the Western world as a dismissive term, showing disregard for the skill in whole body movement and musical interpretation that the dance requires. It was also meant to exclude the dance from polite society by naming it [after] an area of the body associated with base, animal, sexual desire rather than the supposedly loftier aspirations of Western dance. But the belly is also, in our thought vocabulary, the seat of deep emotion, instinctive (“gut”) feelings, birth and desire. I want to reclaim these associations and challenge the dismissive intent of the name “belly dance”. See: Andrea Deagon, ‘Feminism and Belly Dance’, *Habibi*, 17 (1999), 8-13 (p. 8) <<http://people.uncw.edu/deagon/raqs/feminism.htm>> [accessed 12 September 2015].

² The history of the Ouled Nail tribe of Algeria provides a pernicious example of the colonial denigration of a traditional dance practice and way of life. The Ouled Nail were a tribe that lived in the mountains to the south of Algiers. Traditionally, women from the tribe danced in public and entertained men for money. This practice was fully accepted by the remainder of the tribe and was passed on from one generation of women to the next. However, following the colonisation of Algeria, women of the Ouled Nail tribe were rejected as prostitutes and their behaviour was deemed to be immoral. For more on the history of the Ouled Nail tribe, see: Lazreg, pp. 29-33.

³ Keft-Kennedy, p. 279.

⁴ For a collection of such images, see *The Colonial Harem*, in which Malek Alloula interrogates representations of the harem, belly dancers and the veil in a series of French colonial postcards. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

decorum in the West. Belly dancers were voluptuous and overtly sexual, and their dance was perceived to be dishonourable because it emphasised supposedly taboo areas of the female body, such as the midriff, the navel and the pelvis. Furthermore, by contrast to highly choreographed Western dance forms, such as ballet, belly dance was individualised and spontaneous and seemed to be characterised by uncontrollable bodily movements and female (self-)expression. In this respect, although belly dancers were positioned as objects of male sexual pleasure, they arguably used their bodies as modes of subjective (self-)expression and agency that destabilised the white (male) coloniser's ability to "know" and control them as objectified "others". During the colonial era, belly dancers thus emerged as highly ambiguous figures that were fascinating and alluring, yet also embodied dominant colonial anxieties surrounding "illicit" female sexuality and 'Eastern women as dangerous, exotic "others"'.⁵

As a result of the enduring legacies of colonialism and orientalism, belly dancers remain key signifiers of Eastern alterity and exoticism today. For Andrea Moe, 'little has changed with regard to the image and treatment of belly dancers' and they continue to be subjected to racist, orientalist and sexist discourses in contemporary Eastern and Western societies.⁶ Belly dancers are still perceived to be seductresses or depraved women and they often find themselves working in exploitative conditions for very little remuneration. Furthermore, as a result of the rise and spread of politicised Islam, belly dancers are increasingly judged in accordance with strict *sharia* law in conservative Islamic societies in the MENA. As Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young explain, 'Islamic mores [...] dictate that women must not stand uncovered in front of males who do not stand in proper

⁵ Keft-Kennedy, p. 285.

⁶ Moe, p. 182.

kinship relation to them. Female public dancers who appear in male (public) spaces strongly contravene these mores and reinforce the widely held notion that professional dancers are prostitutes'.⁷ Despite the dissolution of the old colonial order, the combination of neo-colonial and conservative religious attitudes means that belly dancers continue to be envisioned as sources of immorality in both Eastern and Western societies today.

In recent years, a number of feminist critics and practitioners have sought to (re)claim belly dancers from their devalued position as objects of exoticisation and eroticisation. Whereas Moe emphasises belly dance's (forgotten) status as an ancient art form and tribal ritual, Lois Ibsen Al Faruqi attempts to show how the 'dances performed in Muslim society reveal strong correspondence to Islamic notions of beauty and truth'.⁸ She argues that belly dance – or solo exhibition dance as she calls it – translates into 'kinesthetic patterns analogous to the abstract arabesques of the visual and aural arts' in Islamic religion and culture.⁹ Whereas belly dance's improvised nature corresponds with Islam's distrust of 'naturalistic portrayal' and embrace of a more abstract means of expression, its focus on small, complex movements resembles 'analogous features in the visual arts', such as the acute attention to detail in Islamic painting and architecture.¹⁰ Al Faruqi thus concludes that belly dance should not be dismissed as an illegitimate or disrespectful art form, but embraced for its potential to 'aesthetically [express] the essence of Islam'.¹¹

In addition to Al Faruqi's attempts to re-read belly dance in light of Islamic aesthetic traditions, feminist writers such as Keft-Kennedy have argued that 'the

⁷ Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, 'Belly Dance: Orientalism: Exoticism: Self-Exoticism', *Dance Research Journal*, 35 (2003), 13-37 (p. 16).

⁸ Moe, p. 181; Al Faruqi, p. 6.

⁹ Al Faruqi, p. 7.

¹⁰ Al Faruqi, pp. 7-8.

¹¹ Al Faruqi, p. 12.

performance and accoutrements of contemporary belly dance can be seen to work subversively toward spectacle (as a means of) power and pleasure'.¹² According to Keft-Kennedy, belly dancing is transgressive because it causes the flesh to protrude and wobble, and therefore undermines socially-accepted conventions with regards to how women should look and behave in (male) public spaces. She argues that belly dance encourages female freedom of expression through the body and points to the skill and mastery needed to move certain body parts in isolation from others and in time to the music. As such, Keft-Kennedy believes that belly dancers should not be understood as passive objects of (male) visual pleasure, but rather as agentic subjects whose '[bodies] must be [...] strong and controlled in order to sustain the complexity of the muscle isolation'.¹³

If Keft-Kennedy argues for the subversive potential of belly dancing and the body, she also queries the extent to which a 'semi-clad woman in public [can] adequately suggest a site of feminist cultural politics'.¹⁴ As Keft-Kennedy asks, how does 'belly dance provide for the possibility of transcending fixed social constructions of gender and embodied identity when the dancer appears to wear the accoutrements of patriarchal desire?'¹⁵ Can the belly dancing body ever be understood outside of the frames of reference of orientalism, (neo-)colonialism and/or hetero-patriarchy? While belly dance's emphasis on scopic pleasure and corporeal exhibition does not sit easily with many feminist discourses, Keft-Kennedy argues that belly dancers can retain their subversive potential so long as they remain in motion and do not allow themselves to be reduced to static objects of (male) visual pleasure. As Keft-Kennedy explains, 'the public display of a woman in a

¹² Keft-Kennedy, p. 291.

¹³ Keft-Kennedy, p. 294.

¹⁴ Keft-Kennedy, p. 292.

¹⁵ Keft-Kennedy, p. 292.

revealing belly dance costume who is *not* dancing risks reaffirming the status quo without suggesting or constituting a feminist cultural politics’ (emphasis in the original).¹⁶ Conversely, ‘the belly dancing body in motion – with its specific gestures and pelvic orientated emphasis – [...] allows for a positive modification and subversion of dominant constructions of appropriate womanly behaviour and presentation’.¹⁷ In other words, though belly dancers need to be understood against the backdrop of damaging (neo-)colonial and orientalist discourses, they can maintain their transgressive potential so long as they emphasise movement and mobility, and insofar as they foreground “unruly” elements, such as protruding flesh, the pelvis and the belly.

Though Keft-Kennedy’s arguments may be valid in a Western context and dance space, the extent to which her theories can be applied to belly dancers in the MENA is questionable. She argues that the belly dancer transcends an acceptable image of female corporeality, but for whom? And, in which culture? Certainly, there is a predilection for svelte female bodies in the West and the (global) media persistently posits images of slenderness as attractive.¹⁸ However, in many Arab cultures, voluptuous women are considered to be desirable and fleshiness is constructed as a signifier of wealth, prosperity and sexual attractiveness.¹⁹ In this respect, though belly dancers might challenge socially-accepted standards of female corporeality in the West, their protruding tummies and wobbling flesh could arguably be seen to endorse the patriarchal ideals that govern women’s physical

¹⁶ Keft-Kennedy, p. 295.

¹⁷ Keft-Kennedy, p. 295.

¹⁸ For an exploration of the norms and regulations governing female bodies in the West, see: Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Wendy Buonaventura argues that ‘[t]he Arab ideal of female beauty does not confine itself to the young and slim, but also takes in the quality of voluptuousness, with its hint of an enveloping protectiveness and sensual ease’. See: Wendy Bounaventura, *Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World* (London: Saqi, 1993), p. 169.

desirability in the MENA. Belly dancing bodies are not necessarily perceived in the same manner in Eastern and Western societies and questions of agency need to be contextualised and viewed in light of the dancer's specific socio-political culture and history.

If the above example demonstrates the need to examine images of belly dancing in context, it also illustrates the difficulties many belly dancers face in balancing their own personal desire for corporeal (self-)expression with the patriarchal expectations others have of their bodies. For Deagon, this often ambiguous position can be better understood using Simone de Beauvoir's work in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, in which she deploys existential phenomenology to examine the power relations that control women's experiences of their bodies in patriarchal societies. In her highly influential book, Beauvoir argues that women have been constructed as "other" and inferior to men, and have thus learnt to live in an alienated and objectified relationship to their bodies. As Beauvoir notes, '[I]a femme se détermine et se différencie par rapport à l'homme et non celui-ci par rapport à elle; elle est l'inessentiel en face de l'essentiel. Il est le sujet, il est l'Absolu: elle est l'Autre'.²⁰ Beauvoir believes that female existence under patriarchy is fundamentally ambiguous because women are free human beings, yet their objectification by male-dominated society prevents them from ever attaining their full transcendent subjectivities. For Beauvoir, women thus occupy an ambivalent space in patriarchy whereby their basic freedoms are denied to them and they are taught to perceive themselves as subordinate, objectified "others".

However, Beauvoir does not hold men solely responsible for the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology. Rather, she argues that women have internalised sexist

²⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: Les Faits et Les Mythes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 15.

values to the extent that they experience their bodies as facticity and live them as objects for male (visual) consumption and pleasure. As Beauvoir explains, ‘chez la femme la dépendance est intériorisée: elle est esclave même quand elle se conduit avec une apparente liberté’.²¹ Because women have interiorised patriarchal ideals and live their bodies as sites of objectification or alienation, they often accept “inauthentic” roles that contribute to their own oppression and fail to challenge dominant patriarchal myths of femininity or female identity. Beauvoir therefore concludes that women need to gain economic independence from men so that they can realise their capacity for transcendence and act as free “authentic” subjects. As Beauvoir explains, ‘dans ses projets [la femme] s’affirme concrètement comme sujet; par son rapport avec le but qu’elle poursuit, avec l’argent et les droits qu’elle s’approprié, elle éprouve sa responsabilité’.²²

Though *Le Deuxième Sexe* was written in a different time and context to those studied in this chapter, Beauvoir’s theorising on the ambiguous position of women under patriarchy can help us to understand the often conflicted position of the belly dancer in contemporary Eastern and Western societies. On the one hand, belly dancing can be seen to be empowering because of its potential for self-expression on the part of the performer; however, on the other, questions remain as to the extent to which the belly dancer is truly able to transcend external perceptions of her body and act as a free and self-determining subject. Is the belly dancer oppressing herself if she chooses to perform in an environment where she is viewed as an object by the dominant (male) audience, if not herself?²³ To what extent does this element of choice contribute to her ability to be self-determining? Is the belly dancer ever able to transcend the male gaze or, as Deagon asks, does her

²¹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: L’Expérience Vécue*, p. 288.

²² Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: L’Expérience Vécue*, p. 587.

²³ Deagon, p. 11.

performance inadvertently ‘[promote] the patriarchal expectations that undermine her self-expression through art?’²⁴

Even if the belly dancer actively chooses to dance on stage or at a nightclub, the amount of agency she gains is arguably limited as she still dances for an audience that might eroticise her and objectify her body. Following Beauvoir’s logic, it could therefore be argued that the belly dancer accepts an inauthentic role that perpetuates an objectified myth of Arab femininity and prevents her from ever really transcending the realm of immanence. Perhaps unwittingly, she could be seen to support the value system that oppresses her and, as Deagon observes, to ‘submit to objectification by [failing] to acknowledge the realities of her condition’.²⁵ Beauvoir’s phenomenological exploration of women’s embodied existence under patriarchy thus helps us to understand the importance of examining the power relations that govern belly dancers’ experiences of their bodies in male-dominated societies. Applying her analysis to contemporary belly dance practices reveals that belly dancers can be complicit in their own objectification if they fail to interrogate their role in propagating certain myths of femininity, or if they defer unquestioningly to a dominant patriarchal vision of their bodies.²⁶

From the Cabaret to the Silver Screen: Images of Belly Dance in Cinema

Despite their ambiguous position in mainstream cultural discourses, a number of high-profile belly dancers have successfully challenged dominant negative attitudes to their trade. During the so-called ‘Golden Era of Egyptian Cinema’ (1930-60), belly dancers, such as Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal, moved out of the

²⁴ Deagon, p. 11.

²⁵ Deagon, p. 12.

²⁶ It should be noted that I have only focused on female interpretations of belly dance here, despite the fact that this style of dance was historically performed by men too. I look in more detail at male interpretations of this dance form in Chapter Four.

(disreputable) space of the cabaret and onto the silver screen.²⁷ These actress-dancers were admired both inside and outside of Egypt and achieved ‘a degree of fame that would have been unthinkable had they remained confined to the old venues’.²⁸ Whereas Carioca frequently adopted the role of a working-class woman and became known for a sensuous dancing style that remained faithful to the ‘earthiness and the heaviness of traditional *baladi*’, Gamal embraced Western interpretations of the dance and her performances were characterised by a fusion of local, regional and more westernised elements.²⁹ She wore high heels on stage, appeared in highly fashionable Western-style clothing and, as Marjorie Franken points out, added ‘more expressive hand movements, almost balletic in form, to the hip and torso movements’ of traditional belly dance.³⁰ Moreover, Gamal had the most acceptable on-screen persona and often appeared in roles that foregrounded her virtue and modesty (see, for example, *Sigara wa kas/A Cigarette and a Glass*).³¹ Though many of these roles were conventional, Stacey Weber-Fève argues that Gamal was able to maintain her agency ‘through a performance of self-expression in movement’, in which the camera positioned her centre frame and followed her faithfully around the stage.³² By bringing belly dance out of the cabaret and onto the silver screen, actress-dancers such as Carioca and Gamal thus popularised their trade and did much to dispel its negative associations with vice and disrepute.

²⁷ Marjorie Franken, ‘Farida Fahmy and the Dancer’s Image in Egyptian Film’, in *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East*, ed. by Sherifa Zuhur (New York: The American University Press in Cairo, 1998), pp. 265-82 (p. 267).

²⁸ Fayza Hassan, ‘Beauty and the Beat’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, <<http://weeklyahram.org.eg/2000/489/feat1.htm>> [accessed 10 December 2013].

²⁹ Hassan, ‘Beauty and the Beat’. *Baladi* is a term used to refer to folk-style belly dancing in Egypt.

³⁰ Franken, p. 268.

³¹ *Sigara wa kas/A Cigarette and a Glass*, dir. by Niazi Mostafa (Arab Film Distribution, 1955).

³² Stacey Weber-Fève, ‘Housework and Dance as Counterpoints in French-Tunisian Filmmaker Raja Amari’s *Satin rouge*’, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 27 (2009), 1-13 (p. 4).



Figure 6. Samia Gamal as Hoda in *Sigara wa kas/A Cigarette and a Glass*

Trance and the Spiritual Body

Whereas much of belly dance's ambiguity stems from its associations with (male) visual pleasure and female corporeal desirability, Wendy Buonaventura points out that 'trance dance is not for the eye to appreciate, but for the body's well-being'.³³

Unlike belly dance, trance is a communal rite that is practised to heal physical or psychological wounds, eliminate inner demons (or *djinns*) and/or connect with the divinity. As Buonaventura explains:

[t]he trance is a therapeutic rite held on behalf of an individual [...] who is suffering from problems of a spiritual or psychological nature [...] The person afflicted is considered to be suffering from an ailment of the spiritual body and has to go through a process whereby he or she is made whole again, or healed.³⁴

³³ Buonaventura, p. 161.

³⁴ Buonaventura, p. 161.

Trance is a healing and restorative ritual that intertwines religion, therapy and movement in an attempt to eradicate negative emotions and cure the spiritual body of ills. In contrast to belly dance, trance rituals thus seek to enable their participants to (re)connect with their “selves” by eradicating the physical or psychological maladies that are preventing them from existing as complete and unified beings.

Discussing the trance process itself, Erika Bourguignon argues that participants are usually encouraged to engage in a twirling movement that creates the impression of a loss of control over the body.³⁵ According to Bourguignon, this sense of physical abandonment causes participants to enter into ‘a state of altered consciousness’, during which they might experience a modification in ‘the perception of time and form, of colours and brightness, of sound and movement, of tastes and odors’.³⁶ Moreover, this altered state of consciousness can induce ‘a change in the feel of one’s own body, in sensations of pain, of heat or cold, of touch; a change in memory or in notions of one’s own identity’.³⁷ Unlike belly dance performances, trances can last for varying amounts of time and can be induced or unexpected. Sometimes, they are rejected as fearful experiences and, other times, they are welcomed as a means to move towards ‘a supreme experience of the self or of the powers of the universe’.³⁸ In contrast to belly dance, trances are not a spectacle for visual pleasure, but a communal and recuperative rite that permits their participants to ‘dance until the point of transcendence is reached, the demons of unease are exorcised and [they are] spiritually cleansed’.³⁹

³⁵ Erika Bourguignon, ‘Trance and Ecstatic Dance’, in *Moving History, Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. by Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. 97-102 (p. 98).

³⁶ Bourguignon, p. 98.

³⁷ Bourguignon, p. 98.

³⁸ Bourguignon, p. 98.

³⁹ Bounaventura, p. 161.

While Buonaventura and Bourguignon discuss trance ceremonies as they are practised in a number of cultures across the world, a number of critics focus specifically on the Sufi trance rituals that take place in the countries of the Maghreb and parts of the Middle East, such as Turkey and Iran. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, Sufism is often understood as the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam and many Sufis believe that it constitutes the heart of the Islamic faith. In an article focusing on Sufi trances in the Maghreb, Andézian argues that Sufism ‘privilégie l’expérience sensible de la foi’ while simultaneously remaining faithful to the original teachings of the *Qur’an*.⁴⁰ In contrast to Salafism, Sufism teaches that it is possible to gain direct experience of God in this world and encourages its adherents to seek access to the spiritual realm through ritualistic practices, such as trance.⁴¹ Whilst Sufi trances are traditionally used to exorcise *djinn*s by inducing the participant into an altered state of being, they also function as a privileged means of uniting the body and the mind in order to enter a state of transcendence and achieve a closer unity with the divinity.⁴² As Andézian notes, ‘[l]’idée d’une relation avec le divin est très important ici. La transe est une grâce divine [...] Ainsi, la transe constitue un moyen privilégié d’entrer en contact avec Dieu ou avec les intermédiaires entre Dieu et les hommes’.⁴³ In short, Sufi trance rituals use ecstatic movements and chanting to integrate the mind and body so that their participants can transcend the physical world and enter into a (temporary) union with God.

⁴⁰ Andézian, p. 25.

⁴¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 142.

⁴² Andézian, p. 30.

⁴³ Andézian, p. 30.

Representations of Belly Dancing and Trance in Contemporary Maghrebi and French Cinemas

In recent years, a number of films have contributed to debates on dance and trance through their representations of young (belly) dancing or entranced characters of Maghrebi heritage. Whereas *Les Silences du palais*, *Délice Paloma* and *La Graine et le mulet* all foreground (extended) belly dance sequences, *Satin rouge* and *Dunia* (*Kiss Me Not on the Eyes*) tell the stories of (young) heroines from Tunisia and Egypt who ‘[come] to terms with [their] bodily desires, sensations and movements through [belly] dance’.⁴⁴ In contrast to these films, *Exils* depicts its principal female protagonist partaking in a Sufi trance ritual in order to eliminate her demons and overcome the traumas of her past. This chapter focuses on *Satin rouge*, *La Graine et le mulet* and *Exils* and argues that all three films position their protagonists’ bodies as sites of subjectivity and sources of resistance to the dominant male gaze.

Resistance and Reinvention in Raja Amari’s *Satin rouge*

Satin rouge tells the story of a middle-aged Tunisian housewife and widow who begins to belly dance in secret at her local cabaret. In a bonus interview accompanying the DVD release of the film, its director, Raja Amari, confesses that she had always wanted to construct a narrative around belly dancing, in part because of her own training as a belly dancer at the *Conservatoire de Tunis* in Tunisia, but also because she loved watching Gamal perform in Egyptian musicals and melodramas when she was younger.⁴⁵ *Satin rouge* thus pays homage to Egypt’s most

⁴⁴ *Délice Paloma*, dir. by Nadir Moknèche (Les Films du Losange, 2006); *Dunia* (*Kiss Me Not on the Eyes*), dir. by Jocelyn Saab (Clair Obscur, 2005); Dalia Mostafa, ‘Cinematic Representations of the Changing Gender Relations in Today’s Cairo’, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 31.3 (2009), 1-19 (p. 9). *Dunia* (*Kiss Me Not on the Eyes*) does not technically feature a Maghrebi character, but forms an important part of a movement in the cinemas of the MENA region to (re)claim belly dance.

⁴⁵ Raja Amari, ‘DVD Interview’, *Satin rouge*. Following her training at the *Conservatoire de Tunis*, Amari studied romance languages at the University of Tunis and film studies at the famous Parisian film school, *La Fémis*. She is currently Tunisia’s youngest female filmmaker. See also: Kate Schultz,

famous belly dancer through its unusual exploration of a Tunisian housewife and widow's (sexual) liberation through belly dancing and her body. The film explores the themes of dance, embodiment, ageing, sexuality and what Amari calls 'social hypocrisy' through the character of Lilia (Hiam Abbas), an exemplary housewife and mother who is seduced by the "disreputable" underworld of the cabaret.⁴⁶

In her analysis of the film, Martin argues that Amari uses the sense of touch to subvert the dominant male gaze and re-present 'the "oriental dancer"' as a 'polysemic figure' that resists categorisation according to dominant Tunisian models of female identity.⁴⁷ Similar to Martin, Weber-Fève focuses on the opening sequence of the film and examines how framing and shot selection work 'to subvert traditional understandings of Tunisian women in a cinematic domestic drama'.⁴⁸ She argues that housework and dance function as counterpoints that 'work together to resist [...] a reification of doubled subjectivity in favour of a plurality of in-between female subjectivities'.⁴⁹ Building upon the work of these two scholars, this chapter argues that *Satin rouge* positions the belly dancing body as a locus for the establishment of agency, identity and female (sexual) empowerment. However, if *Satin rouge* subverts dominant expectations and represents the body as a source of empowerment, this chapter considers the extent to which it is truly able to overcome orientalist images of belly dancers and their bodies.⁵⁰

From the outset, Lilia seems to embody dominant Tunisian ideals of motherhood and widowhood based around what Weber-Fève terms 'silent domestic

'Interview: Self-Empowerment by Way of the Midriff; Raja Amari's *Satin rouge*', *IndieWIRE* <<http://www.indiewire.com/article/interview-self-empowerment-by-way-of-the-midriff-raja-amaris-satin-rouge>> [accessed 4 September 2015].

⁴⁶ Amari, 'DVD Interview'.

⁴⁷ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ Weber-Fève, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Weber-Fève, p. 12.

⁵⁰ That Amari's goal is to alter (Western) (mis)perceptions of belly dance is reinforced by the English-language booklet that accompanies the DVD version of the film and provides an overview of the history of belly dancing by the International Academy of Middle Eastern Dance.

obedience and incessant housekeeping and child-raising practices'.⁵¹ She is frequently pictured in the domestic space of the home and she spends the majority of her time carrying out household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, sewing and looking after her daughter, Salma (Hend el Fahem). However, when she enters the local cabaret in search of her daughter one evening, Lilia's life is permanently altered and she soon finds herself leading a double existence as a traditional housewife and mother by day and a socially-degraded and "seductive" belly dancer by night. As the film progresses, Lilia is transformed from a tradition-bound, reclusive and lonely housewife into a liberated and confident woman who has (re)discovered her agency through belly dancing and her body.

From as early as the opening sequence, the film foregrounds Lilia's sense of duty and respectability, while also revealing her desire for (self-)expression and agency. The scene begins with a silhouetted image of a woman (Lilia) dusting and straightening some curtains in her apartment; however, instead of providing the spectator with a direct visual mediation of its heroine, the film's opening shot transpires to be a reflected mirror image of Lilia, thereby suggesting that her identity as a housewife and mother is not as fixed or stable as it may initially appear. Following this ambiguous opening image, Amari's camera pans slowly around the room in which Lilia is dusting; yet, as Weber-Fève points out, rather than focusing on Lilia as she dusts, the camera constantly pre-empts her actions, such that she follows it into spaces and not the other way around.⁵² Not only does the pre-emptive action of the camera make 'Lilia's actions appear intrusive as she enters into each frame', but it undermines her agency and reinforces the idea that she is bound by

⁵¹ Weber-Fève, p. 3.

⁵² Weber-Fève, p. 9.

domestic duties and traditional responsibilities.⁵³ Albeit in an ambiguous way, the first few shots in the film thus confine Lilia to the domestic space of the home and foreground her dutifully enacting the role already established for her by dominant Tunisian society.

However, about mid-way through the sequence, the camera pans around to focus on Lilia's reflection in the bedroom mirror and shows her abandoning her dusting, letting down her hair and beginning to dance. Now, rather than preceding Lilia's movements, the camera follows her body as she dances around the room to a song on the radio.⁵⁴ For Weber-Fève, the altered movement of the camera 'suggests an importance and agency in [Lilia's] self-identity and self-expression in dance' that she does not hold in other aspects of her life.⁵⁵ Equally importantly, Amari's camerawork implies that if Lilia is to find any escape from her mundane existence, it will be through her body and the embodied practice of belly dance. The opening sequence thus positions Lilia's body as the primary means by which she is able to transcend the (restrictive) roles of widow, housewife and mother imposed upon her by dominant Tunisian society.

In addition to emphasising Lilia's corporeality through movement, this opening sequence enacts a subtle adjustment in her ownership of the gaze. While dusting, Lilia is constructed as the object of the camera's gaze and her body is persistently positioned on the periphery of the film's frame. For the most part, she is pictured with her back to the camera and her gaze is cast down towards the objects that she cleans. However, when Lilia stops to adjust her appearance in the bedroom mirror, she looks directly at her reflection, such that the spectator is able to see her face in full for the first time in the narrative. From this point onwards, Lilia is no

⁵³ Weber-Fève, p. 9.

⁵⁴ Weber-Fève, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Weber-Fève, p. 11.

longer tracked as an object, but leads the camera around the room as she dances. Whereas earlier in the sequence Lilia's downcast gaze implies that her own, personal identity is subservient to the models of femininity prescribed for her by dominant Tunisian society, this clear modification in the looking process suggests that Lilia will be able to achieve a sense of individuality and self-determination in dance that she does not possess in her roles as a housewife and mother. Consequently, not only does this opening sequence construct Lilia's body as a space of resistance to dominant Tunisian models of femininity, but it demonstrates the extent to which Lilia will be able to (re)claim her ownership of the gaze, her (self-)identity and her agency when she dances.

If this opening sequence sets up Lilia's split identity as a housewife and dancer, the heroine's dual existence effectively begins after she enters the local cabaret in search of her daughter one evening. In her work on phenomenology and orientation, Ahmed examines what happens when we take new routes and move into unfamiliar spaces. She argues that embodied subjects are always orientated in space, but how they '[inhabit] spaces "decides" what comes into view'.⁵⁶ In other words, the spaces in which subjects reside 'make certain things, and not others, available [...], some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach'.⁵⁷ Entering new spaces can be a liberating experience as it holds the potential to bring new worlds into view; however, Ahmed warns that it can also be severely disorientating and may leave the subject feeling lost, astray or even out of place.⁵⁸ In *Satin rouge*, Lilia's decision to enter the local cabaret brings an exotic and unfamiliar world into view; yet, in parallel with Ahmed's theorising, it also leaves her feeling confused, displaced and overwhelmed. After she enters the cabaret, Lilia's

⁵⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 21.

displacement is articulated via her bodily actions (she walks in cautiously) and appearance (her dowdy clothing contrasts sharply with the dancers' sequined costumes), but also the series of inquisitive (male) gazes that fix her as an object of fascination. Her disorientation is conveyed via Amari's use of sweeping panning shots, blurred images, close-ups, flashing lights and intense colours, and becomes so overwhelming that she faints. Thus, not only are Lilia's feelings of disorientation and displacement expressed corporeally in this scene, but her first foray into the local cabaret reveals a fearful, yet alluring space that brings her into contact with a previously unreachable world of objects and others.

Despite her initial shock, Lilia is seduced by the allure of this "forbidden" world and begins to return to the cabaret on a nightly basis. In one scene in which Lilia is shown sneaking out of her apartment late at night, she is caught by her neighbours who ask her why she is heading out alone and who send their son to escort her to her invented destination. This sequence demonstrates Lilia's reluctance to reveal her night-time escapades to her friends and family; however, it also illustrates the extent to which women's bodily movements and actions are controlled within conservative Muslim society in Tunisia. It is thus highly significant that directly following this unwelcome imposition on her mobility, Lilia returns to the "disreputable" space of the cabaret and dances on stage for the first time. The sequence begins with Lilia spontaneously changing into one of the lead dancer's costumes and beginning to dance in front of the dressing room mirror. Like in the first scene, the heroine's decision to dance for her reflection destabilises the dominant male gaze by implying that she is dancing for her own personal pleasure and not that of an onlooker; however, in contrast to the opening sequence, Lilia's private dance is transformed into a public performance when the lead dancer, Folla

(Monia Hichri), drags her on stage to dance for the small number of people left at the nightclub at the end of the night. Once on stage, Lilia appears uneasy and her nerves are articulated through her inhibited bodily movements, such that she stands motionlessly as the other dancers move her waist to the rhythm of the music. As the scene develops, Lilia slowly begins to dance more freely, until she is eventually pictured twirling around the room with the other dancers. The juxtaposition of these two scenes thus illustrates Lilia's agency in dance, while also constructing her body as a site of resistance to the restrictive codes of feminine behaviour and identity espoused by her neighbours and dominant Tunisian society more broadly. In parallel with the opening sequence, these scenes confront stereotypical notions of belly dancers as sexualised and seductive by constructing the central heroine's body as a source of agency and (female) empowerment.

If Lilia's first performance on stage marks the beginning of her opposition to dominant Tunisian ideals of femininity, her second dance in public represents a turning point for the heroine. In parallel with the first dance sequence, Lilia initially seems nervous and her movements are inhibited; however, as the scene progresses, her dancing becomes increasingly expressive, spontaneous and untamed, and she begins to move around the room with a degree of freedom and vigour not yet witnessed in her dancing. As Lilia twirls and shimmies, Amari's use of fast editing and varying shot scale captures the unlicensed energy of her movements, but also encourages the spectator to enter into a relationship of "kinesthetic empathy" with her heroine's dancing body. In their recent edited collection, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason define kinesthetic empathy as an embodied and 'empathic reaction in relation to the sense

of movement' during dance.⁵⁹ For Reynolds and Reason, kinesthetic empathy operates across and between bodies and has the potential to inaugurate new modes of understanding by encouraging a proximate empathic relationship between the self and the "other".⁶⁰ However, rather than taking the place of the "other" through identification or appropriation, kinesthetic empathy encourages understanding through a relationship of approximation and corporeal proximity. As Deidre Sklar explains, 'empathic kinesthetic perception implies a bridging between subjectivities [...] Paradoxically, the kind of temporary joining that occurs in empathy produces not a blurry merger but an articulated perception of differences'.⁶¹ Consequently, although kinesthetic empathy encourages corporeal reciprocity between the self and the "other", it refuses to reduce difference to sameness and therefore enables alterity to remain intact.

Building upon these ideas, Douglas Rosenberg argues that the experience of kinesthetic empathy is heightened when watching dance and/or movement as it is represented in film. For Rosenberg, '[t]he "most intangible emotional experience" the dancer is able to convey through metakinesis is made all the more potent in the screendance with the addition of first-person narrative, the use of close-up to add intimacy [...] and editing techniques [...] that encourage the spectator to feel a kinesthetic connection with the dancer on screen.⁶² In the pivotal dance sequence in *Satin rouge*, Amari's use of a mobile camera, close-ups and extreme close-ups, long takes and disorientating camera angles elicits a visceral, kinesthetic and corporeal response in the spectator that not only enables her/him to feel as though s/he is dancing alongside Lilia, but minimises the distance necessary for objectification,

⁵⁹ Reynolds and Reason, 'Introduction', p. 17.

⁶⁰ Reynolds and Reason, p. 20.

⁶¹ Deidre Sklar, 'Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance', in *Moving History, Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, pp. 30-2 (p. 32).

⁶² Rosenberg, p. 69.

containment and/or objective distance. By encouraging us to believe that we are performing the “unruly” moves together with Lilia, Amari undermines our ability to “know” her heroine in an objective and/or objectifying way. Mobilising kinesthetic empathy as a key viewing strategy thus bridges the gap between spectator and dancer, while also evoking a more embodied approach to looking that traverses the boundaries of gender, ethnicity, nationality and cultural identity.

In addition to encouraging a kinesthetic connection between spectator and dancer, Martin argues that this pivotal dance sequence inaugurates ‘a shift in gendered role distribution in the gazing game’.⁶³ Though Lilia is dancing for a room full of desiring male spectators, she appears wholly unaware of her audience, or even of the fact that she is being watched. As she dances, her twirling body appears to enter into a trance-like state, whilst repeated close-ups of her ecstatic face suggest that she is experiencing a moment of ecstasy, if not sexual pleasure. This latter point is reinforced when Lilia comes off stage and admits to Folla that she does not remember anything. Folla responds that she was wild and her boss (Abou Moez El Fazaa) tells her she needs to learn to dance for an audience and not herself: ‘this isn’t a game. There’s an audience. It’s not you in front of your mirror’.⁶⁴ Consequently, though Lilia’s body is foregrounded as erotic spectacle for the film’s (non-)diegetic audience, Amari arguably deflects the objectifying male gaze by focusing on the sexual pleasure and confidence her heroine gains from her own body.⁶⁵ As Martin

⁶³ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 120.

⁶⁴ As the dialogue here is in Arabic, I have used the English translation provided in the film’s subtitles. I will adopt a similar approach throughout this thesis for films where the dialogue is in Arabic and the subtitles are in English rather than French.

⁶⁵ Lilia’s dance in this scene draws a striking parallel with Brigitte Bardot/Juliette’s mambo in Roger Vadim’s *Et Dieu...créa la femme* (Criterion Collection, 1956). This intertextual reference is significant as some critics have argued that Bardot’s dancing body was able to evade the dominant male gaze and articulate a momentary freedom from patriarchy. For Sarah Leahy, Bardot’s dance scenes ‘encourage both male and female spectators to derive pleasure in viewing [...] The spectator, and in particular the female spectator, can collude with the dancing body in its transgression, while still admiring Bardot as erotic spectacle and attempting to “possess” her in the dance’. By drawing a

explains, Lilia's dance is 'strictly her own, performed for herself, for her own fulfilment [...] she is, simply, not participating in the dynamics of the show, in the (gendered) gazing game. In fact, once she dances, she seems impervious to male gazing'.⁶⁶ In short, Lilia's dance enables her to experience (sexual) pleasure in her own body, while simultaneously withstanding the audience's ability to "know" and "possess" her with their totalising gaze.



Figure 7. Lilia's first dance on stage in *Satin rouge*

Despite Amari's attempts to avert the male gaze and avoid objectification, Lindsey Moore points out that 'the lingering camera shots on [Lilia's] body could also be read as aggressive self-Orientalization, perhaps to appeal to Western

parallel between Lilia and Juliette, Amari could thus be attempting to replicate the tension between spectacle and transgression that characterised Bardot's body in dance. For a detailed analysis of Bardot's dances on film, see: Sarah Leahy, 'Bardot and Dance: Representing the Real?', *French Cultural Studies*, 13 (2002), 49-64 (p. 49).

⁶⁶ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 121.

audiences'.⁶⁷ Certainly, Amari's representation of Lilia needs to be understood against the backdrop of damaging orientalist discourses that exoticised and eroticised the belly dancing body; however, her deployment of kinesthetic empathy and alternative structures of looking arguably undermines attempts to read her film as yet another instance of (self-)exoticisation and/or (self-)objectification for the benefit of Western viewers. Rather than constructing her heroine as a static object for (male) visual consumption, Amari focuses on Lilia's body in movement and highlights the pleasure and freedom her heroine experiences when she dances. Moreover, by emphasising Lilia's trance-like state, Amari suggests that her heroine is able to enter a transcendent state in dance, whereby patriarchal rules are irrelevant and she can overcome the oppressive morality that incarcerates her. Reading the film as just another example of eroticisation or exoticisation thus misreads the many formal and thematic features that Amari deploys in order to maintain her heroine's agency and resist submitting her to an objectifying (male) gaze. Nevertheless, despite Amari's attempts to avoid objectification or exoticisation, the ambivalent critical responses to her portrayal of Lilia's body in *Satin rouge* illustrate Keft-Kennedy's argument that '[t]he belly dancer produces a constant and complex slippage between the practice of belly dancing as a symbol of female empowerment on the one hand, and orientalist figurations of "Eastern otherness" linked to colonialist discourse on the other'.⁶⁸

Following the key dance sequence, Lilia's confidence grows and she (re)discovers her sexual desires when she begins a clandestine love affair with Chokri (Maher Kamoun), a cabaret worker who she later discovers is her daughter's lover. Whereas the love scenes between Salma and Chokri take place in the daytime

⁶⁷ Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Post-colonial Literature and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 96. The distributor of Amari's film clearly has a Western spectator in mind. The DVD was circulated in Europe and America, has English subtitles and contains an accompanying English-language booklet that outlines the history of belly dance.

⁶⁸ Keft-Kennedy, p. 281.

and are filled with verbal exchanges and light, Lilia and Chokri's brief affair is negotiated in the dark, night-time spaces of the cabaret bar and is characterised by secrecy, repressed desire and minimal dialogue. Despite its brevity, however, the affair has a profound effect on Lilia and causes her to abandon her inhibitions and succumb to her latent corporeal desires. The heroine's emancipation through her body and her sexuality is conveyed via the visceral and almost wordless nature of her affair with Chokri, but also through Amari's haptic cinematographic style. As discussed in the introduction, Marks argues that the haptic originated in Islamic culture and is a multi-sensory and bodily approach to looking that differs drastically from the distance imposed by optical ways of seeing.⁶⁹ For Marks, haptic visuality is erotic because it encourages an intersubjective relationship between the viewer and the viewed that minimises objective 'distance and implicates the viewer in the viewed'.⁷⁰ This 'mutually constitutive exchange' creates the 'germ of an intersubjective eroticism', which enables the spectator to '[relinquish] her own sense of separateness from the image – not to know it, but to give herself up to her desire for it'.⁷¹ However, if haptic cinema encourages the spectator to abandon visual mastery in favour of a more pleasurable and erotic mode of looking, Marks argues that it does not lead to a possessive encounter with the image or a reduction of the alterity of the "other" that is represented on screen.⁷² Rather, haptic visuality 'allows the object of vision to remain inscrutable' and encourages the viewer to delight 'in the intensified relationship with an other that cannot be possessed'.⁷³ In the scene in which the lovers' relationship reaches its dramatic climax and Lilia yields to her repressed sexual desires, Amari's haptic aesthetics (extreme close-ups, ambient

⁶⁹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 162.

⁷⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 184.

⁷¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 182.

⁷² Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 184.

⁷³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 184.

sound, blurred and indistinguishable images) plunge the spectator into the eroticism of the scene and enable us to experience the physical intensity with which Lilia (re)discovers her body and suppressed corporeal desires. By remaining in close proximity to Lilia's body throughout the narrative, Amari's camera creates a haptic viewing space that not only enables the spectator to "feel" what Lilia is feeling, but refuses to objectify her body via an eroticising or appropriating gaze.

While Amari's film positions the belly dancing body as a site that enables the (re)discovery of (older) female sexual identity and desire, it nonetheless places belly dance against a backdrop of poor working conditions, social stigma and societal marginalisation. Not only does Lilia earn a low wage and get mistaken for a prostitute, but she remains unable to express her nocturnal identity in her daily life for fear of social rejection and alienation. She hides her new job from her neighbours and her daughter and must lie when her late husband's brother, Uncle Béchir (Salah Miled), comes to stay. On the one hand, the heroine's decision to keep her new profession hidden from family and friends reveals the overwhelming power of the prevailing social order; however, on the other, it also fails to challenge it in any real way. Rather than confronting "social hypocrisy", Lilia's dual existence effectively endorses it, thereby undermining the subversive power of her actions. By contrast to Lilia, the character of Folla refuses to hide her unorthodox lifestyle and outwardly confronts the parochial opinions and attitudes of others. She lives alone and seems completely unashamed of her non-conventional profession and/or lifestyle. Consequently, whereas Lilia's doubled identity could be seen to perpetuate the hypocrisy of the dominant social order, the character of Folla destabilises the status quo and champions alternative ways of living that fall outside of dominant Tunisian models and ideals.

Despite Amari's apparent promotion of alternative forms of femininity and non-conventional modes of existence, these subversive elements could be seen to be recuperated in the film's final scenes. In the penultimate sequence, Salma introduces her mother to her new fiancé Chokri; however, rather than revealing the truth of their passionate love affair, Lilia stays silent and allows her daughter to marry her lover. Though Lilia's decision to facilitate her daughter's marriage to Chokri could be viewed as a restoration of the dominant social order, Amari argues that it can also be read as a marker of the heroine's new-found agency and control. By allowing Salma and Chokri to marry, Lilia keeps her lover 'available for her. What could be seen as a renunciation or a submission on her part is actually just a social cover up: she keeps her lover by her side by becoming his mother-in-law'.⁷⁴ Whatever Lilia's intentions, the film ends by depicting Salma and Chokri on their wedding day; however, instead of focusing on the newly married couple, Amari foregrounds Lilia in a bright red dress dancing centre frame. Not only does this closing image symbolise the undeniable agency and power Lilia has assumed through belly dancing and her body, but it articulates a challenge to dominant Tunisian models of femininity by uniting the apparently oppositional figures of the mother and the dancer upon her ageing female body.⁷⁵

In addition to constructing Lilia's body as a vehicle of resistance to restrictive definitions of female identity, this final scene can also be read as an allegorical representation of the Tunisian nation on the brink of a revolution. As outlined in Chapter One, Flinn argues that 'within a Franco-North African context, there continues to be an understanding of cinematic heroines as allegories for their

⁷⁴ Amari, 'DVD Interview'.

⁷⁵ Weber-Fève, p. 7.

nations'.⁷⁶ For her, '[t]he cinematic portrayal of North African postcolonial societies conflates gender and political history', such that contemporary power struggles are frequently negotiated upon Maghrebi(-French) women's bodies.⁷⁷ In *Satin rouge*, Lilia's belly dancing body is associated with the Tunisian nation to such a degree that her desire for (self-)expression and agency can be seen to represent the Tunisian people's struggle for freedom and self-determination. This point is underscored in the final scene in which Lilia dances provocatively in a dress that is reminiscent of the 'satin rouge' of the film's title, but also recalls the colour and texture of the Tunisian flag. In this respect, although the so-called "Arab Spring" had not begun at the time that the film was made, Lilia's transformation from a reclusive housewife to a liberated dancer could be seen to pre-empt the Tunisian nation's transition from subordination to revolution in the spring of 2011.⁷⁸ However, if Lilia is constructed as a metonymic signifier for the Tunisian nation in the film, her embodiment by the well-known Palestinian actress, Hiam Abbas, enables the allegorical meanings attached to her body to transcend their specific national context and achieve a wider political resonance. Rather than standing as a symbol of the Tunisian nation alone, Lilia's body can therefore be viewed as a site of resistance to political hegemony, oppression and authoritarian regimes across the Maghreb and the Middle East more broadly.

⁷⁶ Flinn, p. 340.

⁷⁷ Flinn, p. 340.

⁷⁸ The Tunisian uprising led to a series of similar insurrections that spread across the MENA and became known in popular parlance as the "Arab Spring". This term is problematic as it risks ignoring the specificities of the political upheavals that occurred across the region in early 2011. Moreover, the word "Arab" overlooks the role that non-Arab groups, such as the Berbers, played in their countries' struggle for democratic rule. For an analysis of the events leading up to the Tunisian revolution, see: Mehdi Mabrouk, 'A Revolution for Dignity and Freedom: Observations on the Social and Cultural Background to the Tunisian Revolution', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 16 (2011), 625-35. The allegorical use of Lilia's belly dancing body here draws a striking parallel with *Les Silences du palais*, in which women's bodies are used to represent various stages in Tunisia's history. See: Dorit Naaman, 'Woman/Nation: A Postcolonial Look at Female Subjectivity', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 17 (2000), 333-42.

Though Lilia can be interpreted as a symbol for the revolution, questions remain as to what impact the political upheavals of 2011 had in terms of gender equality in Tunisia. Before the revolution, Tunisia was considered to be one of the most advanced countries in the Arab world in terms of women's rights.⁷⁹ Whereas the post-independence President, Habib Bourguiba, introduced a Personal Status Code (1956) that gave women the right to divorce and access birth control, abolished polygamy, established a minimum age for marriage and provided access to abortion, Ben Ali 'expanded parental, divorce, and custody rights for women, strengthened laws to protect women from domestic violence, and continued to emphasize girls' education and female employment'.⁸⁰ Following the democratic election of the Islamist Al-Nahda party in October 2011, concern grew that Tunisian women's rights were being eroded and their voices were being disregarded in important debates on issues such as polygamy and women's freedom to work.⁸¹ Like in Egypt, where political conservatism was reinforced after the transition to a new "democracy", the Tunisian revolution arguably diminished women's agency and sidelined their role in instituting political change. The realities of the "Arab Spring" notwithstanding, *Satin rouge* still uses Lilia's lived and embodied experiences as an (older) woman in Tunisian society to negotiate contemporary power struggles and to articulate a form of resistance to local, regional and global imbalances of authority. At the end of the film, her body emerges as a site of resistance to hegemonic rule and a space where alternative definitions of female identity can be imagined and emerge.

⁷⁹ I discuss the status of women in Tunisia (as well as Algeria and Morocco) in more detail in the third chapter of this thesis.

⁸⁰ Isobel Coleman, 'Women and the Arab Revolts', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 18 (2011), 215-28 (p. 216).

⁸¹ Coleman, p. 217.

Re-claiming the Belly Dancing Body in Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le mulet*

Whereas *Satin rouge* focuses on its central heroine's transformation from a reclusive and lonely housewife into a liberated and confident belly dancer, the third feature-length film by Franco-Tunisian filmmaker, Abdellatif Kechiche, foregrounds a solitary belly dance sequence that has sparked controversy amongst audiences and critics alike. Since the unexpected success of his second film, *L'Esquive*, Kechiche has been celebrated as one of France's most important directors and his work has been praised for its ability to bridge the perceived divide between mainstream and *auteur* filmmaking in France.⁸² He is the first director of Maghrebi heritage to be featured in the Criterion DVD collection and his films have earned him a number of respected awards, including four *Césars* for *L'Esquive* and four *Césars* for *La Graine et le mulet*, as well as the Equal Opportunity Award at the Venice International Film Festival for *Vénus noire*.⁸³ Most recently, Kechiche was awarded the highly prestigious *Palme d'Or* at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival for his candid exploration of a lesbian romance in *La Vie d'Adèle – Chapitres 1 et 2*.⁸⁴ Such success for a director of Maghrebi heritage in France is rare and Kechiche stands out as an anomaly in a country in which, as Carrie Tarr points out, it is difficult for minority directors to 'get funding for their films' and the *Centre National de la Cinématographie* (CNC) 'has no policy for promoting ethnic minority filmmakers,

⁸² *L'Esquive*, dir. by Abdellatif Kechiche (Rézo Films, 2003).

⁸³ *Vénus noire*, dir. by Abdellatif Kechiche (MK2 Diffusion, 2010).

⁸⁴ *La Vie d'Adèle – Chapitres 1 et 2*, dir. by Abdellatif Kechiche (Wild Bunch, 2013). For the first time in history, the *Palme d'Or* for *La Vie d'Adèle – Chapitres 1 et 2* was jointly awarded to the director and his two main actresses, Adèle Exarchopoulos and Léa Seydoux. However, the release of the film was marked by controversy after Exarchopoulos and Seydoux complained about "exploitative" working conditions during the shoot. For more on the *polémique* surrounding the film, see: Pierre Murat and Laurent Rigoulet, 'Abdellatif Kechiche: "Je n'ai plus envie de cinéma, j'ai besoin de calme"', *Télérama*, 3324 (2013) <<http://www.telerama.fr/cinema/abdellatif-kechiche-je-n-ai-plus-envie-de-cinema-j-ai-besoin-de-calme.102701.php>> [accessed 5 September 2015].

since this would run counter to Republican universalist principles'.⁸⁵ Given their relatively rare status, Kechiche's films are thus exceptionally situated to examine the intersections of gender and ethnicity in a society in which articulations of minority identity are discouraged and exclusionary discourses continue to operate at both structural and societal levels.⁸⁶

La Graine et le mulet forms part of a trilogy in which Kechiche contemplates the experiences of people of Maghrebi heritage living in France. His first film, *La Faute à Voltaire*, examines the day-to-day existence of an undocumented migrant from Tunisia living in the capital city of Paris.⁸⁷ His second film, *L'Esquive*, focuses on a multi-ethnic group of teenagers who live in the Parisian *banlieue* and are rehearsing for their school performance of Pierre de Marivaux's *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard*. By contrast to these earlier films, *La Graine et le mulet* departs from the space of the capital city and focuses on a working-class family of Tunisian heritage living in the southern seaport town of Sète. Following redundancy, the father of the family, Slimane (Habib Boufares), decides to use his severance package to open a traditional couscous restaurant on a boat in the local harbour. With the help of his adoptive daughter, Rym (Hafsia Herzi), Slimane organises an opening-night party and invites respected members of the local community to enjoy a traditional Tunisian dish of couscous and mullet. However, upon discovering that a vital ingredient – the couscous – is missing, Rym takes to the stage and performs a sensual belly dance to

⁸⁵ Tarr, p. 11.

⁸⁶ Kechiche comments on the difficulties he faced attaining his current position in an interview in *Les Inrockuptibles*: 'jusqu'à aujourd'hui, il n'y a pas beaucoup d'acteurs et de réalisateurs d'origine maghrébine dans le cinéma français. Et les représentations liées à l'immigration sont souvent très stéréotypées. Quand j'étais un jeune acteur, j'ai refusé beaucoup de rôles de dealers, délinquants. J'étais arrogant à l'époque et c'était tout juste si j'étais pas prêt à foutre un coup de boule à celui qui me proposait un rôle comme ça [...] C'est d'ailleurs pour ça que je suis très attaché à la défense du statut d'intermittent'. See Jean-Marc Lalanne and Christian Fevret, "'La Graine et le mulet": entretien avec Abdellatif Kechiche', *Les Inrockuptibles* (2007) <<http://www.lesinrocks.com/2007/12/11/cinema/actualite-cinema/entretien-abdellatif-kechiche-la-graine-et-le-mulet-1207-1158380/>> [accessed 5 September 2015].

⁸⁷ *La Faute à Voltaire*, dir. by Abdellatif Kechiche (Iris Camera, 2000).

distract the increasingly impatient crowd. Counter to much of the existing criticism of the final sequence of *La Graine et le mulet*, this chapter argues that Rym's belly dance does not oppress or objectify her, but enacts a sort of resistance to the dominant (white) (male) gaze, as well as to traditional understandings of belly dancers and their bodies.

From the outset of the film, Rym is constructed as a confident and assertive young woman who provides one of the most prominent voices in the narrative. Unlike her taciturn adoptive father, Slimane, Rym is self-assured and outspoken. She is unafraid to voice her opinions and speaks an amalgamation of French and Arabic that illustrates her hybrid identity and skilful control of language. For instance, in the scene in which Slimane and Rym visit the local financial authorities to discuss funding for their business venture, Slimane is physically withdrawn and struggles to articulate his ideas in a coherent manner. By contrast, Rym adapts with ease to the formal situation and acts as an important verbal mediator between the white female employee and her older Maghrebi father figure.⁸⁸ In a later sequence, Rym's expert command of language is again demonstrated when she persuades her reluctant mother (Hataki Karaoui) to attend Slimane's boat-party, despite the presence of his ex-wife and children. Elsewhere, she openly criticises Slimane's sons for suggesting that their father should return to Tunisia instead of living out his retirement in France. In contrast to dominant stereotypes of Maghrebi-French women as submissive or oppressed, Rym is thus presented as an independent and assertive young woman who provides what Higbee terms 'a forceful, uncompromising and fiercely independent, young female voice' in the narrative.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ginette Vincendeau, 'Southern Discomfort', *Sight and Sound*, 18.7 (2008), 46-7 (p. 46).

⁸⁹ Will Higbee, 'Of Spaces and Difference in *La Graine et le mulet* (2007): A Dialogue with Carrie Tarr', in *Studies in French Cinema: UK Perspectives 1985-2010*, ed. by Will Higbee and Sarah Leahy (Chicago: Intellect, 2011), pp. 215-30 (p. 227).

If Rym's agency and articulacy are repeatedly foregrounded throughout *La Graine et le mulet*, the final scene of the film shows her abandoning verbal language and turning to her body as a means of communication. This provocative final dance sequence has divided critical opinion into two camps. On the one hand, critics such as Ginette Vincendeau and Higbee praise the film for the extensive visibility and agency it allows women of Maghrebi heritage, but criticise the belly dance sequence for objectifying the central protagonist's body. Higbee argues that the belly dance scene undercuts Rym's agency and positions her body as little more than an 'eroticized object' for the film's white bourgeois audience.⁹⁰ For him, the heroine's 'highly sexualized performance and the camera's fetishizing fragmentation of her body through extreme close-ups [...] presents [*sic*] an unsettling final image for any feminist reading of the film'.⁹¹ Likewise, Vincendeau argues that the last scene is incongruous with the rest of the narrative and 'degenerates into crude worship of female fecundity with endless close-ups of [Rym's] undulating tummy'.⁹² Both critics dismiss the belly dance sequence as eroticising and lament the manner in which it silences Rym's voice in favour of a 'mute display of folkloric Arabness (though with music)'.⁹³

On the other hand, Jim Morrissey argues that Rym's belly dance should not be seen as an instance of disempowerment because it represents the heroine's conscious manipulation of a stereotyped identity.⁹⁴ Morrissey compares key sequences in *La Graine et le mulet* and *Vénus noire* to 'show how dance performances in Kechiche can involve not only the adoption of stereotypical

⁹⁰ Higbee, 'Of Spaces and Difference', p. 227.

⁹¹ Higbee, 'Of Spaces and Difference', p. 227.

⁹² Vincendeau, 'Southern Discomfort', p. 47.

⁹³ Ginette Vincendeau, 'The Frenchness of French Cinema: The Language of National Identity, from the Regional to the Trans-national', in *Studies in French Cinema: UK Perspectives*, pp. 337-52 (p. 350).

⁹⁴ Jim Morrissey, 'Objectification and Resistance: Dance Performances in Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le mulet* (2007) and *Vénus noire* (2010)', *French Cultural Studies*, 24 (2013), 306-18.

identities that serve to highlight the continuing force of exclusionary discourse, but also assertions of agency on the part of the female ethnic other'.⁹⁵ Like Saartjie Baartman's (Yahima Torres) appropriation of the stereotype of the 'Hottentot Venus' in *Vénus noire*, Morrissey contends that 'the alternative identity that Rym performs in the closing section of *La Graine et le mulet* is [...] a knowing caricature, a preformed Orientalist stereotype of Arab femininity'.⁹⁶ He suggests that Rym's ability to manipulate an objectified identity for her own gains should thus be seen as an indicator of her agency, rather than a relinquishment of it. As Morrissey explains, 'Rym is at once objectified and, through her awareness of it, subverting that objectification'.⁹⁷ In contrast to both of these approaches, this section argues that the dance sequence in *La Graine et le mulet* privileges corporeal expression and (re)claims the belly dancing body as a vehicle of agency, exertion and (female) empowerment. Rather than reducing Rym's performance to an instance of disempowerment or self-objectification, Kechiche deploys the devices of the close-up and kinesthetic empathy to institute a new, more ethical way of looking that resists de-subjectification and refuses to contain his heroine as the (self-)exoticised object of a (neo-)colonial gaze.

⁹⁵ Morrissey, p. 306.

⁹⁶ Morrissey, p. 313. Saartjie Baartman was a Khoisan woman who originated from South Africa. Baartman was brought to the UK where she was treated as an object of fascination because of her bodily difference from white Western women. She became known in derogatory terms as the 'Hottentot Venus'.

⁹⁷ Morrissey, p. 315.



Figure 8. Rym's belly dance in *La Graine et le mulet*

Kechiche's controversial belly dance scene begins with a close-up of the young heroine's undulating stomach, before moving slowly up her near-nude adolescent body to focus on her face. By contrast to her standard attire of jeans and a t-shirt, Rym takes to the stage in a bright red sequined belly dance costume that accentuates her exposed midriff and positions her body as a spectacle for the (non-)diegetic audience to admire. As Rym dances, Kechiche repeatedly intercepts close-ups and extreme close-ups of her protruding belly and rotating hips with shots of the fascinated faces of the (white) (male) onlookers in the film's bourgeois audience. This cross-cutting is important as it reminds us that the young heroine is using her body to manipulate a (neo-)colonial fantasy of Maghrebi femininity in order to placate the increasingly impatient crowd. Furthermore, as Morrissey points out, Rym's shift from 'verbal to bodily performance [...] has an element of choice about it', which enables her to preserve her non-objectified identity and '[maintain] a

greater sense of agency' and control.⁹⁸ He cites the unexpectedness of her transformation from an assertive young heroine into a sexualised belly dancer as evidence of its artificiality and lack of grounding in reality.⁹⁹ Consequently, although Rym's dance ostensibly objectifies her body for the benefit of the (white) (bourgeois) audience, it does so in a manner that consciously plays upon existing stereotypes and therefore enables her to retain a sense of her agency and empowerment.

Despite the performative nature of Rym's dance spectacle, questions remain as to whether the ability to manipulate a (neo-)colonial stereotype constitutes the extent of the young woman's power. Is Rym's agency reduced to her ability to appropriate an entrenched (neo-)colonial and orientalist archetype? Does Kechiche's final scene risk (re)instating regressive images of Maghrebi-French women's bodies rather than confronting them? Is it de-subjectifying? Certainly, Rym's bodily movements and sexualised attire could be seen to correspond to dominant Western ideas of Maghrebi women as trapped within the physical potential of their bodies; however, they also enable her to control the attention of the (white) (male) audience and thereby confirm her mastery over the situation and her embodied existence at this point in the narrative. Rather than disempowering the central protagonist, this scene thus gives perfect expression to Deagon's argument that 'belly dance as performance is subversive' precisely because it 'allows women to seem to conform to patriarchal expectations while at the same time challenging them through powerful self-expression'.¹⁰⁰

In addition to emphasising Rym's agency and self-expression through her body, Kechiche arguably avoids subjecting his heroine to a wholly objectifying gaze

⁹⁸ Morrissey, p. 314.

⁹⁹ Morrissey, p. 314.

¹⁰⁰ Deagon, p.11.

through his re-appropriation of certain filming techniques, such as the close-up. In her recent book, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Martine Beugnet argues that the close-up has long been associated with the ‘itemisation of the body’ and ‘the objectification, visual possession and consumption (or erasure) of the “Other”’.¹⁰¹ Despite the fact that the close-up has often been used by the dominant (male) gaze to fragment, fetishise and eroticise the (female) body, Beugnet claims that some films and filmmakers have begun to view it as a means by which to ‘generate a spatial, temporal and figurative as well as perceptual disruption’ in the diegesis.¹⁰² According to Beugnet, certain films have harnessed the close-up’s potential to destabilise spectatorial authority and challenge its ‘conventional principles of exposure and scrutiny; from a classical element of exposition and fetishism, the close-up becomes a pivotal figure in a critical reworking of vision as power and of visual representation as the hallmark of self-identity’.¹⁰³ In such films, Beugnet contends that the ‘body in close-up is represented neither in terms of objectification or fragmentation’, but ‘evokes a subjectivity in a state of flux – a subjectivity in the making or in the process of dissolution’.¹⁰⁴

In *La Graine et le mulet*, Rym’s body repeatedly exceeds the boundaries of the camera’s frame and Kechiche shoots her using a mixture of close-ups and extreme close-ups, long takes and a constantly mobile camera that prevents the spectator from contemplating her body as a discrete and separate entity. Instead of retaining a distance from his belly dancing heroine, Kechiche zooms in so close to her body that the spectator is able to see her flesh sweat, bulge and wobble. This filming technique enables him to accentuate the strength and mastery Rym’s dancing

¹⁰¹ Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 93.

¹⁰² Beugnet, p. 90.

¹⁰³ Beugnet, pp. 101-2.

¹⁰⁴ Beugnet, p. 108.

entails, and is also subversive because it confounds dominant patriarchal notions of corporeal desirability in France and the West.¹⁰⁵ Similar to the representation of Lilia in *Satin rouge*, Rym is not constructed as a fetishised or eroticised object, but as an agentic subject whose performance is physically demanding, and whose voluptuous body counters dominant notions of female beauty and bodily decorum in France and the West.



Figure 9. An extreme-close up of Rym's belly

In addition to eschewing an objectifying gaze, Kechiche's non-conventional editing techniques enable him to elicit a mimetic, somatic and kinesthetic response on the part of the spectator. As observed in the earlier section on *Satin rouge*, Reynolds and Reason argue that empathic kinesthetic experience in dance operates through a combination of mimesis and empathy, whereby the spectator feels as if

¹⁰⁵ In her analysis of *La Graine et le mulet*, Mary Jean Green points out that all the women in the film 'reflect their Arabic origins' through their 'noticeably "full" figures [...] This physical differentiation is not accidental, since not only did Kechiche select his actresses with great care and attention, but he asked Hafsia Herzi to gain fifteen kilos (33 pounds) to play the role of Rym'. See: Mary Jean Green, 'All in the Family: Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le mulet* (*The Secret of the Grain*)', *South Central Review*, 28 (2011), 109-23 (pp. 119-20).

her/his body is ‘acting in and through the observed person or object’.¹⁰⁶ For Reynolds and Reason, kinesthetic empathy functions ‘as a movement across and between bodies’ and ‘can have affective impact with the potential to change modes of perception and ways of knowing’.¹⁰⁷ In the domain of film studies, cinematic techniques, such as close-ups, music and sound, can increase kinesthetic empathy in the spectator and thereby heighten our bodily understanding of the embodied subjects we see on screen. In the belly dance sequence in *La Graine et le mulet*, Kechiche’s dynamic editing techniques (constantly moving camera, (extreme) close-ups, changing shot scale, visceral music) capture his heroine’s energetic movements, but also induce kinesthetic empathy in the viewer, such that s/he is compelled to “sense” Rym’s physical exertion and “feel” her bodily exhaustion. In the same manner as Amari in *Satin rouge*, Kechiche uses the devices of the close-up and kinesthetic empathy to maintain his heroine’s agency and shun the objectifying gaze of the (non-)diegetic spectator. His filming style pulls the viewer into an intimate, proximate and kinesthetic relationship with his character that undermines the distance needed for visual objectification and opens up new, potentially more ethical ways of representing her body.

Alongside Kechiche’s use of an embodied and non-objectifying gaze, what is also interesting about this final sequence is its duration. Lasting well over ten minutes, the belly dance scene is the lengthiest in the film and uses long takes with little dialogue to emulate Rym’s lived experience of the belly dance performance. This subjective representation of time is evocative of phenomenological approaches to temporality, in which a distinction is drawn between the objective time of clocks and the subjective time of personal experiences. Phenomenological thought attempts

¹⁰⁶ Reynolds and Reason, p. 127.

¹⁰⁷ Reynolds and Reason, p. 88.

to understand how things appear to consciousness as temporal and views time as a series of successive moments that are synthesised by consciousness and the subject.¹⁰⁸ Though diverging from phenomenology on the question of perception, Henri Bergson's conceptualisation of time share similarities with that of the phenomenologists because it rejects objective "clock time" in favour of a notion of temporality that is grounded in lived experiences or what Suzanne Guerlac terms 'the sensation of qualities and affects – things [...] that cannot be measured'.¹⁰⁹ According to Bergson, subjective time, or *durée réelle*, cannot be understood objectively, but is driven by immediate feelings and sensations and operates at levels that precede reflective consciousness. He thus encourages us to approach time through 'the horizon of inner experience' and not 'the objective horizon of things as set in space'.¹¹⁰ In the final sequence of *La Graine et le mulet*, the use of long takes creates the impression of an elongated temporality, but also conveys the protracted duration of the boat party for both the impatient *invités* and Rym as she dances endlessly on stage. However, rather than simply replicating his characters' subjective experiences, Kechiche's editing also functions on a meta-cognitive level, whereby the sheer length of the scene allows the mind to wander, pulling the spectator into a position of self-awareness and compelling her/him to contemplate the image of Maghrebi femininity being presented on screen.

In addition to privileging Rym's corporeality as she dances, the final scene of *La Graine et le mulet* foregrounds that of Slimane desperately searching for the missing couscous and his ex-wife Souad (Bouraouia Marzouk). Following the arrival of his mistress at the boat party, Slimane's eldest son, Madjid (Sami Zitouni), panics

¹⁰⁸ See, for example: Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), trans. by John Barnett Brough.

¹⁰⁹ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 5.

¹¹⁰ Guerlac, p. 50.

and disappears with the couscous in the boot of his car. In desperation, Slimane leaves the party and attempts to find Souad and a solution to the mystery of the missing couscous. Upon discovering that she is not at home, Slimane heads to his son's apartment where he is waylaid by his daughter-in-law (Alice Hourri) who is in tears because of her husband's adultery. Attempting to recommence his search, the old man discovers that his moped has been stolen by three mischievous youths who proceed to lead him on a cat-and-mouse chase around the estate as night-time falls. As Slimane runs in futile circles after his moped, Kechiche repeatedly cuts to shots of Rym's rotating hips whipping the crowd into a frenzy on the space of the boat. In an interview in the French cultural magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, Kechiche explains that the constant cross-cutting between these two characters was intended to:

exprimer une tendresse entre les deux personnages, un lien presque spirituel, qui engage un même destin. Et ça passant par une sorte de sacrifice du corps, par la possibilité de se donner. Je voulais exprimer quelque chose de l'ordre de transmission, de la quête, qui passe par la sueur, un ventre qui tremble, un déchaînement de musique, une sorte de transe.¹¹¹

Kechiche's statement suggests how deeply Slimane and Rym's destinies are intertwined; however, it also hints at the deeply intuitive, corporeal connection between his two main protagonists in the final segment of the film. As Rym's hips make circles on the stage, Slimane runs in circular motions after the young boys who have stolen his moped. Not only does the motif of the circle represent the cyclical nature of life and death, but it ties both characters into an inevitable shared destiny that configures the passage from one generation to the next. As Rym rises to prominence in the vibrant space of the boat, Slimane collapses to the ground in silence, isolation and darkness. The old man's tragic demise enables Kechiche to pay

¹¹¹ Lalanne and Fevret.

homage to the sacrifices made by his generation of men; however, it also allows him to portray those made by the younger generation of women through Rym's desperate dancing to save her adoptive father's dreams from ruination.¹¹² The theme of self-sacrifice that characterises both protagonists' trajectories adds an almost ritualistic element to the final scene that not only emphasises the primordial and intercorporeal connection between the two main characters, but reinforces a notion of the cyclical nature of existence and the inevitable passage of time.

Despite Kechiche's emphasis on the themes of (self-)sacrifice and corporeal reciprocity, he nonetheless holds the younger generation of men responsible for the downfall of their fathers. By contrast to Rym, who performs an extraordinary gesture of love and self-sacrifice for her adoptive father figure, the three young boys steal Slimane's moped and Madjid disappears into the darkness with the couscous in the boot of his car. Rather than signifying a moment of disempowerment or de-subjectification, Rym's belly dance thus emerges as an emblem of the hope and optimism her generation of women represents for the future in France. Like the portrayal of Lilia in *Satin rouge*, the final dance sequence of *La Graine et le mulet* does not objectify or eroticise Rym's body, but privileges it as a symbol of love, beauty, self-sacrifice, agency and female empowerment.

Embodying the Intercultural Encounter: The Sufi Trance Scene in Tony Gatlif's *Exils*

Whereas *Satin rouge* and *La Graine et le mulet* focus on belly dancers who gain agency and (self-)empowerment through their bodies, the penultimate sequence of

¹¹² Kechiche dedicates the film to his late father and admits that the narrative sprang from 'une envie de rendre hommage à cette génération de pères; des pères qui sont venus en France dans les années soixantes avec leurs enfants [...] et qui ont beaucoup travaillé, qui ont beaucoup trimé, qui ont sacrifié leur vie, qui sont déracinés'. See: Olivier Bombarda, 'Abdellatif Kechiche à propos de "La Graine et le mulet"', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOgAGcmi2sE>> [accessed 5 September 2015].

Exils shows its heroine engaging in a Sufi trance ritual in Algiers. As discussed at length in Chapter One, *Exils* is a road movie that charts the journey of a young Algerian-French woman (Naïma) and her French *pied-noir* boyfriend (Zano) from Paris to Algiers where they hope to (re)discover their cultural heritage and (re)connect with their (parents') "homeland". As we saw in Chapter One, Naïma is shown to feel alienated in Algeria and breaks down, declaring to Zano that she feels like a foreigner everywhere she goes, including in her own body. The penultimate sequence of the film thus shows Naïma taking part in a Sufi trance ceremony in order to (re)connect her mind and body and overcome the traumas of her past. In parallel with the representation of dance and movement in *Satin rouge* and *La Graine et le mulet*, the penultimate section of *Exils* uses the device of kinesthetic empathy to break down intercultural barriers and deconstruct the hegemony of the (male) gaze. However, by contrast to the other two films studied here, *Exils* privileges the healing powers of dance and positions the entranced body as a site of catharsis, rejuvenation and intercultural reconnection.

The scene begins by focusing on a close-up of Naïma's terrified face as the Sufi mystic tells her that the only way she can overcome the traumas of her past and her alienation from her country of origin is by (re)connecting with her body and her self. The camera then cuts to a close-up of two men's hands extracting a pulsating rhythm from the skin of a drum, before panning slowly around the room to focus on the various individuals taking part in the Sufi trance ceremony. The lighting is dark and the tempo of the music is initially moderate; however, as the scene progresses, the beating drums and accompanying chanting grow in speed and volume and Gatlif films Naïma and the other (female) participants using a mobile camera that mirrors their frenetic movements, spinning around the room in dizzying circles. In her work

on film and (queer) phenomenology, Lindner argues that these devices enable what she terms the possibility ‘for *bodily* identification with the image’, whereby the spectator is encouraged to empathise viscerally, kinesthetically and mimetically with what they see on screen (emphasis in the original).¹¹³ For Lindner, ‘[t]his mode of seeing is characterized by a *grasping* gaze that engages our muscles and tendons’, and thereby allows us to experience visual images ‘through modes of movement, comportment and gesture’ (emphasis in the original).¹¹⁴ Here, Gatlif’s use of dark lighting, visceral music, an ever-mobile camera, disorientating angles, close-ups and extreme close-ups elicits kinesthetic empathy with Naïma’s erratic bodily movements, but also undermines our ability to understand the scene visually and appeals to more sensory and embodied modes of knowing. Through his use of an embodied and “grasping” gaze, Gatlif not only reduces the distance necessary for detached contemplation, but pulls the (Western) spectator into a relationship of empathy with his heroine’s entranced body that holds the potential to break down barriers of gender, ethnicity and cultural identity.

In addition to potentially evoking kinesthetic empathy in the spectator, the penultimate sequence of *Exils* offers an unusual representation of temporality as subjective and condensed in Naïma’s entranced body. Following the close-up of two hands drumming at the beginning of the scene, there are no more cuts and Gatlif films the twelve-minute trance sequence on a hand-held camera using one extended take. On the one hand, these filming techniques imbue the scene with a documentary aesthetic that differs from what Higbee deems the ‘more stylized approach to form and mise-en-scène found elsewhere in the film’.¹¹⁵ However, they also add a subjective dimension to the sequence that enables Gatlif to emulate Naïma’s lived

¹¹³ Lindner, ‘Situated Bodies, Cinematic Orientations’, p. 155.

¹¹⁴ Lindner, ‘Situated Bodies, Cinematic Orientations’, p. 155.

¹¹⁵ Higbee, “‘Et si on allait en Algérie?’”, p. 69.

experience of the Sufi trance ceremony. As discussed briefly in the section on *La Graine et le mulet*, such an idiosyncratic representation of time is reminiscent of Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, in which he argues that Western scientific and philosophical traditions have tried to quantify time by representing it as a series of discrete and separate units.¹¹⁶ As an alternative to this spatialised and objective "clock time", Bergson proposes his concept of *durée* and argues that time is pre-reflective and personal and should be viewed as an intensive flow of irreversible and heterogeneous moments. As Bergson explains, 'la pure durée pourrait bien n'être qu'une succession de changements qualitatifs qui se fondent, qui se pénètrent, sans contours précis, sans aucune tendance à s'extérioriser les uns par rapport aux autres, sans aucune parenté avec le nombre: ce serait la hétérogénéité pure'.¹¹⁷ In the penultimate sequence of *Exils*, Gatlif uses one extended take to replicate Naïma's immediate experience of the trance scene, but also to represent temporality as an irreversible movement of heterogeneous moments. Similar to *La Graine et le mulet*, Gatlif's privileging of subjective time closes the gap between spectator and protagonist by immersing us in Naïma's affective experience of the Sufi trance ritual.

However, if Gatlif encourages the viewer to empathise with Naïma's lived reality, he arguably does so in a manner that insists upon the specificity of her time and being. In his book on Bergsonian philosophy, John Mullarkey argues that Bergson's theory of time shares many points of comparison with Levinasian ethics because it respects the irreducible alterity of the "other".¹¹⁸ As argued in the introduction to this thesis, Levinas believes that self-other relations are inevitably fraught because the "other" destabilises my sovereignty, forces me to recognise that

¹¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris: Alcan, 1909).

¹¹⁷ Bergson, p. 49.

¹¹⁸ John Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 109.

the world is not mine alone and calls me to act responsibly without ever promising the same in return. For Levinas, this radical inequity is crucial because it destabilises the centrality of the subject and refuses to reduce alterity to sameness. In line with Levinasian ethics, Mullarkey argues that Bergson offers an ethical reading of time that emphasises the specificity of each individual *durée* and thereby ‘[ensures] that the other *as other* remains unknowable in absolute terms’ (emphasis in the original).¹¹⁹ In the penultimate sequence of *Exils*, Gatlif uses intimate camerawork that encourages the spectator to experience a close, corporeal connection to the events on screen; however, he refuses to allow us to take Naïma’s place by eschewing subjective point-of-view shots and thus destabilising our ability to understand the scene objectively. In short, *Exils* adopts an ethical representational strategy that refuses to submit its protagonist to a totalising gaze and hence allows her to exist as a transcendent subject in her own right.

Importantly, the penultimate sequence of *Exils* also positions the Sufi trance ritual as a privileged means by which Naïma is able to integrate her past into her present and her future. In his work on time, Bergson argues that past, present and future penetrate one another to the extent that the past and future are always lived as part of the present. To illustrate this point, Bergson uses the example of a piece of music in which the diverse elements work together to create what consciousness apprehends as a melody.¹²⁰ In the same way as a musical melody, Bergson views the body as a ‘centre of action’ that ‘[synthesises] the heterogeneous rhythms of duration into temporal horizons of past, present and future’.¹²¹ He suggests that the body is a contact zone that fuses different temporal moments and allows us to (re)think time in terms of synthesis and a flowing continuity. In *Exils*, the Sufi trance ritual unites

¹¹⁹ Mullarkey, p. 190.

¹²⁰ Bergson, p. 48.

¹²¹ Guerlac, p. 5.

these three distinct temporal dimensions by enabling Naïma to exorcise the demons of her past and move forward into a more positive future. Her body is thus constructed as a “contact zone” that fuses different temporal moments and thereby facilitates the emergence of new possibilities for the future.

At the end of the Sufi trance scene, Naïma appears to have exorcised her demons, (re)integrated her past and present, and (re)united with a culture that previously alienated her and caused her pain. However, if Gatlif uses the Sufi trance ritual to demonstrate Naïma’s (re)connection with her body and opening up to Algerian culture, it could also be seen to contribute to an exoticised – and erroneous – view of Algeria and Islam as steeped in mysticism, ritual and superstition. Certainly, Gatlif can be accused of fetishising Algerian culture and associating it with a ceremonial practice that is far less widespread than his film suggests; however, this scene can also be seen in more positive terms as yet another example of the director’s privileging of the primacy of the body, the experiential and the sensate.¹²² Rather than viewing the Sufi trance ceremony as a moment of unnecessary exoticism, it can be understood as a healing and restorative ritual that enables Naïma to move from feeling alienated and displaced to feeling embodied, emplaced and (re)connected with her country and culture of origin. In short, the Sufi trance ritual commences a process of healing and catharsis that permits the heroine to (re)connect with her “homeland” by (re)integrating her mind and body and overcoming the traumas of her past. In positioning the Sufi trance ritual as the

¹²² Following de-colonisation, Sufism in Algeria was discredited as an obscurantist and heretic branch of Islam and the number of participants fell drastically. In recent years, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has endorsed Sufism as a peaceful alternative to Salafism and Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). However, with the exception of Kabylie, the number of participants remains low and young Algerians tend to view the religion as anachronistic. They are also wary of its sudden alliance with the State. For a detailed analysis of attitudes towards Sufism in Algeria, see: Hamidi Khemissi, Ricardo René Larémont and Taybi Taj Eddine, ‘Sufism, Salafism and State Policy towards Religion in Algeria: A Survey of Algerian Youth’, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 17 (2012), 547-58.

primary means by which the central protagonist is able to achieve a state of transcendent unity, the penultimate sequence of *Exils* illustrates the parallels between Sufism and phenomenology that were identified in the introduction to this thesis.

Conclusion

Satin rouge, *La Graine et le mulet* and *Exils* all suggest that the practices of belly dance and trance empower their protagonists and enable them to (re)gain a sense of subjectivity and agency. Whereas *Satin rouge* focuses on an older Tunisian woman who gains (sexual) liberation through belly dancing and her body, Kechiche emphasises his central heroine's agency and ability to express herself corporeally in *La Graine et le mulet*. In *Exils*, Gatlif suggests that his principal protagonist is able to achieve a sense of (spiritual) healing by abandoning the cerebral and surrendering to her body and the ancient embodied practice of the Sufi trance ritual. In all cases, these films show their protagonists (re)integrating their bodies and their minds, and achieving a sense of (sexual) liberation through the embodied practices of belly dance or trance.

Crucially, all of the films discussed in this chapter seek to counter negative stereotypes and challenge orientalist (mis)conceptualisations about women of Maghrebi heritage. As shown, one of the key ways in which they do this is by using the devices of kinesthetic empathy and the haptic to foreground corporeality through movement and counter the objectifying male gaze. By emphasising the close-up, tactility and motion, these directors pull the spectator into an intimate relationship with the image that breaks down inter-corporeal barriers and destabilises the distance needed for objectification or de-subjectification. In doing so, these films offer ethical ways of representing their protagonists' bodies that refuse to submit them to an

eroticising or objectifying gaze, and therefore allow their inherent and absolute alterity as “other” to remain intact. In mobilising kinesthetic empathy in the spectator, *Satin rouge*, *La Graine et le mulet* and *Exils* challenge dominant (Western) (mis)perceptions and facilitate more ethical ways of looking at the (belly) dancing body.

However, if these films seek to resist orientalist images of Maghrebi(-French) women, questions remain as to how effective they are in altering dominant attitudes to (belly) dancing and the body. Though *Exils* was well-received by critics, it was mainly popular in art-house cinemas in Europe or America and on the festival circuit, meaning that its unusual representation of a Sufi trance ritual was limited to small, niche audiences and made little impact with mainstream spectators inside or outside of the Maghreb. By contrast, Martin points out that Amari’s ‘figure féminine résistante à sa société a trouvé un public réceptif: il a tenu l’affiche 13 semaines en Tunisie’.¹²³ The film’s relative success in Tunisia could suggest that domestic audiences are ready to embrace subversive images of belly dance and the female body that position them as sources of liberation and empowerment. In opposition to both of these films, *La Graine et le mulet* was surprisingly popular in France and attracted a large number of spectators, as well as a series of prizes and awards.¹²⁴ Despite its commercial and critical popularity, however, the ambivalent scholarly responses to the final section of the film demonstrate the complexity of belly dance as a cultural phenomenon and the still ambiguous place that belly dancers occupy in our contemporary thought vocabularies in both the East and the West.

All things considered, then, the above analyses show that *Satin rouge*, *La Graine et le mulet* and *Exils* offer more nuanced representations of belly dance and

¹²³ Florence Martin, ‘*Satin rouge* de Raja Amari: l’expression féminine sens dessus dessous’, *Expressions maghrébines*, 5 (2006), 53-66 (p. 62).

¹²⁴ Durmelat and Swamy, p. 2.

trance than has often been believed by scholars and might immediately be apparent. In a subversive and potentially radical manner, these three films not only reinvent the (belly) dancing body as a space of subjectivity, agency and (female) empowerment, but envision new models of Maghrebi femininity that depart from dominant Western and Eastern (mis)conceptualisations and fantasies.

3. Embodying Islam in Yasmine Kassari's *L'Enfant endormi*, Aziz Salmy's *Amours voilées* and Nouri Bouzid's *Millefeuille*

Introduction

The previous chapter of this thesis examined three films that show Maghrebi(-French) women challenging patriarchal expectations through their bodies and the embodied practices of belly dance and trance. Retaining a focus on women in the Maghreb, this section examines three films that foreground the impact of patriarchal religious discourses upon Maghrebi women's lives and corporeal subjectivities: *L'Enfant endormi*, *Amours voilées* and *Millefeuille*. Building upon the ideas established in the previous chapter, this segment argues that these three films expose the extent to which external discourses, such as religion and patriarchy, determine women's internalised identities in the countries of the Maghreb. It begins by providing a contextual overview of the intersections of gender, religion and the body in early Islam and the *Qur'an*, Islamic family law, and the phenomenon of veiling. Thereafter, this chapter examines *L'Enfant endormi*, *Amours voilées* and *Millefeuille* in light of these debates and argues that all three films construct their protagonists as agentic subjects who actively resist patriarchal and religious attempts to control their bodies and desires.

Women, Gender and the Body in Early Islamic Discourse

Though most contemporary Islamic societies are patriarchal in structure, many critics argue that original Islam did not advocate gender inequality, but offered an ethical and egalitarian vision of the relationship between the sexes.¹ As mentioned

¹ See, for instance, Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

briefly in the introduction, in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Ahmed argues that the Islamic conception of gender is not grounded in patriarchal ‘theories proposing that the inferiority of women is based on biology and “nature”’, but that original Islam promoted absolute equality between women and men in the eyes of God.² She examines key verses in the *Qur’an* – such as *sūra* 33:35 in which men and women are addressed on equal ethical and moral terms – to show that gender inequalities in Islam were established through later androcentric readings of the religious texts and via the institution of the patriarchal family unit.³ For Ahmed, the codification of orthodox Islam legitimised patriarchal familial structures that designated women’s bodies as ‘the property of men, first of the woman’s father, then of her husband, and [made] female sexual purity (virginity in particular) [a] negotiable, economically valuable property’.⁴ From this point onwards, Ahmed argues that women’s bodies were not only viewed as the property of their male kin, but were constructed as privileged sites through which male honour and patrilineal familial lines could be protected and secured. As Ahmed explains, ‘Islam’s ethical vision [...] [was] thus in tension with, and might even be said to subvert, the hierarchical structure of marriage pragmatically instituted in the first Islamic society’.⁵

In addition to envisioning women’s bodies as the property of their male relatives, androcentric interpretations of the *Qur’an* viewed the female body as *haram* (sinful or taboo) because of its potential to provoke disorder amongst men. As

² Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 64.

³ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 62. In Ahmed’s text, *sūra* 33:35 is translated as follows: ‘For Muslim men and women, – | For believing men and women, | For devout men and women, | For true [truthful] men and women, | For men and women who are | Patient and constant, for men | And women who humble themselves, | For men and women who give | In charity, for men and women | Who fast (and deny themselves), | For men and women who | Guard their chastity, and | For men and women who | Engage much in God’s praise, – | For them has God prepared | Forgiveness and a great reward’. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 64-5.

⁴ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 12.

⁵ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 63.

Viola Shafik explains, '[b]ecause of the effect the sight of a woman's body can have on men it was believed to provoke *fitna* or chaos. As a result, her whole sexuality was conceived as problematic' and had to be carefully monitored and controlled.⁶ Today, the Islamic tradition still considers women to be the incarnation of chaos/disorder, and institutions, such as Islamic family law, are used to control female sexuality and protect the stability of the dominant patriarchal social order. For Ahmed, Islamic '[f]amily law is the cornerstone of the system of male privilege set up by establishment Islam. That it is still preserved intact signals the existence of enormously powerful forces within the Middle Eastern societies determined to uphold male privilege and male control over women'.⁷ Not only does Islamic family law oblige women to embody the religious values of their societies, but it monitors their corporeal behaviours and actions in the name of the family, religion and the nation. As Joseph explains, Islamic family law is a 'testimony to the centrality of women's bodies and behaviours to scripts of nationhood and statehood and testimony to the centrality of "family" to social and political projects in the region'.⁸ Islamic family law controls women's bodies, movements and actions through legislation surrounding marriage and divorce rights, repudiation (a husband's ability to divorce his wife without legal recourse), inheritance laws and child custody rights.

Islamic Family Law in the Countries of the Maghreb

Looking specifically at the countries of the Maghreb, Charrad argues that family law codes in Algeria and Morocco function to position women's bodies as (sexual)

⁶ Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, Nation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 169-70.

⁷ Ahmed, p. 42.

⁸ Joseph, p. 20.

commodities for exchange between members of their patrilineal kinship.⁹ Following independence in 1956, Morocco adopted a strict family law code, or *Mudawanna*, that was underpinned by the Maliki school of Islamic thought and legalised many harmful practices such as polygamy, repudiation and unequal divorce and inheritance rights.¹⁰ Similar to the *Mudawanna* in Morocco, Charrad points out that the Algerian Family Code of 1984 forwarded a ‘conception of the family as an agnatic kinship structure in which the patrilineal male line had privilege and women were subordinate to both husbands and male kin’.¹¹ In both Algeria and Morocco, Islamic family law codes legalised practices such as matrimonial guardianship, polygamy and repudiation, which disempowered women and positioned their bodies as the property of their fathers, husbands and wider kinship network. Whereas the concept of the matrimonial guardian places women’s decisions about marriage in the hands of their father or another male kin member, regulations on matrimony make it difficult for women to divorce their husbands and give them no legal recourse in the case of repudiation. Though rare statistically, the practice of polygamy allows men to marry up to four women at a time as long as they can provide for each wife financially and are able to treat them all equally. Family law codes in Algeria and Morocco thus positioned women as minors before the law and sanctioned a view of their bodies as the (saleable) property of their husbands, fathers and patriarchal familial unit. As Zahia Smail Salhi explains, Islamic family law codes ‘legalise women’s inferior position in society and render them minors for life by putting them under the guardianship of male family members’.¹²

⁹ Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights*, p. 1.

¹¹ Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights*, p. 197.

¹² Zahia Smail Sahli, ‘Gender and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa: Negotiating with Patriarchal States and Islamism’, in *Gender and Violence in Islamic Societies: Patriarchy, Islamism*

By contrast to Algeria and Morocco, the Tunisian *Majalla* (or Code of Personal Status) of 1956 banned polygamy and repudiation, gave women the same divorce rights as their husbands and improved the rules of inheritance for daughters and granddaughters.¹³ For Charrad, the Tunisian *Majalla* ‘constituted a radical shift in the interpretation of Islamic laws with regard to the family’ and gave Tunisian women greater capacity to control their bodies in both public and private spaces.¹⁴ Following the rise to presidency of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, this process of reform continued and further changes were made to the Tunisia *Majalla* in 1993. Not only were women granted greater custody rights, but they were now able to pass their nationality onto their children.¹⁵ By contrast to the Tunisian *Majalla*, family law codes changed very little in Algeria and women found themselves to be the victims of acts of gender-based violence perpetrated against their bodies during the Algerian Civil War. In Morocco, the *Mudawanna* was eventually adjusted in 2004 to allow women greater capacity for divorce, child custody and self-guardianship; however, these modifications did not change the rulings on polygamy or repudiation (though it altered them slightly) and women’s inheritance rights still differed extensively from those of the men in their patrilineal kinship.¹⁶ As Moha Ennaji explains, ‘[i]nequality concerning inheritance is still maintained, whereby a woman inherits half part of a man, which implies that males inherit the double of females’.¹⁷ Consequently, despite the changes to the *Mudawanna* in 2004, family law codes in Algeria and

and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa, ed. by Zahia Smail Salhi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 12-42 (p. 24).

¹³ Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights*, p. 1,

¹⁴ Mounira M. Charrad, ‘Tunisia at the Forefront of the Arab World: Two Waves of Gender Legislation’, in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of Change*, ed. by Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 105-13 (p. 105).

¹⁵ Mounira M. Charrad, ‘Becoming a Citizen: Lineage versus Individual in Tunisia and Morocco’, in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, pp. 70-87 (p. 75).

¹⁶ Moha Ennaji, ‘Women’s NGOs and Social Change in Morocco’, in *Women in the Middle East and North Africa*, pp. 79-88 (p. 84).

¹⁷ Ennaji, p. 86.

Morocco still reinforce a notion of women's bodies as assets that can be relinquished as and when their husbands or fathers choose. The Tunisian *Majalla*, on the other hand, constructs women in more secular terms that diminish the authority of the patrilineal kinship and, as Charrad observes, imbue them with 'significant individual rights, even though many aspects of gender inequality persist'.¹⁸

The Female Body in Islamic Culture and Tradition

Despite the more liberal legal position adopted by the Tunisian *Majalla*, women are still expected to conform to a number of entrenched patriarchal norms in contemporary Tunisia, as well as in Islamic societies throughout the Maghreb. In all three countries, there is a preoccupation with female purity and women's bodies are envisioned as the principal vehicles through which patriarchal and familial honour are assured and ascertained. As we saw represented in *Bled number one*, women who are thought to have acted dishonourably are often violently avenged by (male) members of their kinship group for bringing shame to their husbands and families. For Joseph, such acts not only position women's bodies as repositories for male honour and respectability, but '[reinforce] the notion that women and children are properties of males of their paternal kin – a privilege not only of fathers and husbands but of extended paternal relatives'.¹⁹ Consequently, despite ostensible gains in attaining enfranchisement before the law, women are still expected to bear the burden of dominant cultural discourses that emphasise female chastity and position their bodies as receptacles for male honour and reputation.

¹⁸ Charrad, 'Becoming a Citizen', p. 72. Space prevents me from looking at the reasons why Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia adopted such different family law codes, but see Charrad, *States and Women's Rights*, for a detailed examination of the influence of tribal groupings, ethnic diversity and colonial practices on each individual country's policies.

¹⁹ Joseph, p. 21.

In securing male honour through female chastity and propriety, Islam legitimates the need to monitor women's corporeal movements and behaviours in (male) public spaces. Practices such as gendered segregation divide the world into two distinct realms that restrict physical interaction between men and women. Whereas the outside world of religion, politics and the public is considered to belong to men, the domestic space of the family and the home is usually gendered as female. For Fatima Mernissi, this gendering of space is rooted in the belief in women's capacity to cause *fitna* and operates to neutralise female (sexual) power in (male) public spaces.²⁰ As Mernissi explains, '[t]he whole Muslim organization of social interaction and spacial [*sic*] configuration can be understood in terms of women's [sexual] power. The social order then appears as an attempt to subjugate her power and neutralize its disruptive effects'.²¹ In other words, spatial segregation maintains the hegemony of the dominant social order by confining women to the private space of the home and placing limitations on their capacity to move in the male-gendered space of the street. However, despite the restrictions of gendered segregation, John L. Esposito argues that changing economic conditions in the MENA mean that women are increasingly able to occupy (male) public spaces and that physical interaction between the sexes is becoming a more readily observable phenomenon.²² For Esposito, '[i]n our modern, globalizing world [...] women are increasingly joining the workforce and breaking down traditional notions of gendered space'.²³ Consequently, although the practice of gendered segregation is still in operation, women are an increasingly apparent presence in (male) public spaces and Islamic

²⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (London: Al Saqi, 2003), p. 33.

²¹ Mernissi, p. 33.

²² John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 95.

²³ Esposito, p. 95.

societies are having to find innovative new ways to adapt to the need for social interaction between the sexes.

Islam and the Veil: (Un)Covering the Female Body

Such organic modifications to the practices of gendered segregation notwithstanding, Mernissi argues that the veil persists as a privileged means to ‘prevent sexual interaction between members of the *umma* [male community] and members of the domestic universe’.²⁴ Situated at the core of debates on gender, religion, space and the body, the veil mediates interaction between the sexes and is a key signifier of Islam in dominant cultural discourses in both the East and the West. Despite these associations, however, veiling existed prior to Islam and was actually assimilated into Muslim practices from the customs of Byzantine and Persian women.²⁵ During the time of the Prophet, veiling was a sign of honour and only Muhammad’s wives were expected to veil; however, following Muhammad’s death, middle- and upper-class Muslim women began to veil in order to communicate their respectability and superiority to lower-class women.²⁶ As Ahmed explains, veiling originally ‘served not merely to mark the upper classes but, more fundamentally, to differentiate between “respectable” women and those who were publicly available. That is, use of the veil classified women according to their sexual activity and signaled to men which women were under male protection and which were fair game’.²⁷ Hence, rather than mediating interaction between the sexes, veiling was connected to questions of social standing, respectability and female sexual availability in the first Islamic societies.

²⁴ Mernissi, p. 140.

²⁵ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 55.

²⁶ Esposito, p. 106.

²⁷ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 55.

Despite these original connotations, the veil began to take on different meanings during the era of (French) colonial rule in areas of the MENA. Though many of the white (male) colonisers were against the fight for female emancipation in their own countries, they viewed the veil as an emblem of the subjugation of Muslim women and used it to reinforce a notion of the inferiority of Islamic cultures. As Ahmed explains, '[v]eiling [...] became the symbol now of both the oppression of women [...] and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of assault on Muslim societies'.²⁸ Muslim women were considered to be oppressed and their bodies were constructed as vehicles for the legitimisation of white (male) domination. However, at the same time as the coloniser manipulated the veiled female body to signify Islamic inferiority and backwardness, the colonised constructed it as a source of resistance to colonial domination and as a marker of the authenticity of indigenous traditions and practices. The most obvious example here remains Fanon's analysis of the Algerian War of Independence, in which he argues that Algerian women helped the FLN (*Front National de Libération*) to win the war by smuggling bombs and weapons underneath their veils.²⁹ During the colonial era, the veiled female body thus emerged as a marker of oppression and resistance, and was used by both the coloniser and the colonised to affirm the superiority of Western/Eastern ways of thinking.

Today, the veiled female body remains a site of contestation and contemporary debates over the veil are 'charged with other issues – culture and

²⁸ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 152.

²⁹ Frantz Fanon, *L'An cinq de la révolution algérienne*, 2nd edn (Paris: La Découverte, 2001). Women's role in the Algerian War was immortalised on film in the historical epic, *La Bataille d'Alger*, dir. by Gillo Pontecorvo (Argent Films, 1966).

nationalism, “Western” versus “indigenous” or “authentic” values’.³⁰ In the West, the veil is often perceived as fixed and inflexible, and many Western (and non-Western) critics argue that it limits Muslim women’s capacity to dress and behave as they please. As Esposito explains, ‘[c]ritics of veiling [...] stress the importance of self-expression [...] They believe that any person or religion or culture that requires a mature woman to dress in a certain way infringes on her rights and freedoms’.³¹ Furthermore, these critics condemn instances of forced or obligatory veiling and see women who choose to veil as doing so ‘under the sway of an oppressive patriarchal culture or as just submitting to the dictates of their religion’.³² Like in the previous chapter, these arguments surrounding self-determination and freedom of choice can be better understood using Beauvoir’s work in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, in which she develops Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” to argue that women can be complicit in their own objectification in patriarchal societies.³³ As outlined in Chapter Two, Beauvoir argues that women often support the patriarchal order to the extent that they accept their status as second-class citizens and rescind their capacity to act as free and self-determining subjects.³⁴ In line with Beauvoir’s theorising, critics of veiling argue that Muslim women who choose to veil are acting in “bad faith” by supporting a religion that places limitations on their freedoms and diminishes their capacity for self-expression. For Salhi, wearing the veil offers a false sense of freedom because it allows women to enter the public space, but ‘isolates them from public view and restricts their movements especially with some

³⁰ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 120.

³¹ Esposito, pp. 106-7.

³² Esposito, pp. 107.

³³ In Sartre’s work, “bad faith” refers to people’s willingness to engage in acts of (self-)deception and thereby deny their own, personal freedom(s). See: Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant: essai d’ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

³⁴ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: L’Expérience Vécue*, p. 288.

types of strict veiling as in the case of burqa and chador'.³⁵ She believes that veiling exerts control over women's bodies and behaviours, and therefore undermines their ability to determine themselves in opposition to the directives of dominant patriarchal Islamic discourses. Salhi thus questions the extent to which it is possible for veiled women 'to be full agents while abiding by the rule of patriarchy and keeping to its set boundaries'.³⁶

The arguments of these critics notwithstanding, a number of Islamic feminists and activists have questioned the extent to which the veil can be read as a symbol of self-deception and conformity. Is the veiled Muslim woman promoting a patriarchal religious discourse that disempowers her and limits her existential freedoms? Or is she using the veil to express a personal adherence to her faith, despite the weight of Western stereotypes and imperialism? As Salhi asks, '[d]o Muslim women effectively challenge patriarchy and [...] enjoy a certain level of agency or do they maintain its rule and therefore collaborate with their oppressors?'³⁷ For many Islamic feminists, dismissals of veiling as an act of (self-)deception are not only decontextualized and implicitly Western in orientation, but deny Muslim women their capacity for agency or self-determination. In opposition to such reductive discourses, these feminists adopt a phenomenological approach to veiling that views it in its local context and as 'a lived experience full of contradictions and multiple meanings'.³⁸ For instance, in *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*, Fadwa El Guindi argues that veiling is a complex phenomenon that lies 'at the intersection of cultural notions of body and space, and social aspects of

³⁵ Salhi, p. 29.

³⁶ Salhi, p. 29.

³⁷ Salhi, p. 28.

³⁸ Homa Hoodfar, 'The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women', *Resources for Feminist Research* (1993), 5-18 (p. 5).

gender and the group'.³⁹ She points out that Muslim women not only dress differently depending upon the spaces their bodies occupy, but that they use the veil to communicate 'a number of social domains – individual and group identity, social status, economic position, political power, gender, and religious role'.⁴⁰

Similar to El Guindi, Ahmed highlights the functionality of the veil and argues that it has 'a variety of distinct practical advantages. On the simplest, most material level, it is economical' and protects women from harassment and the objectifying male gaze.⁴¹ Moreover, in contrast to dominant (Western) assumptions, Ahmed argues that veiling does not necessarily make Muslim women's bodies invisible or 'declare [their] place to be in the home but, on the contrary, legitimizes their presence outside it'.⁴² She points to the veiled woman's increased capacity to move in public and argues that the veil can operate as an antidote to the pervasive sexualisation of women's bodies in dominant patriarchal societies in the West. For Ahmed, veiling is a social practice that enables women to avoid unwanted attention and improves their ability to move in (male) public spaces. Certainly, the veil can be understood as an item of clothing that facilitates women's mobility and heightens their capacity for social interaction; however, such arguments also run the risk of accommodating patriarchal hegemony because they threaten to legitimise (or even essentialise) some men's compulsion to objectify women's bodies if they are uncovered in public.

In a different vein to Ahmed, a number of scholars and activists in and from the MENA have foregrounded the veil's social function by stressing its ability to act as a sign of resistance to dominant Western hegemony and politics. In the 1980s and

³⁹ Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 57.

⁴⁰ El Guindi, p. xvii.

⁴¹ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 223.

⁴² Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 224.

early 1990s, young university students in Egypt started a veiling renaissance that swept across the MENA and continues to grow in force today. For El Guindi, the revival of this style of dress reignited (neo-)colonial debates about cultural authenticity through its affirmation of ‘an Islamic identity and morality’ and its rejection of ‘Western materialism, consumerism, commercialism, and values’.⁴³ These young women began to veil not because they were forced to by tyrannical Islamic men, but because they saw the veil as a means to oppose Western cultural values and articulate a personal allegiance to their faith. For them, the veil represented ‘a return to their cultural roots and rejection of a Western imperialist tradition that [...] shows little respect for women’ or their bodies.⁴⁴ Consequently, rather than representing an instance of “bad faith” or self-deception, the veiling renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s was considered to be underpinned by choice and allowed Muslim women to foreground a loyalty to their faith, their nation and their culture.

As this overview shows, veiling is a complex phenomenon that has multiple and shifting meanings and therefore should not be reduced to a single, decontextualized or simplistic definition. As Charrad concludes, ‘[s]ome women are forced to veil, and others choose to do it and make that choice for multiple reasons. Some wear a veil only on some occasions and not on others. Behind each veil there is a different story, and no generalization holds for all’.⁴⁵ The veiled female body is synonymous with many different meanings and its shifting connotations should not be viewed in isolation from their specific political and cultural context(s).

⁴³ El Guindi, p. 145.

⁴⁴ Esposito, pp. 107.

⁴⁵ Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights*, p. 430.

Embodying Religious Oppression: Women in Contemporary Maghrebi Cinema

Given the integral place of Islam in the everyday lives of women in the Maghreb, it is unsurprising that religion emerges as a key theme in three contemporary Maghrebi films that focus on women. Whereas *L'Enfant endormi* foregrounds two young Berber women who reject the authority of dominant spiritual and religious traditions, *Amours voilées* is set in urban Casablanca and focuses on a young Muslim woman who challenges the sexual mores of her society. By contrast to both of these films, *Millefeuille* takes place in the midst of the Tunisian revolution and explores changing attitudes to women, religion and the veil. Though these three films focus on different social contexts and spaces, they all criticise the extent to which patriarchal religious traditions operate through women's bodies to impose restrictions on their embodied identities and desires.

Subverting Spiritualism in Yasmine Kassari's *L'Enfant endormi*

Yasmine Kassari is a filmmaker of Moroccan heritage who lives and works in Brussels. Though she initially studied medicine in Paris, Kassari soon shifted disciplines and cities to train as a filmmaker at the *Institut National Supérieur des Arts et du Spectacle et de Techniques de Diffusion* (INSAS) in Brussels. After shooting three short films (*Le Feutre noir*, *Chiens errants* and *Linda et Nadia*), Kassari made a documentary called *Quand les hommes pleurent*, which casts a sympathetic eye on a group of men who have migrated from Morocco to Spain in the hope of finding work and a better quality of life.⁴⁶ Following the success of *Quand les hommes pleurent*, Kassari made a feature-length film called *L'Enfant endormi*, which also focuses on the theme of migration, but from the point-of-view of the

⁴⁶ *Le Feutre noir*, dir. by Yasmine Kassari (1994); *Chiens errants*, dir. by Yasmine Kassari (1995); *Linda et Nadia*, dir. by Yasmine Kassari (2000); *Quand les hommes pleurent*, dir. by Yasmine Kassari (Doc Diffusion France, 2000).

women who have been left behind. It uses location shooting, non-professional actors (save Rachida Brakni) and a low-key aesthetic to recount the daily lives of two young women, Zeinab (Mounia Osfour) and Halima (Rachida Brakni), who use the practices of magic and spiritualism to cope with their husbands' departure to Spain. Whereas Halima places faith in her grandmother's (Fatma Abdessamie) spells and potions, Zeinab uses an age-old spiritual ritual to "put her unborn baby to sleep" until its father returns.⁴⁷

In her analysis of the film, Orlando focuses on the director's portrayal of rural village life and argues that the film depicts Morocco as a country that is characterised 'as much by masculine oppression as [...] marginalization, poverty and illiteracy'.⁴⁸ Taking a similar approach to Orlando, Lara N. Dotson-Renta argues that 'the film charts how the immigration intended to send back financial support to Morocco instead tears at the social and marital structures that organize the Moroccan nation'.⁴⁹ Likewise, Martin claims that *L'Enfant endormi* 'shows how the initial male crossing of borders upsets traditional behaviours at home and leads to a series of transgressive acts by the women left behind'.⁵⁰ Developing the work of these three scholars, the following analysis argues that *L'Enfant endormi* constructs religion and spiritualism as embodied practices that not only control women's bodies and desires, but can be subverted to empower them as subjects of agency and resistance. In what follows, I provide an overview of the myth of the sleeping child, before examining how Kassari treats the potentially subversive themes of religion, spiritualism and the body in *L'Enfant endormi*.

⁴⁷ See below for further discussion of the myth of the sleeping child.

⁴⁸ Valérie Orlando, *Screening Morocco*, p. 140.

⁴⁹ Lara N. Dotson-Renta, *Immigration, Popular Culture and the Re-Routing of European Muslim Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 84.

⁵⁰ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 161.

The myth of the sleeping child (or *rāged*) refers to an ancient mystical belief that women can delay the birth of their babies by up to several years at a time. Though this myth counteracts the discoveries of science and embryological biology, it is supported by all four Sunnī law schools as it enables Islamic scholars and jurists to alleviate doubt in cases of uncertain paternal heritage.⁵¹ For instance, if a woman is divorced, repudiated, widowed, abandoned or has been unfaithful, the myth of the sleeping child can be invoked to assign paternity to the deceased or departed husband and thereby save the mother from the social shame of being accused of committing *zina* (adultery or sex outside of marriage).⁵² Rather than stemming from Islamic scholars' disregard for the findings of science and embryology, the myth of the sleeping child thus emerged as a means to counter the harsh patriarchal laws that deny illegitimate children the right to inherit, brand women as adulteresses and bring shame upon men and their families.

Before the colonial era, family law codes in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco all supported the idea that a pregnancy could last for up to five years at a time.⁵³ Following colonisation, however, Western scientific views began to penetrate the Islamic world and the notion of an elongated pregnancy was rejected as 'yet another example of the "backwardness" of the subject peoples' in the colonial stronghold.⁵⁴ In order to offset the increasing popularity of such views, a number of Muslim scholars re-appropriated the myth of the sleeping child and used it to highlight the Maghreb's cultural distinction from France and the West.⁵⁵ They argued that Western medicine could not be trusted as it failed to include non-Western women in

⁵¹ Susan Gilson Miller, 'Sleeping Fetus: Overview', in *Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures: Family, Body, Sexuality and Health*, ed. by Suad Joseph (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), pp. 421-24 (p. 421).

⁵² Gilson Miller, p. 421.

⁵³ Gilson Miller, p. 421.

⁵⁴ Gilson Miller, p. 421.

⁵⁵ Gilson Miller, p. 422.

its data and because it overlooked local women's proficiency with herbs and potions.⁵⁶ Not only did these scholars use Maghrebi women's social practices and bodily behaviours to articulate the authority of indigenous religious ideologies, but they positioned their bodies as 'the background against which a new symbolic discourse of cultural difference was established'.⁵⁷

Despite fierce defence of the myth of the sleeping child during the colonial era, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco all re-wrote their laws concerning the permissible length of a woman's pregnancy following de-colonisation. Whereas Algeria placed a limit of ten months on the legal period of gestation, Morocco and Tunisia minimised their maximum legislative limit to a period of up to one year in normal cases and five years in the case of a repudiated or divorced woman.⁵⁸ Despite these judicial changes, however, Gilson Miller points out that, 'in the popular mind and at the level of social practice, the belief in the "sleeping fetus" persisted, often associated with false pregnancies, sterility, the onset of menopause and the loss of reproductive powers'.⁵⁹ Nowadays, rather than acting as a marker of cultural specificity or local authenticity, the myth of the sleeping child works to protect women from strict patriarchal laws by 'giving them the benefit of the doubt in cases of questionable paternity, providing them with male protection, and granting the child the right to inherit'.⁶⁰ In this respect, although the myth of the sleeping child enables women to counter the harsh patriarchal and religious laws that constrain their sexual identities and agency, it could also be understood as an instance of collective "bad faith" insofar as it upholds dominant negative ideologies and reinstates the authority of the hegemonic social order.

⁵⁶ Gilson Miller, p. 422.

⁵⁷ Gilson Miller, p. 422.

⁵⁸ Gilson Miller, p. 422.

⁵⁹ Gilson Miller, p. 422.

⁶⁰ Gilson Miller, p. 421.



Figure 10. The opening shot of *L'Enfant endormi*

In *L'Enfant endormi*, Kassari refuses to pass judgement on the veracity of this myth and, instead, focuses on its capacity to both reinforce and subvert the patriarchal discourses that govern women's corporeal behaviours in (rural) Moroccan society. The oppressive nature of these discourses is evident from the outset of the film, which begins with a marriage ceremony that restricts the bride's corporeal mobility and agency. The film opens with a stylistically arresting shot that is filmed from behind the gauze of Zeinab's bridal veil or *aâbroq*. Like the bride, we see three young girls looking in the direction of the camera, before a woman in a red dress (Halima) enters, rebukes the girls for staring and lifts the bride's *aâbroq* to give her a sip of water. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of the two young women and a short dialogue ensues, before Halima replaces Zeinab's veil and leaves to attend to her husband outside. The hazy quality of this opening shot enables it to be read in terms of Marks' work on haptic cinema, in which she defines a haptic image as one in which 'the eye is compelled to "touch" an object' and the spectator

is prevented from perceiving through visual processes alone.⁶¹ As outlined in Chapter Two, Marks views haptic cinema as less objectifying because it undermines spectatorial authority and allows the image to retain a sense of its unknowability. In *L'Enfant endormi*, Kassari's haptic opening shot not only functions to align the spectator with Zeinab's objectified position, but destabilises our ability to understand the scene from a detached, omniscient or objective point-of-view. Like the films studied in Chapter Two, this unusual opening image breaks down intercultural barriers and encourages the (Western) spectator to empathise with the central heroine's lived and embodied experience of objectification and corporeal immobility.

If this opening shot enables the viewer to experience Zeinab's discomfort in a more intimate and embodied way, the following scenes suggest that the mystical traditions of her community impede her bodily mobility and place restrictions on her autonomy. Not only must Zeinab stay in the same place until the *guérisseur* (healer) arrives to purify her body, but she is not allowed to leave the room to relieve herself without permission or an escort. The young heroine's physical immobility is brought into sharp relief in the scene in which Halima's daughter, Siham (Nermine Elhaggar), comes to see her and asks whether she will ever be able to move again. Laughing, Zeinab says: '[o]f course I will. Just not today'. Though Siham's questions are comical, they also contain a serious undertone insofar as they anticipate the permanent state of stasis in which Zeinab finds herself after her husband leaves the village to find work in Spain. In fact, as Dotson-Renta observes, the departure of her husband 'places the life of the young Zeinab into a state of perpetual pause. Rather than affirm a future life together, Zeinab's marriage makes

⁶¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 173.

her a placeholder for her husband's family, a kind of collateral asset to ensure his future return'.⁶² This point is underscored in the later scene in which the blind grandmother chides her daughter (Khamisa Abdessamie) for using her daughter-in-law as a pawn to guarantee the certainty of her son's return: '[w]hat an idea, marrying the night before he leaves the country. What life can that girl expect? She's had just enough of him to be hurt. Before we used to marry our children to be rid of them. Now we do it to make sure they'll return'. From as early as the opening scenes, *L'Enfant endormi* thus suggests that dominant patriarchal and mystical traditions are not only experienced in material terms, but operate through Zeinab's body to regulate her physical movements and (in)actions. Whereas Kamel's enforced exile impedes his ability to move and interact in the world in *Bled number one*, Zeinab is forced into a position of physical immobility because of the patriarchal religious traditions of her community in *L'Enfant endormi*.

In addition to delimiting Zeinab's physical mobility and agency, the wedding ceremony also foregrounds the extent to which women's bodies are envisioned as vehicles for the perpetuation of mystical beliefs surrounding the sanctity of marriage in rural Moroccan society. In the scene in which the *guérisseur* arrives to purify Zeinab's body, her nervousness is articulated corporeally and she stands at the back of the room with her shoulders hunched and her eyes cast down towards the ground. Not unlike the rest of the marriage ritual, the purification rite is enacted on and through Zeinab's body, such that the *guérisseur* tells her to walk over some slabs of wood several times, recite a prayer and bathe in a bucket of blessed water. As Zeinab undresses, Kassari's camera moves away from a focus on her naked body to concentrate on the shadows of the women on the wall behind them. Like in the first

⁶² Dotson-Renta, p. 86.

sequence, this mode of representation creates a haptic viewing space that not only undermines attempts at visual mastery, but protects the heroine's body from the eroticising and/or exoticising gaze of the non-diegetic spectator. As Martin explains, Kassari's camera manages to '[point] to the presence of the female body and [protect] it from the public eye [...] The female body is not fetishized but appears in its blurry entirety'.⁶³ Not only does this scene avoid objectifying the central heroine, but it demonstrates the extent to which Zeinab experiences symbolic discourses related to matrimony and female chastity at the level of her body. Throughout the marriage ritual, she is made to embody the spiritual codes of her society and her body is constructed as a canvas for the intersection of dominant ideologies related to gender, spirituality and patriarchy in rural Moroccan society.



Figure 11. Halima undresses Zeinab during a marriage ritual in *L'Enfant endormi*

If the spiritual practices of the community are portrayed in patriarchal terms in these opening scenes, *L'Enfant endormi* also constructs mysticism as a feminine

⁶³ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 178.

practice that provides the women of the village with a means to deal with their pain following their husbands' departure for Spain. In her work on mysticism in the Maghreb, Nedjma Plantade acknowledges the definitive 'role played by women in the production of magical discourses and practices [...] since antiquity'.⁶⁴ Though magic and spiritualism are disapproved of in many orthodox religious circles, Plantade argues that women 'invested with special powers allowing them to foresee the future (divination) or to act upon it (magic)' can be found throughout history and are still respected today.⁶⁵ Similar to Plantade, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum looks at Berber communities in the Maghreb and argues that Berber '[w]omen's spiritual fulfilment is not founded in sacred texts', but expressed in their daily lives and 'imbued with spiritual bonds and feelings of awe, compassion and love'.⁶⁶ In *L'Enfant endormi*, the grandmother embodies the figure of the mystic and is constructed as a kind of soothsayer who uses magic, ritual and superstition to guide the women of the village in their daily lives and decisions. Though she is blind, Dotson-Renta argues that 'the grandmother [...] is the one to "see" situations most clearly'.⁶⁷ In one scene, she concocts a potion to help Halima recover from a state of possession, whilst elsewhere she uses magic to predict whether the men have arrived safely at their destination. In this latter scene, Kassari's use of shadowy lighting, intimate camerawork and close-ups of the grandmother's hands and *misbaha* (prayer beads) invokes an embodied response on the part of the spectator that invites her/him to empathise with the faith the illiterate women place in more sensuous and superstitious modes of knowing. In contrast to the earlier marriage sequences, these

⁶⁴ Nedjma Plantade, 'North Africa', in *Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures: Family, Body, Sexuality and Health*, pp. 21-22 (p. 21).

⁶⁵ Plantade, p. 22.

⁶⁶ Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *The Future Has an Ancient Heart: The Legacy of Caring, Sharing, Healing and Vision from the Primordial African Mediterranean to Occupy Everywhere* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2012), p. 86. Google ebook.

⁶⁷ Dotson-Renta, p. 86.

scenes construct mysticism as an embodied practice that helps the women of the village to deal with the abrupt and potentially permanent disappearance of their fathers, husbands and sons.

In addition to providing a palliative function for the women, the practices of mysticism and superstition contribute to what Dotson-Renta refers to as the film's 'curious dimension of time'.⁶⁸ Like *Bled number one* and *La Graine et le mulet*, *L'Enfant endormi* eschews objective clock-time in favour of a more spiritual mode of temporality that foregrounds waiting and inertia, and is structured around ritualistic practices and the body. This spiritual dimension of time resonates with Marks' discoveries in *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, in which she claims that a number of early Islamic intellectuals developed theories of perception as 'simultaneously rational and subjective'.⁶⁹ According to Marks, the classical Islamic philosopher and mathematician, Abu 'Ali al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham, posited a theory of perception as embodied and subjective that was 'revived with remarkable fidelity in Bergson's philosophy' years later.⁷⁰ In *L'Enfant endormi*, Kassari arguably exposes the continuities between Eastern and Western theories of perception through her film's emphasis on the subjective, yet spiritual dimension of time for the women in the village. Not only do long takes with little action or dialogue convey the protracted nature of time in the village, but repeated images of the women listening to the grandmother's spells and incantations construct their mountain hamlet as a space that functions according to a more mystical temporal order. In parallel with both ancient Islamic philosophy and Bergsonian conceptualisations of time, the film thus creates a subjective temporal dimension that operates in accordance with the women's spiritual rituals and mystical traditions.

⁶⁸ Dotson-Renta, p. 89.

⁶⁹ Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, p. 62.

⁷⁰ Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, p. 65.

If *L'Enfant endormi* constructs time as spiritual and experiential, it also illustrates the extent to which the women live in a perpetual state of stasis since the departure of their husbands and sons. In a similar manner to *Bled number one*, extended takes emphasise the slow passage of time for the women in the village, but also the extent to which their lives are on pause until their loved ones return to their families and their homeland. While these filming techniques convey the women's lived and embodied experiences of time, they also contribute to a vision of Morocco as a static space that exists outside of modernity and is shrouded in mysticism, tradition and superstitious practices. This point is reinforced in the scenes in which bursts of modernity interrupt the static and repetitive nature of the women's daily lives. Whereas Halima hides a packet of contraceptive pills in her hut, the villagers receive videotapes that contain updates on the men's experiences in Spain. In a similar manner to *Quand les hommes pleurent*, Kassari uses the videotapes to foreground the poverty, unemployment and exclusion suffered by the men in the Spanish host land; however, by contrast to her earlier documentary, Kassari quickly shifts her focus back to the women and foregrounds their disappointment with the videotapes as a means of communication. Whereas Halima's husband refuses to speak to her, the rest of the men appear dejected, demotivated and self-conscious in front of the camera's lens. As Martin explains, 'the mostly illiterate, modest men [...] do not have the proper codes at their disposal for such an asynchronous and public conversation'.⁷¹ Consequently, whereas the women's ritualistic practices enable them to feel a sense of connection with their menfolk, this abstract and disembodied mode of communication is alienating and extinguishes any real chance of communication or dialogue.

⁷¹ Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 181.

If Kassari's filming techniques convey the material reality of the women's lived experiences of loss, Martin argues that their bodies 'start to express psychosomatic symptoms of their longing and solitude'.⁷² Whereas the mother's grief consumes her body and she dies, Halima misses her husband so much that it causes her to feel a pain in her stomach. She states: 'there are nights like this when it brings a pain to my belly. I could howl like a wolf'. The fact that this pain occurs at the symbolic site of Halima's womb suggests that the men's migration has destroyed interpersonal relations and impeded the continuation of familial lines. This latter point is reinforced in a later sequence in which Halima embraces one of the few remaining village men because she is desperate for some form of physical affection and love. Tragically, however, Halima is witnessed by members of her husband's family who beat her for betraying their son and lock her away from the rest of the community. Like Louisa in *Bled number one*, Halima is forced to bear the weight of dominant patriarchal and religious traditions upon her body; however, by contrast to Louisa, Halima (re)gains control over her body by asking her husband's relatives for a divorce and leaving the village to return to her immediate family. In a similar way to *Bled number one*, *L'Enfant endormi* thus uses Halima's mistreatment at the hands of her extended family to criticise the manner in which dominant religious discourses on honour and shame continue to operate at the level of women's bodies in (rural) Moroccan society.

Whereas Halima's extended family beats her and controls her physical movements, Zeinab's overbearing mother-in-law coerces her into prolonging her pregnancy by putting her unborn baby to sleep. She takes Zeinab to a *marabout* (holy man) who exercises control over her body by giving her a small copper

⁷² Martin, *Screens and Veils*, p. 170.

talisman to prevent the birth of her baby until her husband returns. Despite Zeinab's initial acceptance of the myth of the sleeping child, the final scene of the film shows her rejecting the patriarchal authority of her community and (re)gaining control over her identity through her body. She receives a letter from her husband instructing her to awaken her sleeping foetus; however, rather than obeying her spouse's orders, Zeinab refuses to awaken the unborn baby and washes her talisman away into the river. The scene begins with Zeinab standing alone in the vast mountainous landscape. The camera then cuts to a close-up of her hands opening a small copper encasement, before she drops her talisman into the river and watches it drift away downstream. The ambient sound of the river and the wind elicits a sensory engagement with the image that invites the spectator to share Zeinab's subjective experience of the world around her, but also creates a kind of mimetic compassion for the heroine as she watches her talisman disappear into the distance. For Zeinab, this rupture with the myth of the sleeping child is nostalgic and symbolises the end of her period of interminable waiting; however, as Orlando explains, it also 'permits her to assert her independence over her body and her destiny. In the end, it is through [...] the women's challenge of the validity of mythical belief and its power over them, that Halima and Zeinab claim their individuality and *personhood*' (emphasis in the original).⁷³ In a similar manner to Halima, Zeinab subverts the spiritual practices of her community and (re)asserts a sense of her autonomy through her body. At the end of the narrative, both heroines (re)gain control over their bodies by resisting the dominant patriarchal and mystical traditions that govern their corporeal identities and agency.

⁷³ Orlando, *Screening Morocco*, p. 143.

Veiled Desires in Aziz Salmi's *Amours voilées*

By contrast to *L'Enfant endormi*, Aziz Salmi's debut feature-length film, *Amours voilées*, is a romantic melodrama that tells the story of five educated and independent middle-class women from Casablanca. Unlike *L'Enfant endormi*, *Amours voilées* did not receive a distributor for circulation abroad and was primarily disseminated amongst the young, increasingly secular, urban population of contemporary Morocco. Upon its release, the film sparked massive controversy because of its stark portrayal of a veiled Muslim woman engaging in sex outside of marriage and during the holiest month of the Muslim calendar. Despite its controversial content, however, *Amours voilées* was deemed suitable for release by the *Centre Cinématographique Marocain* (CCM) and proved extremely popular in Morocco where it currently 'holds the record for the highest number of ticket sales for a Moroccan film'.⁷⁴ The film's popularity notwithstanding, its sensationalist plotline provoked the condemnation of a number of Islamist groups and the Islamist MP, Abdelbari Zemzi, called for it to be banned on the grounds that it was blasphemous and denigrated the image of veiled Muslim women. Though he had not seen the film, Zemzi campaigned for:

la suppression de tout ce qui, dans le film, contribue à la déformation de l'image de la femme voilée. On ne peut [pas] accepter que ce film véhicule un appel à l'abandon du voile [...] Je me demande si l'on a le droit d'utiliser l'argument de la liberté pour porter préjudice à la réputation du voile. Toute fille, voilée ou pas, est exposée à l'erreur.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Valérie K. Orlando, 'Women, Religion, and Sexuality in Contemporary Moroccan Film: Unveiling the Veiled in *Hijab al-Hob* (*Veils of Love*, 2000)', *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, 2 (2013), 106-23 (p. 119). Salmi was arguably able to release such a provocative film because of the modifications to the *Mudawanna* in 2004 and as a result of the relaxation of the laws surrounding censorship in the early 2000s. Other equally provocative Moroccan films include *Les Yeux secs*, dir. by Narjiss Nejjar (Pierre Grise Distribution, 2004) and *Marock*.

⁷⁵ Abdelbari Zemzi, 'Abdelbari Zemzi: "Le film porte atteinte à l'image des femmes voilées"', *Aujourd'hui: Le Maroc* (2009) <<http://www.aujourd'hui.ma/une/focus/abdelbari-zemzmi-%C2%ABle-film-porte-atteinte-a-l-image-des-femmes-voilees%C2%BB-61221#.VffVzPn6FNp>> [accessed 9 September 2015].

Tapping into contemporary debates on women and the veil, Zemzi argued that Salmy's film was underpinned by Western ideals and deformed the image of Islam through its representation of a veiled Muslim woman having sex outside of marriage. In response, Salmy stated that he had not intended to distort the image of Islam, but that he wanted to create a positive discussion about the tensions between tradition and modernity, women, Islam and freedom of expression in modern-day Moroccan society. This analysis examines *Amours voilées* in light of these debates and the changing attitudes to women and their bodies brought about by the modifications to the *Mudawanna* in 2004. It argues that *Amours voilées* criticises the manner in which dominant Islamic discourses operate through women's bodies to impose restrictions on their corporeal desires and individuality. At the same time, however, this analysis queries the extent to which Salmy's vision of female empowerment through the body is couched in Western feminist notions of secularism, romance and emancipated female sexuality.

Amours voilées focuses on the character of Batoul (Hayet Belhaloufi), a twenty-eight-year-old paediatrician whose life is turned upside down when she meets an older man called Hamza (Younes Megri), and enters into a sexual relationship outside of marriage and during the holy month of Ramadan. Torn between her desires and her faith, Batoul attempts to end her relationship with Hamza, but is repeatedly pulled back to her lover until she discovers that she is pregnant at the end of the narrative. Despite professing his love for Batoul, Hamza absolves himself of any responsibility for their unborn baby and refuses to marry her at the end of the film. *Amours voilées* concludes with Batoul breaking dominant religious and societal conventions by deciding to raise her baby alone and out of wedlock. Like Zeinab in *L'Enfant endormi*, Batoul not only (re)claims her autonomy through her body, but

challenges dominant religious mores by following her own personal desires and not those of modern-day Moroccan society.

From the outset, *Amours voilées* foregrounds Batoul's strong religious convictions, but also her desire for individuality and self-expression. The film begins with Batoul walking through the corridors of the hospital where she works as a paediatrician; she then returns home to pray in the privacy of her own bedroom, before heading out to socialise with friends at a local café. These initial snapshots of Batoul's life not only subvert dominant (Western) clichés of Muslim women as submissive or oppressed, but portray her as a devout and educated young heroine who finds little difficulty in marrying her allegiance to her faith with her modern, urban lifestyle. Yet, despite the apparent ease with which Batoul unites tradition and modernity in these opening scenes, her chance encounter with Hamza soon causes her to experience a tension between her corporeal desires and the patriarchal stipulations of her faith. From their first date, Batoul finds herself attracted to the older man's cosmopolitanism and charm; however, as Orlando points out, she also feels 'conflicted and caught [...] between her own desires to be a free, independent woman, embracing all facets of her sexuality, and the taboos of traditional Moroccan culture'.⁷⁶ These opening scenes thus construct Batoul as a devout young woman who is torn between her religious convictions and a desire to express her (sexual) identity in terms that contradict the dominant Islamic models of femininity in contemporary Moroccan society.

This tension is exacerbated in the sequence in which Batoul's carnal desires prove stronger than the requirements of her faith and she sleeps with Hamza for the first time. Like the sequence in which Lilia and Chokri sleep together in *Satin rouge*,

⁷⁶ Orlando, 'Women, Religion, and Sexuality in Contemporary Moroccan Film', p. 114.

Salmy's phenomenological filming style conveys the sensuality and eroticism of the scene, but also the strength of Batoul's repressed corporeal desires. As outlined briefly in the introduction to this thesis, Sobchack draws upon phenomenological theory to argue that all films have the capacity to "move" and "touch" us bodily'.⁷⁷ For Sobchack, 'we do not experience any movie only through our eyes', but 'see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium'.⁷⁸ Like Marks, Sobchack views cinema as a multi-sensory and bodily medium; however, by contrast to Marks, Sobchack contends that 'all films engage the sense-making capacities of our bodies, as well as of our minds – albeit according to different ratios (or rationalities)' (emphasis in the original).⁷⁹ In the first sex scene in *Amours voilées*, Salmy uses one continuous take, soft lighting, intimate camerawork and a close-up of Hamza's hand stroking Batoul's chest to communicate the building sexual tension between his two central protagonists; however, these phenomenological filming techniques also encourage the spectator to experience a visceral empathy for Batoul as she abandons all reason and rationality and gives in to her corporeal desires for Hamza. Similar to Amari in *Satin rouge*, Salmy's phenomenological filming style conveys the force with which Batoul resists the stifling religious expectations of her society and begins to experience her body as a source of sensuality and pleasure.

If this scene constructs Batoul's body as a site of discontinuity between religion and desire, it also demonstrates the extent to which women's bodies are frequently positioned as vehicles for the negotiation of dominant religious ideals about honour and shame in contemporary Moroccan society. After Batoul and Hamza make love, Salmy cuts to an image of the older man lying naked on the bed,

⁷⁷ Sobchack, p. 58.

⁷⁸ Sobchack, p. 63.

⁷⁹ Sobchack, p. 62.

while Batoul sits alone, embarrassed and ashamed. The young heroine's sense of shame can be better understood using Sara Ahmed's work on emotionality and affect, in which she argues that shame is an embodied experience that is mediated through the body's comportment and 'impresses upon the skin, as an intensive feeling of the body "being against itself"'.⁸⁰ To a greater degree than the other emotions, shame is intersubjective as it relies on the presence of a real or imagined "other" who witnesses the supposedly reprehensible act. As Ahmed explains, '[s]hame as an emotion requires a witness: even if a subject feels shame when it is alone, it is the imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to itself'.⁸¹ In *Amours voilées*, Batoul sits at the end of the bed with her head bowed and her legs pulled in towards her chest in shame. Not only is her shame expressed corporeally, but her reaction to the loss of her virginity demonstrates the extent to which she has internalised dominant religious perspectives on chastity and the virginal female body. This scene thus constructs Batoul's shame as an embodied response that is displayed on the body and depends upon the presence of an (imaginary) "other"; however, it also criticises the manner in which dominant Islamic discourses envision women's bodies as repositories for honour and respectability in contemporary Moroccan society. Like *Bled number one* and *L'Enfant endormi*, *Amours voilées* thus illustrates the extent to which women's bodily behaviours and desires are controlled by dominant religious discourses in the patriarchal Islamic societies of the Maghreb.

⁸⁰ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 103.

⁸¹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 106.



Figure 12. Batoul and Hamza in the first lovemaking scene of *Amours voilées*

Batoul's sense of shame reaches a climax towards the middle of the narrative when she splits up with Hamza for a month over Ramadan. During this period, Batoul begins to wear the *hijab*, first to break the daily fast and then more frequently, until she is veiling on a regular basis. Despite the increasingly prominent presence of the veil in the film's narrative, Salmy argues that he did not intend to make a film about veiling, but that 'le foulard n'était qu'un prétexte. Je n'avais pas envie de faire un spectacle sur le foulard islamique pour ne pas tomber dans la récupération idéologique'.⁸² In key conversations between Batoul and her friends, Salmy thus foregrounds his heroines' lived experiences of veiling in order to divorce the veil from its solely religious origins and demonstrate its myriad social and cultural meanings in urban Moroccan society. Whereas Najwa (Nora Skali) sees veiling as a

⁸² Mahmoud Jemni, 'Entretien de Mahmoud Jemni avec Aziz Salmy, cinéaste: "Parler du dilemme d'une jeune musulmane marocaine d'aujourd'hui"', *Africine* (2010) <<http://www.africine.org/?menu=art&no=9174>> [accessed 7 September 2015]. Despite Salmy's protests that his film is not about veiling, the opening credits contain a silhouetted image of a veiled woman, suggesting that the veil is, in fact, an important factor in the film's narrative.

means of appearing respectful and finding a husband, Batoul uses the veil to express an allegiance to her faith and as a sign of her repentance. By contrast to both Najwa and Batoul, Houyem (Saadia Ladib) claims that she would rather shave her head than wear a veil and dons a wig when she goes out so that she can escape her daily life as a divorcée and mother. Rather than fixing the veil as a marker of religion or oppression, *Amours voilées* offers a phenomenological exploration of veiling that illustrates the extent to which each individual character apprehends veiling differently depending upon her relationship to her body, her faith and her cultural identity. The film thus exemplifies El Guindi's argument that 'the veil is a complex symbol of many meanings. Emancipation can be expressed by wearing the veil or by removing it. It can be secular or religious. It can represent tradition or resistance'.⁸³

Despite Batoul's attempts at abstinence and repentance, Orlando argues that the young heroine's 'individualism and [...] desire to make love to Hamza [...] win out, and for a while she breaks all normative taboos'.⁸⁴ In a number of highly controversial scenes, Salmy shows the couple kissing and making love during the holy month of Ramadan. For instance, in the scene in which the lovers meet again, Hamza mocks Batoul and tells her that she looks like Mother Teresa, before kissing her passionately in the front of her car. Elsewhere, Hamza and Batoul have sex in the bathtub of a house that Hamza is decorating, whilst in the most controversial scene of the film they sleep together as the call to prayer sounds in the background. Though these sequences are sensationalist, they can also be seen to be subversive because of the emphasis they place on the body and desires of a young and highly devout Muslim woman.⁸⁵ In a similar way to Halima in *L'Enfant endormi*, *Amours*

⁸³ El Guindi, p. 172.

⁸⁴ Orlando, 'Women, Religion, and Sexuality in Contemporary Moroccan Film', p. 114.

⁸⁵ Orlando points out that Salmy gave the main part to an Algerian-French actress because he feared that a Moroccan woman would face too much criticism in her own country. See Orlando, 'Women,

voilées thus positions Batoul's body as a site through which it examines the tensions many Moroccan women face in reconciling a devotion to their religion with their personal behaviours and (sexual) desires.



Figure 13. Batoul and Hamza kiss as the call to prayer sounds in the background

This tension between religion and desire reaches a pinnacle in the film's final scenes when Batoul tells Hamza that she is pregnant. After Hamza refuses to marry her, Batoul smashes a mirror and storms out of his apartment, only to find herself caught in a lengthy traffic jam outside. Batoul's irritation is illustrated via her body's restiveness, whilst her sense of claustrophobia is articulated through the use of close-ups, the increasingly invasive sound of car horns and the discordant harmonies of the non-diegetic music. Like in the first sex scene, these filming techniques demonstrate the extent to which Batoul's distress is experienced corporeally, and also enable

Religion, and Sexuality in Contemporary Moroccan Film', p. 115. This seems to be a recurring pattern in contemporary Maghrebi cinemas, in which a number of lead roles have been played by Maghrebi-French actresses, including Lubna Azabal and Rachida Brakni.

Salmy to communicate her affective sense of claustrophobia to the film's audience. In the climax of the sequence, these sensations become so overwhelming that Batoul faints, before waking up in a hospital room where she reveals the truth of her love affair to her family and friends. From outside the hospital room, Hamza hears Batoul rejecting male patriarchal authority and resolving to raise her baby alone and out of wedlock. Like Zeinab at the end of *L'Enfant endormi*, Batoul not only (re)asserts a sense of her autonomy through her body, but rejects the dominant patriarchal and religious mores of contemporary Moroccan society. In the end, *Amours voilées* not only criticises the obligations placed upon women to embody the social, religious and cultural values of their societies, but shows its central heroine overcoming these obstacles by (re)claiming control over her body and her future.

Despite the subversive nature of the film's ending, a number of bloggers and reviewers have questioned the extent to which it adopts a Western feminist perspective that posits liberated sexuality as a marker of female emancipation.⁸⁶ While the film's *Sex and the City*-esque narrative and soft-rock soundtrack imply that it is influenced by the conventions of dominant Western television and cinema, Salmy arguably avoids imposing a Western feminist agenda onto the Moroccan context by examining the themes of religion and the body against the backdrop of current debates surrounding tradition and modernity in contemporary Moroccan society. Furthermore, the fact that *Amours voilées* remains the most successful film to date at the Moroccan box-office suggests that its representation of the tensions between religion and desire resonated with Morocco's young urban population. Consequently, although *Amours voilées* could be seen to promote Western feminist

⁸⁶ See, for instance, Ethar El-Katatney, 'What's Love Got to Do With It? *Amour Voilées*' Representations of Love and the Veil', *Muslimah Media Watch*, (2009), <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2009/03/hijab-al-hob-love-sex-and-the-veil/>> [accessed 20 September 2015].

ideals, its (sensationalist) message clearly seemed to speak to many in a society in which gender roles are being questioned and Islamic family law is under attack from growing numbers of feminist factions and activists.

‘Tu es une femme, un tabou, un corps interdit’: Uncovering Tunisian Women’s Bodies in Nouri Bouzid’s *Millefeuille*

Whereas *Amours voilées* focuses on the corporeal desires of a veiled Moroccan woman, *Millefeuille* explores the themes of (un)veiling, religion, secularism and the body amongst women in contemporary Tunisian society. Like Kassari, Bouzid studied at the INSAS in Brussels, before returning to Tunisia to teach at the film school, *L’École des Arts et du cinéma* (EDAC), in Tunis. Today, he is celebrated both inside and outside of Tunisia and was awarded the *Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur* at the Cannes film festival in 2011.⁸⁷ In his overview of Bouzid’s career to date, Martin Stollery argues that Bouzid’s cinema has often been referred to as a ‘cinema of the body’, not only because of his sensual filming style, but also because of his focus on characters in pain ‘or freeing their bodies for dance, comedy, or physical expressions of liberation’.⁸⁸ As mentioned in the introduction, *L’Homme des cendres* focused on the sexual exploitation of young boys. His next film, *Bezness*, looked at male prostitution and the exploitative nature of the Tunisian tourist industry.⁸⁹ More recently, *Making of* has adopted a self-reflexive (and somewhat didactic) mode of representation to explore the impact of fundamentalism on Tunisia’s disenfranchised male youth. Bouzid’s oeuvre tends to examine the

⁸⁷ Stollery points out that this award ‘provoked a flurry of comment in Tunisian online forums [...] about the rights and wrongs of him accepting an honour from France, Tunisia’s former coloniser, and a country which was slow to recognise the legitimacy of the Tunisian people’s uprising’. See: Martin Stollery, ‘Nouri Bouzid’, *Senses of Cinema*, 68 (2013), <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/great-directors/nouri-bouzid/>> [accessed 9 September 2015].

⁸⁸ Stollery.

⁸⁹ *Bezness*, dir. by Nouri Bouzid (Amorces Diffusion, 1992).

themes of masculinity and male sexuality; however, his most recent film, *Millefeuille*, has foregrounded the prominent role of women during Tunisia's fight for independence from authoritarian rule.⁹⁰ Set against the backdrop of the recent Tunisian revolution, *Millefeuille* focuses on one veiled heroine named Aïcha (Souhir Ben Amara) and one unveiled heroine named Zaineb (Nour Meziou), both of whom are struggling for the right to dress and define their bodies as they please. However, if Bouzid's film shows its central heroines fighting for their right to self-autonomy over their bodies, this analysis questions the extent to which it portrays Islam as a patriarchal religion that delimits women's liberties and undermines their freedom of expression.

Veiling in Tunisia: A Contested History

In her recent article on veiling in Tunisia, Sahar Ghumkhor argues that Tunisia has often been 'regarded as one of the most westernized Muslim countries' and that veiling has been an issue of contention for successive Tunisian leaders.⁹¹ During the colonial era, the nationalist movement encouraged women to wear a *safsari* (a veil that covers the head and body) in order to symbolise a Muslim and national identity, as well as their resistance to the hegemonic colonial order. Following independence in 1956, Ghumkhor argues that the new Tunisian government began a campaign for reform that was conceptualised in terms of the French *mission civilisatrice* and implied that "progress" and "modernity" could only be achieved through westernization'.⁹² Like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, Habib Bourguiba encouraged women to abandon their *safsaris* in

⁹⁰ *Millefeuille* won the award for Best Director from the Arab World at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival in 2012.

⁹¹ Sahar Ghumkhor, 'The Veil and Modernity', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 14 (2012), 493-514 (p. 493).

⁹² Ghumkhor, p. 494.

favour of the *hijab* and passed a law that placed restrictions on women's capacity to wear the veil in public roles and schools.⁹³ For Bourguiba, unveiling was synonymous with emancipation and the veil was treated as 'an embarrassing national burden that needed to be cast aside in order to "modernize" Tunisia'.⁹⁴ The post-independence Tunisian government not only rejected the veil as a symbol of backwardness and oppression, but also couched its attempts at modernisation within the Western Enlightenment values of secularism and individuality.⁹⁵

When Ben Ali came to power in 1987, he continued to undermine the authority of the religious establishment in Tunisia by banning, arresting and torturing members of Islamist groups, such as the moderate Islamist party Al-Nahda. He viewed the veil as an obstacle to attempts to "modernise" the country and presented the veiled female body as 'a visible manifestation of socially backward Islamic movements and the so-called "fanatics", like Al-Nahda, who had corrupted Islam'.⁹⁶ Despite Ben Ali's attempts to minimise the presence of the veil in Tunisia, recent years have seen an increase in the number of veiled Muslim women on Tunisian streets. Referred to as *muhajjabah*, these women often choose to wear the veil as a means to express their faith and criticise what they view as the implicitly Western discourses of Tunisia's secular government.⁹⁷ Following Ben Ali's removal from power in the spring of 2011, this revival continued and Ghumkhor states that it 'is estimated that up to 20 per cent of Tunisian women [currently] wear the hijab'.⁹⁸

⁹³ Ghumkhor, p. 494.

⁹⁴ Ghumkhor, p. 494.

⁹⁵ Ghumkhor, p. 500.

⁹⁶ Ghumkhor, p. 502.

⁹⁷ Ghumkhor, p. 508.

⁹⁸ Ghumkhor, p. 506.

Gender, the Body and Secularism in *Millefeuille*

Set against the backdrop of the Tunisian revolution, *Millefeuille* contributes to debates on religion, secularism and the veil through its representation of two Tunisian women who are fighting for their right to dress and define their bodies as they choose. Whereas Aïcha finds herself being forced to unveil by her corrupt and chauvinistic boss (Hamdi Hadda), Zaineb faces increasing pressure from her mother (Sabah Bouzouita) and fundamentalist brother (Brahim Aloui) to adopt the *foulard* and quit her job as a waitress. In parallel with *L'Enfant endormi* and *Amours voilées*, both women reject dominant patriarchal and religious attempts to control them through their bodies; however, to a greater degree than the other two films studied in this chapter, *Millefeuille* uses its central protagonists' lived and embodied experiences of Islam to articulate a plea for a more secular society in which women are able to define their identities irrespective of the patriarchal Islamic order.

From the outset, *Millefeuille* foregrounds its central heroines' subjective experiences of their bodies, but also the extent to which they are constructed as objects by dominant patriarchal and religious discourses in contemporary Tunisian society. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the notion of the body as both object and subject has been explored by Elizabeth Grosz in her book, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, in which she argues that the body should not be understood as an object because it 'provides the very horizon and perspectival point which places me in the world and makes relations between me, other objects, and other subjects possible'.⁹⁹ Like Grosz, Sobchack believes that our bodies are usually experienced as sensate and subjective realities for the self, but claims that their objectification by others can lead us to view them as ““things”” that need to be

⁹⁹ Grosz, p. 86.

‘seen, managed and mastered’.¹⁰⁰ In such cases, Sobchack believes that ‘our *epistemological* relation to our own bodies’ is rendered ‘impoverished, alienated, and two-dimensional’ (emphasis in the original).¹⁰¹

In *Millefeuille*, Bouzid constructs his central heroines as embodied subjects who experience dominant patriarchal and religious attempts to objectify them in profoundly material terms. From the first few scenes in the narrative, Bouzid demonstrates how dominant Islamic discourses reduce women to their bodies and limit their capacity to act as thinking, bodily subjects. In an early sequence, the two young heroines walk past a series of roadblocks and insurgent groups to Zaineb’s house where they discover that her fundamentalist brother, Hamza, has escaped from prison during the riots. From the moment Hamza returns, his relationship with Zaineb is fraught and he attempts to control her corporeal movements and actions in the name of his faith and the dominant Islamic discourse. Not only does Hamza criticise Zaineb’s fashion studies as ‘*idolâtrie*’, but he chastises her for using social media and rebukes her for taking part in the street protests.¹⁰² Later in the narrative, we learn that Hamza was in a relationship with Aïcha before his arrest and further indoctrination in prison. Since his release, Hamza is unable to see beyond his conservative religious views and reduces Aïcha to her body when he tells her that she is just ‘*une femme, un tabou, un corps interdit*’. Elsewhere, he associates her with the space of the nation and says: ‘[I]e pays est malade de péchés, d’immoralité, de dépravations, et toi aussi’! Through the character of Hamza, Bouzid thus demonstrates how conservative Islamic discourses not only reduce women to their bodies, but oblige them to embody the religious values of their societies through their physical demeanour and actions.

¹⁰⁰ Sobchack, p. 182.

¹⁰¹ Sobchack, p. 182.

¹⁰² As Islam is a monotheistic and aniconic religion, idolatry is forbidden and seen as a major sin.

If Zaineb's brother embodies the intolerant discourses of the Islamist movement, her fiancé, Brahim (Lofti Abdelli), symbolises that of Tunisia's corrupt, westernised elite, who profited under Ben Ali, but cut their losses following his removal from power. Brahim is deceitful and self-centred and switches his ideological standpoint depending upon who is in power. Unlike the other characters in the narrative, he speaks primarily in French, drives a French car and is obsessed with Western commodities and appearances. Despite his apparent liberalism, however, Brahim offers one of the most conservative voices in the narrative and treats women as little more than pawns in male patriarchal power games. In one early scene, Brahim picks Zaineb up from the bus stop because he does not want other men looking at her in public. He views Zaineb's body as his personal possession and tells her that any man who so much as looks at her is disrespecting his honour, stating: '[é]coute, celui qui te touche touche à ma dignité'. Elsewhere, Brahim senses that Al-Nahda is gaining support and decides to veil Zaineb's body as a symbol of his allegiance to the Islamist party. Though Zaineb's father (Fathi Messelmani) tells Brahim that he must speak to his daughter directly, Hamza agrees that his sister should adopt the veil to protect her from moral depravation: '[e]lle n'a pas le choix. Il faut l'imposer par force [...] L'essentiel c'est de la protéger de la dépravation morale'. This scene thus demonstrates the extent to which dominant religious discourses objectify women's bodies and position them as sites for the negotiation of (male) ideological authority. Though Brahim hides behind a "modernist" agenda, he actually harbours some of the most conservative views in the film and reinforces a notion of women's bodies as the property of their patrilineal kin.

If these scenes suggest that dominant patriarchal and religious discourses reduce women to their bodies, Bouzid also foregrounds his central heroines' lived and embodied experiences of Islam through Zaineb's reactions to her mother's demands that she veil. Mobilising dominant patriarchal discourses, Zaineb's mother tells her daughter that without the veil nobody will be able to tell whether she is pure or impure and locks her in her bedroom so that she can reconsider her refusal to veil. Once inside her room, Zaineb's distress is displayed on and through her body, such that she paces around the room nervously, shouts and pounds on her bedroom door frantically. As Zaineb panics, Bouzid uses close-ups and extreme close-ups, dark lighting, frenzied camerawork, restricted camera angles and tightly framed spaces to construct her bedroom as a suffocating space and to communicate a sense of her (corporeal) constriction and claustrophobia. Thus, in parallel with the marriage sequences in *L'Enfant endormi*, Bouzid's filming techniques allow the spectator to "feel" a sense of Zaineb's entrapment, but also demonstrate the extent to which patriarchal Islamic discourses restrict women's capacity to interact with the world of objects and others.

If the first imprisonment sequence foregrounds Zaineb's corporeal immobility, the second one exacerbates a sense of her distress. The sequence begins with Zaineb's joy upon seeing her aunt Samia (Bouraouia Marzouk); however, when Zaineb reiterates her reluctance to veil, her mother and aunt lock her in her room and drug her with an opiate made out of poppy flowers.¹⁰³ In a series of highly distressing scenes, close-ups of Zaineb's tearful face express her suffering, whilst soft lighting, blurred images and elongated takes convey a sense of her lethargy and drowsiness. Furthermore, Bouzid's use of a series of close-ups of hands, the aroma

¹⁰³ These scenes draw a parallel with *Fleur d'oubli*, in which the central heroine becomes addicted to the opium her mother gives her to alleviate her post-natal depression. See: *Fleur d'oubli*, dir. by Selma Baccar (CINEX, 2005).

of a potion and the silky material of the headscarves creates a haptic aesthetic that pulls the spectator into a mimetic relationship with the image that invites her/him to feel a strong degree of compassion for the central protagonist's lived and embodied experiences of (enforced) veiling and (physical) entrapment.

If these filming techniques evoke empathy for Zaineb's experiences, they also risk compounding dominant (Western) fears of the veil as a regressive garment that is imposed upon women by oppressive patriarchal forces. Not only is Zaineb forcibly veiled by her mother and her aunt, but these scenes also establish an implicit connection between her imprisonment and the veil as an item of clothing that secludes women and restricts their corporeal capacities. In this respect, although Bouzid's phenomenological filming style creates empathy for Zaineb's lived and embodied experiences of enforced veiling, it also threatens to reinforce dominant (Western) perceptions of the veil as a garment that disempowers women and limits their capacity to act as free and self-determining subjects.

The longer Zaineb is imprisoned by her mother and aunt, the more she starts to experience her body as a site of alienation and physical confinement. As outlined in Chapter One, Sobchack argues that we usually live our bodies as a home-space that 'protects us and is familiar and intimately responsive to our intentions and desires'.¹⁰⁴ However, in cases of alienated embodiment, Sobchack claims that we begin to comprehend our bodies as a "prison-house" that entraps us, but is not our own.¹⁰⁵ In these inauspicious circumstances, Sobchack argues that 'our bodies seem neither the home nor hearth of our being but, instead, the property of another [...]' This is "the" body (perhaps ours, but not us) experienced as a containment cell that

¹⁰⁴ Sobchack, pp. 182-3.

¹⁰⁵ Sobchack, p. 183.

would inhibit our intentional movement and deny our volition'.¹⁰⁶ In parallel with Sobchack's theorising, Zaineb begins to experience her body as a kind of "prison-house" that disempowers her and hinders her physical capacities in the world. Not only does she feel like she is being suffocated ('vous m'étouffez'), but she begins to scratch the surface of her body in a desperate attempt to escape her own skin. In a similar manner to Louisa in *Bled number one*, Zaineb's experience of imprisonment is profoundly corporeal and she starts to live her body as a source of suffering and physical entrapment.



Figure 14. Zaineb's aunt attempts to veil her in *Millefeuille*

The heroine's sense of alienation and (corporeal) entrapment reaches a climax in a surreal, nightmarish sequence in which she appears to lose a sense of connection to the world around her. The scene begins with a reflected mirror image of Zaineb, curled up in a ball with her knees squeezed into her chest, rocking backwards and forwards. The camera then cuts to a series of dark, blurred and

¹⁰⁶ Sobchack, p. 184.

unintelligible images in which Zaineb's aunt attempts to cover her head with a scarf while Zaineb fights and screams desperately. The use of dark lighting, ambient sound and a series of close-ups of a mesh of hands, feet and faces not only undermines our ability to comprehend the scene visually, but encourages us to understand Zaineb's alienation through more intuitive and pre-reflective modes of knowing. Similar to the dreamlike sequences in *Bled number one*, these surreal scenes communicate Zaineb's growing sense of detachment and enable Bouzid to suggest that patriarchal attempts to control women's bodies can lead to physical as well as psychological trauma.

While Zaineb is being forcefully veiled by her mother and aunt, Aïcha comes under increasing pressure to remove her veil in the workplace and public spaces. Unlike Zaineb, Aïcha wears the veil voluntarily and claims that it is not political, but allows her to feel protected in (male) public spaces, stating: '[m]on voile ne parle pas politique [...] Ça évite les attouchements dans le bus'. The logic of Aïcha's argument is underscored in an earlier sequence in which a group of Islamists storm a bus stop and tell the women to go home because their presence in the street is shameful, shouting: '[p]echéresses! Salopes! Couvrez-vous! Mettez votre burqa'. Elsewhere, Aïcha accompanies Zaineb to her home so that she is not harassed for walking around in public unveiled. On the one hand, Aïcha's motivations for veiling illustrate Ahmed's argument that some Muslim women adopt the veil to avoid (male) physical harassment in the street.¹⁰⁷ On the other, the young heroine could be seen to be acting in "bad faith" because her behaviour fails to challenge the hegemony of the patriarchal Islamic order. Rather than confronting male sexual harassment, Aïcha's reasons for veiling effectively reinforce the restrictive

¹⁰⁷ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 223.

patriarchal norms that prevent women from entering (male) public spaces unless their “licentious” bodies are covered from sight.

In addition to deploying the veil to increase her mobility, Aïcha wears it at the local *pâtisserie* so that she can work in the kitchen and not as a waitress where she would be paraded as a sexual object by her chauvinistic boss. However, despite Aïcha’s attempts to avoid the objectifying male gaze, she repeatedly suffers the sexual advances of her boss who looks at her desirously and tells her that he wants her to unveil and work upstairs as a waitress, stating: ‘[c]’est l’occasion de sortir de ce trou, de voir un peu de lumière’. Upon hearing her boss’s request, Aïcha’s discomfort is expressed on and through her body’s surface, such that she shakes, before breaking down in tears and collapsing when her boss leaves the room. Whereas Aïcha’s response demonstrates the extent to which her distress is experienced corporeally, her boss’s comments associate unveiling with the (French) Enlightenment discourses of emancipation and freedom from oppression. By contrast to Zaineb, Bouzid thus uses the character of Aïcha to represent the lived and embodied experiences of women who choose to veil, but face increasing pressure from (secular) Tunisian society to unveil as a sign of their liberation and emancipation.

If Aïcha experiences anxiety at the prospect of unveiling, her distress reaches a climax in the sequence in which her boss tells her that he will fire her if she refuses to comply with his wishes. The scene begins with Aïcha looking at her reflection in a mirror as her co-workers slowly unravel her veil and put make-up on her face. The presence of a mirror illustrates the extent to which Aïcha’s identity is being defined for her, but also enables Bouzid to foreground her terrified reflection to the film’s spectators. Similar to Naïma in *Exils*, Aïcha’s fear can be understood through the

prism of Ahmed's work on emotions and affect, in which she argues that fear is an intense sensation that operates on the body's surface and through its physical (in)actions.¹⁰⁸ Like the experience of shame, Ahmed claims that fear causes an alteration in the body's comportment, such that '[o]ne sweats, one's heart races, one's whole body becomes a space of unpleasant intensity'.¹⁰⁹ To a greater degree than shame, fear can '[overwhelm] us and [push] us back with the force of its negation, which may sometimes involve taking flight, and other times may involve paralysis'.¹¹⁰ In the enforced unveiling sequence in *Millefeuille*, Aïcha's fear is conveyed through close-ups and extreme close-ups of her terrified face, but also via the modifications in her bodily behaviour, such that she jumps up from her seat in panic, destroys the kitchen and then collapses in a flood of tears and flour in her co-workers' arms. In parallel with Zaineb, Aïcha's experience of enforced unveiling is not coded as abstract or incorporeal, but is "felt" in physical as well as psychical terms.

While *Millefeuille* foregrounds Aïcha and Zaineb's lived and embodied experiences of (un)veiling, it also envisions them as allegories for the Tunisian nation on the brink of a revolution. In the same way as Lilia can be read as a precursor for the Tunisian uprising at the end of *Satin rouge*, Zaineb and Aïcha are repeatedly positioned as metaphors for a nation in turmoil in *Millefeuille*. Not only do the opening scenes link Aïcha's twenty-seventh birthday to the street protests and a new era in Tunisian history, but Zaineb is repeatedly pictured in red or with the Tunisian flag draped around her shoulders. Given their explicit association with the space of the nation, it is unsurprising that the two young heroines achieve independence from patriarchal rule at the same time as the Tunisian people attain

¹⁰⁸ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 65.

¹¹⁰ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 65.

their freedom from authoritarianism. Whereas Aïcha quits her job rather than removing her *foulard*, Zaineb refuses to veil and tells Brahim that she no longer wants to marry him. Similar to the heroines in *L'Enfant endormi* and *Amours voilées*, Aïcha and Zaineb reject patriarchal authority and (re)gain control over their subjectivities through their bodies. To a greater degree than the other films studied in this chapter, Bouzid uses his heroines' new-found independence to suggest that post-revolutionary Tunisia should be a nation where women are not made to embody the norms and values of their societies, but are granted autonomy over their bodies and desires.



Figure 15. Aïcha (left) and Zaineb (right) walk through the streets of post-revolutionary Tunisia unveiled

Though *Millefeuille* promotes female self-determination and political autonomy, it problematically suggests that these ideals are only achievable through a commitment to the dominant Western values of secularism and individuality. Despite Aïcha's wilful defence of the veil throughout the narrative, the final scene of the film shows her abandoning her *foulard* and walking through the streets of post-

revolutionary Tunis unveiled.¹¹¹ On the one hand, this scene indicates Bouzid's espousal of secularism as the keystone of an autonomous and egalitarian society; on the other, it associates unveiling with emancipation from a religious ideology that stifles women's freedoms and limits their capacity for self-expression. Like the post-colonial elite under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Bouzid not only reinforces simplistic stereotypes that associate veiling with oppression and the East, but unveils his central protagonist's body in order to signify his support for the secular values of Western modernity. More so than the other two films studied in this chapter, *Millefeuille* thus uses its central protagonists' lived and embodied experiences of veiling to articulate a (Western) secularist critique of Islam as a religion that suppresses freedom of expression and places limitations on women's capacity for self-determination. The film thus resonates with Charef's approach in *La Fille de Keltoum* insofar as it is underpinned by a dualistic logic that reinforces a notion of Western secular rationality as superior to the "irrationalism" and religiosity of Islam and the East.

Conclusion

Despite clear divergences in terms of content and context, these three films all construct Islam as a patriarchal religion that delimits women's movements and restricts their capacity to interact with the world of objects and others. Whereas *L'Enfant endormi* illustrates how ancient mystical traditions operate through women's bodies to confirm the authority of the patriarchal social order, *Amours*

¹¹¹ The film's ending is reminiscent of *Douce France*, dir. by Malik Chibane (MKL Distribution, 1996), in which the central heroine Farida (Fadila Belkebla) abandons the *hijab* she has defended throughout the narrative. On the one hand, Farida's decision to relinquish her veil can be read as a commitment to the French republican values of assimilation and *laïcité*; however, the young heroine's sorrow at the end of the film also implies that her decision stems from a painful realisation that the only way she will fit into French society is by discarding this symbol of her alterity.

voilées highlights the tensions between religion and desire in the urban topography of modern-day Casablanca. In a similar manner to these two films, *Millefeuille* examines the polemical issue of veiling and shows its central character entering into a state of severe disconnection from her body because of dominant patriarchal endeavours to force her to veil. Consequently, although these three films focus on different situations and spaces, they all use their heroines' day-to-day experiences to explore the material reality of women's lived experiences of religion in contemporary Islamic societies in the Maghreb.

However, if these films foreground women's lived and embodied experiences of Islam, they also show their central protagonists rejecting male patriarchal authority and regaining control over their identities through their bodies. Whereas *Millefeuille* shows its characters refusing Islamic sartorial codes and asserting their independence over their bodies, *L'Enfant endormi* and *Amours voilées* depict their central protagonists rejecting the authority of dominant religious beliefs and deciding whether or not to keep their babies on their own. In contrast to dominant negative stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed or subjugated, all three films construct their protagonists as agentic embodied subjects who resist dominant Islamic models of femininity and (re)gain control over their identities through their bodies.

Though these films offer nuanced representations of Muslim women, they arguably reinforce dominant negative visions of Islam as a patriarchal religion that is oppressive towards women and prevents them from acting as thinking, embodied subjects. In *L'Enfant endormi* and *Millefeuille*, the two central heroines are physically immobilised by their community's commitment to patriarchal religious traditions, whilst in *Amours voilées* Batoul experiences severe existential angst when she enters into a sexual relationship outside of marriage. While such negative

representations are arguably the result of films that are set in societies in which religion is imposed upon women (and men) rather than chosen, they also risk reinforcing dominant negative perceptions of Islam as a misogynistic religion that disempowers women and is enforced by tyrannical Islamic men. In this respect, although the three films studied in this chapter offer articulate and contextualised images of Muslim women, they nonetheless leave room for more balanced representations of Islam that include moderate manifestations and construct it as a religion that can enhance women's lives and be negotiated with their contemporary identities. Such representations would contribute meaningfully to debates on women and religion by constructing Islam as a set of beliefs that is not misogynistic or demonised, but has roots in egalitarianism and can be compatible with contemporary modes of being-in-the-world.

4. Embodiment, Sexuality and Space in Abdellah Taïa's *L'Armée du salut*, Rémi Lange's *Tarik el hob* and Amal Bedjaoui's *Un fils*

Introduction

In Chapter Three, I examined three films that show Maghrebi women rejecting patriarchal controls and refusing to embody the religious values of their societies through their bodies, dress and movements. Departing from a focus on women, this chapter examines three films that foreground men of Maghrebi heritage who desire other men and experience their bodies as sites of sexual non-conformity: *L'Armée du salut*, *Tarik el hob* and *Un fils*. It looks at films that are set in and between the countries of the Maghreb and France, and interrogate the impact of space upon their characters' sexual subjectivities and embodied identities. Following a similar pattern to previous chapters, I begin by providing an outline of how (male) same-sex desire has been treated in Islamic cultures and religion; then, I analyse in detail how my chosen films represent the intersections of corporeality, sexuality and space amongst men of Maghrebi heritage. In tandem with the wider aims of this thesis, this chapter examines the extent to which these films articulate sexual identity on and through the body and in relation to external factors, such as socio-political context and space.

Divergent Sexual Practices, the *Qur'an* and the Islamic Nation-state Today

Despite the fact that most contemporary Islamic societies operate according to a patriarchal logic, a number of academics argue that the *Qur'an* offers a surprisingly lenient approach to people who engage in same-sex acts outside of marriage. In *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims*, Kugle re-reads a number of passages from the *Qur'an* in order to show that

early Islam did not stigmatise men (or women) who engaged in same-sex acts for pleasure, but mentions them ‘obliquely and does not assess them negatively’.¹ Through his analysis of the narrative of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Kugle claims that the Prophet Lot did not demonise (male) same-sex relations, but ‘condemned same-sex rape and denounced the use of sex as coercion against the vulnerable’.² In contrast to the Bible and the Torah, Kugle believes that the Islamic scriptures offer Muslims who desire members of the same sex a resource to ‘help resolve the conflicts they experience between Islam (as a religion imposed by family, community, and history) and their existential condition as members of a sexual and gender minority’.³

If scriptural Islam is fairly lenient in its approach to divergent sexual practices, the development of a patriarchal Islamic culture led to greater stringencies on sexual behaviour that did not lead to reproduction. In the contemporary era, Tilo Beckers argues that nature and the family continue to play an important part in ‘the condemnation of homosexuality’, such that ‘[t]he equation of nature and heterosexual reproduction leads to the evaluation of homosexuality as an aberrance and an infringement on nature, lacking the possibility of reproduction due to the “misuse” of sexual organs’.⁴ As such, same-sex acts between men are punishable by imprisonment in most Islamic societies and death in the more repressive states of Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and some parts of Northern Nigeria. Despite the severity of such laws, Kugle claims that a kind of “situational bisexuality” is widespread in many Islamic societies, whereby women and men

¹ Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), p. 2. I include women in brackets here as the *Qur’an* does not directly refer to women in these passages, but focuses predominantly on men.

² Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, p. 39.

³ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, p. 8.

⁴ Tilo Beckers, ‘Islam and the Acceptance of Homosexuality: The Shortage of Socioeconomic Well-Being and Responsive Democracy’, in *Islam and Homosexuality: Volume 1*, pp. 57-98 (p. 61).

engage in same-sex acts because ‘access to opposite sex-partners is restricted and marriage is expensive’.⁵ When practised amongst men, this sort of behaviour tends to be formulated along an active-passive binary that not only reinforces the dominant gendered hierarchy, but ensures that the masculinity of the active male participant remains intact. As Jarrod Hayes explains in his work on marginal sexualities in the Maghreb, ‘Arab men, as long as they are the penetrators, even with men, are still manly; the passive partner is either a boy or feminized’.⁶ Furthermore, these acts are tolerated in some societies so long as they remain clandestine and do not cause any form of disruption to the patriarchal institutions of marriage and the family.

While many Islamic states place prohibitions on sexual interaction between men, there are no restrictions on same-sex relations between women as such acts are not considered to disrupt the authority of the dominant patriarchal order. As Kugle explains, for many Islamic scholars and jurists, ‘[t]he assumption is that a woman cannot penetrate in the “active role” because she has no penis and that she would not betray her gender role by being penetrated, as in the “passive role”’.⁷ As such, ‘women’s gender role – determined by her lack of a penis – is considered “less weighty” than men’s gender role’ and does not need to be regulated by law.⁸ However, if same-sex interaction between women is essentially permissible by law, Beckers points out that the widespread refusal to even acknowledge female same-sex desire means that:

[o]nly men are silently allowed to engage in same-sex sexual contacts outside of their marriages, while women are not entitled to do so under the norms of familialism and patriarchy. Thus [...], women with

⁵ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, p. 10.

⁶ Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 4.

⁷ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, p. 153.

⁸ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, p. 154.

same-sex desires [...] do not enjoy the same social agency that men do in normative Muslim societies.⁹

In other words, women who participate in same-sex acts are doubly marginalised as their desires are either curtailed or rendered invisible by patriarchal Islamic societies.

Though “situational bisexuality” may occur relatively frequently in contemporary Islamic societies in the MENA, Habib claims that some Muslims or Arabs who engage in same-sex acts do so because of an “innate” attraction to members of the same sex. In her monograph, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*, Habib attempts to understand these subjects through a conceptual framework that not only ‘[considers] the potential contributions of essentialism to gay historiography’, but suggests that it ‘is not necessarily a historical crisis to refer to “medieval gay people” in the Arab Middle East.’¹⁰ Perusing a range of erotic literature from the medieval Islamic world, Habib argues that there is ample ‘evidence of (a medieval) Arabian epistemology of sexuality, desire and identification, whose features seem strangely contemporaneous with recent discourses on sexuality’.¹¹ Speaking on same-sex interaction between women in particular, Habib suggests that ‘[t]he critics who take the most extreme caution *not* to define “same-sex love and desire among women in the Middle Ages” as homosexual or lesbian, create an imaginary difference, at best metonymic’ (emphasis in the original).¹² For Habib, an identitarian form of lesbianism is not only evident throughout Islamic history and culture, but can be understood through models of sexuality that emphasise its inherent or “essential” nature. In fact, Habib goes so far

⁹ Beckers, p. 67.

¹⁰ Samar Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 20.

¹¹ Habib, *Female Homosexuality*, p. 22.

¹² Habib, *Female Homosexuality*, p. 82.

as to argue that the texts that she examines ‘do not seem to be compatible with the constructionist tenet that “sexual orientation” is *not* “innate”’ (emphasis in the original).¹³

Taking issue with Habib’s teleological approach to sexuality, Massad adopts a constructivist framework that denies the existence of the category of homosexuality in the MENA altogether. Massad begins by examining Arab nationalist scholarship and critiquing the internalisation of orientalist perceptions by middle- and upper-class Arab intellectuals during the colonial era. In adopting a westernised worldview, Massad argues that these intellectuals internalised negative colonial conceptions of their culture, but also ‘the epistemology by which Europeans came to judge civilizations [...] along the vector of something called “sex”, as well as its later derivative, “sexuality”’.¹⁴ In other words, Massad believes that Arab scholars rejected aspects of their own culture in order to adhere to dominant Western conceptualisations of “civilization” and “appropriate” sexual behaviour. As Massad explains, the ‘Orientalist depiction of Arab sexual desires as of a different qualitative and quantitative order signifying radical alterity would be countered by vigorous assimilation on the part of Arab historians who insisted that Arab sexual desires were not all that different from those of Europeans’.¹⁵ For Massad, these scholars internalised Victorian social and sexual mores that denigrated Arab culture and condemned the “lasciviousness” of the pre-modern Islamic world.

If the Orientalists criticised the perceived sexual licentiousness of the Islamic Middle East, Massad argues that ‘the Modern West [attacks] its alleged *repression* of sexual freedoms in the present’ (emphasis in the original).¹⁶ Since the 1960s, Massad

¹³ Habib, *Female Homosexuality*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Massad, p. 6.

¹⁵ Massad, p. 15.

¹⁶ Massad, p. 175.

believes that Western human rights campaigners (which he terms collectively the ‘Gay International’) have attempted to impose identity categories onto Islamic cultures that are not structured around a hetero-homo binary and do not operate according to identitarian models of sexual desire.¹⁷ For Massad, the imposition of such ideals is damaging because it forces ‘men who are considered to be “passive” or “receptive” parties in male-male sexual contacts [...] to limit their sexual aim to one object choice, either women or men. As most “active” partners see themselves as part of a societal norm, so heterosexuality becomes compulsory given that the alternative [...] means becoming marked outside the norm’.¹⁸ Though Massad problematically disregards the experiences of Arab Muslim women who engage in same-sex acts altogether, his work demonstrates that attempts to apply Western sexual categories to non-Western contexts might marginalise some of the people they purport to protect.¹⁹ At the end of his book, Massad dismisses the efforts of the ‘Gay International’ as a form of imperialism that uses the position of sexual minorities in Islam to reinforce dominant notions of Western superiority and liberalism.²⁰

Despite widespread academic support for Massad’s thesis, Habib argues that *Desiring Arabs* is reductive as it refuses to allow any space for modern-day Muslims or Arabs who self-identify as gay or lesbian in the Western sense of the word. In a more nuanced and less essentialist approach than her previous work, Habib claims that Western identitarian categories of sexuality are becoming increasingly common

¹⁷ Massad, p. 41.

¹⁸ Massad, p. 188.

¹⁹ Massad, p. 188.

²⁰ Massad’s thesis gains strong support in Jasbir Puar’s recent monograph, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, in which Puar claims that Western governments use discourses on gay rights to position themselves as more liberated and progressive than those in the East. For further reading, see: Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007). See also, Sara Ahmed, ‘Problematic Proximities: Or Why Critiques of Gay Imperialism Matter’, *Feminist Legal Studies*, 19 (2011), 119-31.

in the MENA because of human rights activism, processes of globalisation and the greater accessibility of Western television programmes and the internet. For Habib, dismissing same-sex acts amongst men and women in the MENA as “situational” or “unique” is problematic as it undermines the lived experiences of many modern-day Muslims and Arabs who adopt a Western model of desire as ontological. She believes that Massad’s thesis is oppressive for ‘those who [...] *have* [...] initiated local grassroots campaigns for LGBTIQ rights in the Arab world’ because it constructs them as little more than agents of Western imperialism and Orientalist fantasy (emphasis in the original).²¹ Though Habib acknowledges that Massad’s arguments are highly sophisticated, she argues that they might be said to bear little relevance to ‘the lives of those who are suffering persecution and misery’ because of their sexual orientation in the MENA today.²²

Though Habib and Massad make strong cases for the ontological conceptualisation of sexuality, George Ioannides finds both approaches to be deficient in understanding the diversity of sexual desires located in the MENA at the present time. On the one hand, Ioannides criticises Massad for erasing ‘the subjectivities of self-identified “homosexual” Arab Muslims in the Middle East’, whilst, on the other, he argues that Habib’s first monograph uses ‘history [...] to create space for “homosexual” Muslims who are “exclusively” and “innately” attracted to persons of the same gender by “disposition”’.²³ In order to overcome this conceptual impasse, Ioannides turns to queer theory as he believes that it might enable us to understand the ‘multiplicity of Muslim non-normative sexualities that

²¹ Habib, *Islam and Homosexuality: Volume 1*, p. xix.

²² Habib, *Islam and Homosexuality: Volume 1*, p. xxvi.

²³ George Ioannides, ‘Queer Travels: Intersections for the Study of Islam, Sexuality, and Queer Theory’, in *Queering Religion, Religious Queers*, ed. by Yvette Taylor and Ria Snowdon (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 117-36 (p. 122).

either can or cannot be subsumed under Western sexual rubrics'.²⁴ Though queer theory has been criticised for its associations with white male privilege and the West, Ioannides contends that its refusal to adopt a hetero-homo dichotomy can illuminate our understanding of the transient, fluid and often uncategorisable nature of sexual desire in the MENA today.²⁵ For Ioannides, queer theory is salutary precisely because it 'does not discount the polymorphous plurality of sexual subjectivities and (dis)identities found throughout the Arab and Islamic Middle East', but '[accounts] for intersectional identitarian sexualities as well as non-identitarian expressions of sexual desires and/or behaviours'.²⁶ He thus concludes that adopting a queer theoretical framework might allow us to understand the presence of (clandestine) homosexual acts in the MENA, but also 'the existence of a Western identitarian category of non-normative sexuality'.²⁷

Certainly, queer theory offers a compelling conceptual framework through which to understand the seemingly uncategorisable nature of sexual desire throughout the MENA; however, it is an extremely complex theoretical discourse that pays little attention to people's lived experiences or modes of existence. Because queer theory constructs the body as a site of subversion, it often neglects to attend to the material aspects of embodiment or the importance of people's empirical experiences of their sexuality. These more material elements can be grasped through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on the sexual schema, in which he argues that sexuality is not simply an isolated aspect of our identities, but infuses our everyday existence and plays a fundamental role in our perception of the world and others. For

²⁴ Ioannides, p. 118.

²⁵ Ioannides, p. 128. For an eloquent criticism of the white male bias of queer theory, see: Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Ioannides, p. 129.

²⁷ Ioannides, p. 128.

Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is similar to an atmosphere that is consistently present and, ‘sans être l’objet d’un acte de conscience exprès, peut motiver les formes privilégiées de mon expérience [...] Prise ainsi [...] la sexualité est coextensive à la vie’.²⁸ In other words, sexuality cannot be understood as a mere subset of experience, but is an always present force that permeates every aspect of our lived and corporeal existences. As Merleau-Ponty elaborates:

[i]l y a osmose entre la sexualité et l’existence, c’est-à-dire que si l’existence diffuse dans la sexualité, réciproquement la sexualité diffuse dans l’existence, de sorte qu’il est impossible d’assigner, pour une décision ou une action donnée, la part de la motivation sexuelle et celle d’autres motivations, impossible de caractériser une décision ou un acte comme “sexuel” ou “non-sexuel”.²⁹

Rather than understanding sexuality as a drive in the psychoanalytical sense of the word, Merleau-Ponty believes that desire underpins our very existence and can be felt at every level of our interaction with the world and others. As Judith Butler explains, ‘sexuality is an essentially malleable quality, a mode of embodying a certain existential relation to the world, and the specific modality of dramatizing that relation in corporeal terms’.³⁰

Though Butler rightly criticises Merleau-Ponty for focusing entirely on white male bodies in *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, she views his model of sexuality as liberating because it does away with normative dogmas and constructs desire as an essential element of existence itself.³¹ For Butler, in suggesting that sexuality and existence are coterminous, Merleau-Ponty offers ‘a view of sexuality freed of

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, p. 197.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, p. 197.

³⁰ Judith Butler, ‘Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*’, in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. by Jeffner Allan and Marion Iris Young (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 85-100 (pp. 86-7).

³¹ Butler, p. 85.

naturalistic ideology, one which restores both the historical and volitional components of sexual experience and, consequently, opens the way for a fuller description of sexuality and sexual diversity'.³² In the context of this thesis, Merleau-Ponty's work is extremely important because it enables us to move the debate on sexuality in the MENA away from sophisticated theoretical premises and back to the phenomenological reality of people's everyday lives. By re-conceptualising sexuality as lived experience, Merleau-Ponty's work helps us to comprehend Maghrebi people who live their homosexuality through erotic relationships and momentary affiliations, but also those sexual subjects who act against the prevailing morality in their countries by identifying with the (Western) categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer. In contrast to previous approaches to the ontological conceptualisation of sexuality, a (queer) phenomenological framework might provide us with the tools needed to apprehend how desire is not simply represented, but lived, embodied and experienced on a diverse and idiosyncratic level by identitarian and non-identitarian sexual subjects in and from the MENA.

Queer Arab Cinema(s)

Despite the current conservatism surrounding the candid expression of non-normative desires in Islamic societies today, Habib argues that Arab '[f]ilms from the decades preceding the mid-1970s tend to be engaged in a rather open and positive dialogue with [their] audience as regards sexual deviation'.³³ Before the 1980s, Egyptian cinema, in particular, was characterised by a sense of freedom and offered far more transgressive representations of female and male (homo)sexuality than it does today. With the arrival of the Egyptian version of the Hays Code in 1976,

³² Butler, p. 85.

³³ Habib, *Female Homosexuality*, p. 95.

however, Habib points out that the figure of the homosexual was ‘relegated to a dark closet’ and representations of homosexuality were only ‘possible through clandestine symbology’.³⁴ Nowadays, homosexuality is seldom featured openly in contemporary Arab cinema and films that deal with the subject are often heavily censored or banned – as was the case with Maher Sabry’s fictional film, *Toul Omri*, which was refused a public screening anywhere in the MENA because of its unapologetically open representation of gay Egyptian men.³⁵ Despite these difficulties, a handful of features have emerged that either feature homosexual characters or deal explicitly with the theme of same-sex desire. Whereas *The Yacoubian Building* offers a stereotypical, yet sympathetic portrayal of a gay male character, *Caramel* and *Circumstance* provide nuanced representations of lesbian desire amongst Lebanese and Iranian women respectively.³⁶ Moreover, Parvez Shwarma’s remarkable documentary, *A Jihad for Love*, foregrounds a series of interviews with practicing Muslims from all over the Islamic world who self-identify as gay or lesbian, but must live in exile or enforced secrecy because they cannot express their desires openly in their homelands.³⁷

In terms of the Maghreb more specifically, Bouzid’s landmark film, *L’Homme des cendres*, sets homosexual desire against the backdrop of childhood trauma, rape and sexual abuse. More recently, the science-fiction thriller, *Bedwin Hacker* has foregrounded a queer female character; *Le Fil* has examined same-sex

³⁴ Habib, *Female Homosexuality*, p. 113. Otherwise known as the Motion Picture Production Code, the Hays Code was introduced in 1930 to control the content of American films. It was heavily influenced by the Catholic Legion of Decency and placed prohibitions on the representation of non-normative sexualities on American cinematic screens. Similarly, from 1976 onwards, Egyptian censorship laws prohibited Egyptian filmmakers from representing “deviant” sexualities or criticising certain subjects, such as politics and religion.

³⁵ *Toul Omri*, dir. by Maher Sabry (Les Films de l’Ange, 2008). See: Omar Hassan, ‘Real Queer Arabs’, *Film International*, 8 (2010) <<http://filmint.nu/?p=1295>> [accessed 9 September 2015].

³⁶ *The Yacoubian Building*, dir. by Marwan Hamed (Arab Co for Cinema Production & Distribution, 2006).

³⁷ *A Jihad for Love*, dir. by Parvez Shwarma (First Run Features, 2007).

desire against the backdrop of bourgeois Tunisian society; and *L'Armée du salut* has explored a teenage boy's homosexual awakening in rural Morocco.³⁸ Aside from these few exceptions, the majority of films featuring queer characters of Maghrebi heritage are set in France, perhaps because (as mentioned in the introduction) censorship is far less strict and funding for films that focus on "taboo" subjects is easier to obtain. Whereas *Drôle de Félix*, *Tarik el hob* and *Vivre me tue* focus on gay Maghrebi-French men, *Change-moi ma vie*, *Origine contrôlée*, *Un fils* and *Chouchou* all foreground cross-dressing men of Maghrebi heritage who live in Paris.³⁹ Focusing specifically on *L'Armée du salut*, *Tarik el hob* and *Un fils*, this chapter argues that these three films position sexuality as a fundamental component of existence, and explore the impact of space upon sexuality, self-other relations and embodied notions of identity.

Corporeal Alienation and Sexual Exploitation in Abdellah Taïa's *L'Armée du salut*

Abdellah Taïa grew up in a small rural village in Morocco where he struggled with his sexuality because of dominant social mores that deny the existence of homosexuals and criminalise same-sex acts between men. As Taïa explains in an interview:

[w]here I come from, homosexuals do not exist, which is a horrible thing to live with and to accept. I had no other choice but to accept this non-existence. We could call this exile, meaning that your people, the ones who say they love you, that want to protect you, that want the best for you, and give you food – milk, honey, and so many other

³⁸ Though *Le Fil* and *Bedwin Hacker* make important interventions into the near-invisibility of queer characters on Maghrebi screens, I have chosen not to examine them here, namely because queer sexuality plays a marginal role in *Bedwin Hacker* and is represented somewhat conventionally in *Le Fil*.

³⁹ *Drôle de Félix*, dir. by Olivier Ducastel & Jacques Martineau (Pyramide Distribution, 2000); *Origine contrôlée*, dir. by Ahmed Bouchaâla & Zakia Tahri (United International Pictures, 2001); *Vivre me tue*, dir. by Jean-Pierre Sinapi (Arte France Cinéma, 2002); *Chouchou*, dir. by Merzak Allouache (Warner Bros., 2003).

things – they deny you the most important thing, which is recognizing you as a human being.⁴⁰

Because of the difficulties Taïa faced growing up in Morocco, he moved to Paris in 1998 where he came out as gay in an interview with the Moroccan magazine, *Tel Quel*, in 2006. Though Taïa was heavily criticised by the Moroccan press, Islamic scholars and Moroccan intellectuals, his decision to come out publicly inaugurated an open debate about homosexuality, individualism and gay rights in Morocco. Today, Taïa stands as a beacon of hope for many men (and women) who self-identify as gay (or lesbian) in the Maghreb and the Middle East more broadly. To this day, he is the only openly gay Moroccan writer and filmmaker in the world.

Based on a semi-autobiographical novel of the same name, *L'Armée du salut* is Taïa's first full-length film and the only Moroccan feature to date to treat the theme of homosexuality openly. Like *Amours voilées*, *L'Armée du salut* was the subject of protests by Islamic students and faced criticism from the Moroccan *Parti de la justice et du développement* (PJD) because of its “un-Islamic” content. However, despite eliciting so much controversy, the film was shown in cinema theatres across Morocco and was even nominated for the Grand Prix at the Tangiers Film Festival in 2014.⁴¹ It is a coming-of-age narrative that details the day-to-day existence of a young boy named Abdellah (Said Mrini) who undergoes a (homo)sexual awakening in a small rural village in Morocco. The film adopts a dyadic structure, whereby the first section of the narrative focuses on Abdellah's attempts to come to terms with his homosexuality in Salé, a small working-class village just outside of Rabat. In this first segment, Taïa focuses on Abdellah's erotic

⁴⁰ Joe Edgar, ‘A Conversation with Moroccan Novelist Abdellah Taïa’, *Sampsonia Way*, (2012) <<http://www.sampsoniaway.org/literary-voices/2012/09/10/a-conversation-with-moroccan-novelist-abdellah-taia/>> [accessed 9 September 2015].

⁴¹ Valérie K. Orlando, ‘Abdellah Taïa, director. *L'Armée du salut* (Salvation Army)’, *African Studies Review*, 57 (2014), 245-50 (p. 245).

longing for his older brother, Slimane (Amine Enajji), and (exploitative) sexual encounters with a series of older Moroccan men from the village. The second segment of the film jumps forward in time to concentrate on a more mature Abdellah's (Karim Ait M'Hand) relationship with an older Swiss man named Jean (Frédéric Landenber). For the first part of the narrative, Taïa constructs Abdellah as an embodied subject who feels alienated and repressed within the heteronormative structures of the family and rural Moroccan society. However, if Abdellah initially lives his sexuality as repressed and estranging, the end of the film shows him rejecting attempts to suppress his (sexual) freedoms and (re)gaining control over his body and desires.

A sense of repressed desire permeates the opening shots of the film, which show Abdellah walking past a hissing pressure cooker to one of the bedrooms in his family home. For Orlando, the pressure cooker 'metaphorically captures the emotional turmoil pent up inside' Abdellah; however, it also symbolises the extent to which the young protagonist's sexual frustration suffuses his everyday existence and is lived as an inseparable component of his experience.⁴² After Abdellah enters the bedroom, he tenderly caresses the sheets of an unmade bed, such that the spectator is able to hear the sound of the cotton brushing against his skin, but also the gentle inhalation of his breath as he takes in the scent of a pillow. These extremely tactile shots can be understood using Jennifer M. Barker's work in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, in which she argues that '[l]ove, desire, loss, nostalgia, and joy are perceived and expressed in fundamentally tactile ways, not only by characters but also, even more profoundly, by film and viewer'.⁴³ In this scene, the sound of the fabric and Abdellah's breath pulls the spectator into a sensory

⁴² Orlando, 'Abdellah Taïa', p. 248.

⁴³ Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (London: University of California Press, 2009), p. 1.

relationship with the image that not only invites us to feel as though we are feeling Abdellah’s physical sensations, but also invokes a kind of mimetic empathy with his emotional and affective state of desire and longing. Thus, before we know anything about the character on screen or the context in which he lives, Taïa uses the “matter” of surfaces, textures and touch to establish an intersubjective connection between spectator and protagonist that facilitates a strong degree of empathy with his sexual frustration and repressed corporeal desires.



Figure 16. Abdellah sneaks into his brother’s bedroom in *L’Armée du salut*

Following these deeply tactile opening shots, Abdellah sneaks out of the bedroom, but is caught by his mother (Malika El Hamaoui) who chastises him from an off-screen space for being in his older brother’s bedroom again, stating: ‘[t]’étais encore dans la chambre de ton frère? Je te jure, je vais lui dire. Cette fois, il va te tuer’. Not only does this short piece of dialogue hint at Abdellah’s “incestuous” desires for his older brother, but it (re)contextualises the opening scene, such that we

now understand that Abdellah was caressing the unmade bed sheets in order to feel as though he could touch or connect with his brother in a physical way. However, if this tactile gesture is coded in deeply erotic terms, it also expresses Abdellah's yearning for an affective and emotional connection with his sibling that transcends the erotogenic and yokes sex to feelings of emotional devotion. This point is reinforced in a later scene in which Abdellah steals a pair of Slimane's boxer shorts so that he can feel a physical, emotional and sentimental attachment to his brother whenever he smells them or touches their fabric to his skin. Though these scenes foreground Abdellah's "transgressive" desires for his older brother, they do not condemn the young protagonist, but suggest that his state of infatuation unites his mind and his body, such that he does not differentiate between the emotional and the sexual, but experiences his desires in a profoundly affective, pre-reflective and corporeal way. Read in the light of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the sexual schema, these opening scenes thus illustrate the extent to which Abdellah's corporeal desires constitute an always present component of his experience in the world. Like Batoul in *Amours voilées*, Taïa constructs Abdellah as an embodied subject whose carnal desires are not only connected to his emotions, but cause him to act against the prevailing morality espoused by his mother and dominant Moroccan society more broadly.

If this opening scene uses embodied filming techniques to communicate a sense of Abdellah's repressed corporeal desires, the remainder of the first segment of the narrative foregrounds his physical and psychical discomfort within the heterosexual spaces of the family and rural Moroccan society. In her work on (dis)comfort and norms, Ahmed claims that being comfortable is about being 'so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and

the world begins'.⁴⁴ Because phenomenal space is heteronormative, Ahmed argues that it is frequently experienced as alienating and discomfoting for subjects who do not align themselves with dominant heterosexual modes of existence. As Ahmed explains, non-normative subjects often feel uncomfortable 'when faced by the "comforts" of heterosexuality', such that their bodies might '[feel] out of place, awkward, unsettled'.⁴⁵ In the first section of *L'Armée du salut*, Abdellah's body is frequently constructed as out of place and he is shown to feel uneasy within the heteronormative structures of the familial home. He enjoys watching Egyptian musicals with his mother and sisters, but is excluded from their bodily and social space because of strict regulations on gendered segregation in traditional Moroccan society. In one early scene, Abdellah is banished from eating with the women and refused entry to the masculine spaces occupied by his father (Abdelhak Swilah). As such, he sits alone on the kitchen floor with his knees pulled in towards his chest and his eyes cast down towards the ground. Not only is the young protagonist's distress articulated corporeally, but Taïa uses his physical, spatial and visual isolation to indicate his displacement within the gendered spaces of the familial home. Similar to Kamel in *Bled number one*, Abdellah does not extend with ease into gendered spaces and often appears disorientated, awkward and out of place. As Orlando explains, because Abdellah '[feels] no allegiance to either masculine or feminine realms', he is 'often set adrift [...] to negotiate life on the liminal edges of these socially gendered divisions'.⁴⁶

Outside of the familial home, Abdellah lives his body as a site of alienation because of his sexual objectification by the (older) men in the village. As outlined in previous chapters, Sobchack argues that we normally experience our bodies as a

⁴⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 148.

⁴⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 148.

⁴⁶ Orlando, 'Abdellah Taïa', p. 248.

protective space, but that their objectification by others can lead us to live them as alienating ‘[places] that [ground] us in negativity’ and ‘that everyone else regards as ours but that we understand as really belonging to “others”’.⁴⁷ In the first segment of *L’Armée du salut*, Taïa positions Abdellah as an embodied subject who not only experiences his body as an object-for-others, but feels alienated because of his sexual exploitation and objectification by many of the men in the village. The young protagonist’s corporeal estrangement is evident in one early scene, in which he is stopped by an older man (Abdelwahad Badri) who leads him to a disused building site, tells him to turn around and begins to unzip his trousers. Here, Abdellah’s feelings of alienation are depicted on and through his body, such that he looks down at the ground in a resigned manner, before reluctantly following behind the older man. However, they are also articulated via Taïa’s decision to film the scene from a detached and observational perspective, which creates a distanciation effect that enables him to communicate his protagonist’s sense of (s)exploitation and (corporeal) alienation to the spectator. In stark contrast to the opening sequence, this scene not only divorces sex from emotionality, but constructs Abdellah’s first on-screen (homo)sexual encounter as alienating, exploitative and corporeally estranging.

In another scene in which Abdellah visits the local *souk* (market) with his father, he is treated as an erotic object by an older male fruit vendor (Hamid Elouajdi Mouladi) who invites him to the back of his stall where he strokes his hand and neck menacingly. Like in the earlier sequence, Abdellah’s discomfort is visible on his body and through his resigned facial expressions; however in contrast to the previous scene, Taïa uses haptic camerawork to communicate Abdellah’s physical and psychological unease to the non-diegetic spectator. As discussed at various points

⁴⁷ Sobchack, p. 184.

throughout this thesis, Marks argues that haptic cinema deploys the sense of touch to create ‘a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image’ that blurs intersubjective boundaries and undermines the supremacy of vision.⁴⁸ As the fruit vendor strokes Abdellah’s hand and neck, Taïa’s use of close-ups of hands emphasises the sensation of touch, but also creates an inter-corporeal connection between spectator and protagonist that enables us to feel as though we can feel these unwelcome tactile gestures upon our own skin. Although in different ways, these two scenes thus use embodied filming techniques to criticise the power hierarchies at play in inter-generational male relationships, and also the hypocritical sexual and social mores of rural Moroccan society. Not only is Abdellah’s body treated as the erotic object of (older) male sexual desire, but the film positions him as the victim of a society that facilitates the (clandestine) exploitation of young boys and their bodies.



Figure 17. The *hammam* sequence in *L'Armée du salut*

⁴⁸ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multi-Sensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 3.

If the first half of the film enables the spectator to share Abdellah's "felt" sense of alienation and discomfort, the remainder of the narrative explores the sexual exploitation of Moroccan men's bodies by white European sexual tourists in the Maghreb. Following a conversation in which Slimane tells Abdellah that he should learn French as it could provide him with an escape route out of Morocco, Abdellah engages in his first act of prostitution with a European man he sees on the beach. The camera then cuts to a scene in a local *hammam*, in which we see Abdellah sitting on the floor with his knees pulled in towards his chest and his gaze cast down towards the ground. Though Abdellah does not verbally articulate his emotions, his corporeal comportment strongly suggests to the spectator that he feels a sense of shame about his actions in the previous scene. As discussed in Chapter Three, Ahmed argues that shame is an embodied emotion that is expressed on the body and relies upon the subject's internalisation of the perspective of an existent or non-existent other.⁴⁹ For Ahmed, shame is 'an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body'.⁵⁰ In shame, 'more than my action is at stake: *the badness of an action is transferred to me*, such that I feel myself to be bad and to have been "found" or "found out" as bad by others' (emphasis in the original).⁵¹ Similar to Batoul in the first sex scene in *Amours voilées*, Abdellah's embodied reaction to his behaviour suggests that he has internalised dominant religious and societal discourses regarding the "shamefulness" of male same-sex desire and prostitution. His bodily demeanour implies that he has transferred the supposed "badness" of his actions onto himself and is attempting to "cleanse" his physical body in order to overcome his troubled psychological state. The juxtaposition of these few scenes therefore positions Abdellah as an embodied

⁴⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 106.

⁵⁰ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 103.

⁵¹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 105.

subject who experiences no distinction between his mind and his body, but lives his interiority and his emotions in a profoundly corporeal way.

Following the *hammam* sequence, *L'Armée du salut* jumps forward in time to show a more mature Abdellah in a relationship with an older Swiss man named Jean. For Orlando, the two men's relationship is coded in hierarchical terms and enables Taïa to interweave 'French-speaking [...] Europe's continued sexexploitation of Moroccan youth [...] into the subtext of the film'.⁵² Certainly, the film constructs Abdellah as a victim of (s)exploitation and the oppressive social and sexual structures of contemporary Moroccan culture; however, it also refuses to diminish his agency and positions him as an independent subject who acts of his own volition and free will. For Taïa, Abdellah 'is neither innocent nor a victim. Like the other characters, he uses the same weapon: malignancy [...] He will [...] have to cheat, manipulate and hurt people. A free individual is never pure'.⁵³ In this quotation, Taïa implies that Abdellah not only acts manipulatively in his relationship with Jean, but that he allows his body to be (s)exploited in order to escape the material reality of his lived situation in Morocco. This interpretation of Abdellah's behaviour emerges most obviously in the few scenes in which we see him together with Jean in Morocco. In one scene on a boat, Abdellah moves away from Jean when questioned about their relationship by a poor fisherman (Amin Labsal), whilst elsewhere he walks despondently down a deserted beach as the older Swiss man chases after him eagerly. However, if these scenes use Abdellah's embodied behaviour to communicate his disinterest in Jean, they also place the protagonist's actions within the context of an extremely oppressive society in which self-identified gay men are not recognised as subjects and sexual tourism offers one of the only escape routes

⁵² Orlando, 'Abdellah Taïa', p. 249.

⁵³ Abdellah Taïa, 'Salvation Army', *Strand Releasing* <http://strandreleasing.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Salvation-Army_pk_FINAL.pdf> [accessed 22 August 2015].

out of Morocco. *L'Armée du salut* thus lends credence to Taïa's argument that some kind of exploitation may be necessary if Abdellah is to sustain a degree of individual freedom.



Figure 18. Abdellah walks away from Jean on the beach in *L'Armée du salut*

The final segment of the narrative takes place in Switzerland and shows Abdellah rejecting his former Swiss lover and (re)claiming a sense of control over his body and desires. After receiving a scholarship to study in Geneva, Abdellah visits his new university where he bumps into Jean who works as a lecturer in one of the departments in his building. In a heated argument, Abdellah tells Jean that he wants to end their relationship and has explained his reasoning in a letter, the content of which is never revealed to the spectator. Jean responds by calling him ‘un arriviste’ and ‘une pute’ and suggesting that he used him solely to get to Europe: ‘[t]’as pas de coeur [...] Tu m’as utilisé [...] Tu as tout calculé? [...] Regarde ce que tu as fait de moi. Regarde. Tu n’es qu’un arriviste [...] Tu es une pute, une pute’. Though Jean is clearly hurt, Taïa uses his reaction to Abdellah’s decision to highlight the ignorance

of many white middle-class Europeans *vis-à-vis* the plight of gay Moroccan men. Not only does Jean demonstrate a profound lack of awareness of Abdellah's lived situation as a homosexual man in a homophobic society, but he arguably repeats the dominant (Western) discourses that see younger men (and women) from developing nations as using romantic relationships to escape their homelands and secure a place in the West. However, if Jean's dialogue reinforces negative (neo-)colonial expectations, Abdellah resists such reductive discourses and (re)claims a sense of authority over his identity when he states: '[m]aintenant je suis libre, libre tu m'entends? Libre du Maroc. Libre de toi. Libre de toi!' In this highly symbolic monologue, Abdellah rejects Western (s)exploitation and his former Swiss lover, but also the traditional mores of Moroccan society that have stifled his subjectivity and denied his sexual mode of being-in-the-world. In a similar manner to the heroines in Chapter Three, the penultimate sequence of the film shows Abdellah overcoming attempts to suppress his freedoms and thereby (re)gaining a sense of authority over his body and desires.

The final scene of the film shows Abdellah in a Salvation Army shelter where, as Orlando states, he 'metaphorically finds the "salvation" he seeks: not only a place to sleep safely, but a space of freedom where one is recognized as an individual'.⁵⁴ Because he will not receive his student bursary for another month, Abdellah seeks shelter in a hostel where he meets a fellow refugee from Morocco called Mohammed (Zakaria Saadoune). In the closing minutes of the film, Abdellah shares an orange with Mohammed who offers to sing him a song in return. Abdellah chooses *Ana lak ala tool* (*I am Yours Forever*) a famous Egyptian love song from the musical *Days and Nights*, which he watches with his mother and sisters earlier in the

⁵⁴ Orlando, 'Abdellah Taïa', p. 247.

film.⁵⁵ This song unites the men because of their shared cultural heritage, but also communicates Abdellah's new-found sense of (sexual) autonomy by referencing the freedom and liberation that characterised Egyptian filmmaking in the 1950s.⁵⁶

However, if this scene suggests that Abdellah is finally free to define his subjectivity as he pleases, his tears upon hearing Mohammed sing remind the spectator that his quest for sexual freedom has come at the cost of the loss of his homeland and his culture of origin. This poignant final sequence enables Taïa to criticise dominant Moroccan society for refusing to recognise its homosexual subjects and denying their subjective mode of being-in-the-world. Yet, rather than simply reinforcing the negative neo-colonial discourses that position Morocco as an oppressive space that represses its homosexual citizens, Taïa seems to envision his film as a vehicle through which to campaign for greater sexual freedom for homosexual subjects in and from Morocco and the Middle East more generally. Not only does Taïa deploy the tools available to him to secure his freedom in the West, but he arguably chooses to extend that freedom to others by using his film (and his novels) to expose the plight of self-identified homosexual men (and women) in parts of the Islamic world. Through his filmmaking and his writing, Taïa not only counters Massad's thesis on the non-existence of "homosexuals" in the MENA, but represents an instance of what Habib refers to as a 'local grassroots [campaign] for LGBTIQ rights in the Arab world'.⁵⁷ *L'Armée du salut* can therefore be seen as a landmark film that counters reductive academic discourses and works to raise awareness of the

⁵⁵ *Days and Nights*, dir. by Henry Barakat (Arab Film Distribution, 1955).

⁵⁶ This point is reinforced through Taïa's comments in an interview with *The New York Times*: 'Egyptian movies saved me [...] There was already the idea of transgression through the television happening in my house and with my sisters. In my head, I connected that to homosexuality'. See: Aïda Alami, 'Muslim, Gay and Making No Apologies', *The New York Times*, (2014) <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/12/world/middleeast/abdellah-taia-makes-his-directorial-debut.html?_r=0> [accessed 22 August 2014].

⁵⁷ Habib, *Islam and Homosexuality: Volume 1*, p. xix.

lives and experiences of people who do not identify with dominant heteronormative modes of existence in the Maghreb.

Sexual and Spatial (Re-)Orientations in Rémi Lange's *Tarik el hob*

Whereas *L'Armée du salut* constructs Morocco as a conservative society that is oppressive and alienating for homosexual men, *Tarik el hob* represents the country in more positive terms that foreground its longstanding history of homosexual traditions and practices. By contrast to Taïa, Rémi Lange is an openly gay filmmaker from France whose films are often lauded for their ethical treatment of such marginal subjects as paraplegic gay men, transvestites and ethnic minority queer people.⁵⁸ Proving no exception to this trend, *Tarik el hob* focuses on the sexual re-orientation of a young, seemingly heterosexual Algerian-French man called Karim (Karim Tarek) who lives and studies in Paris.⁵⁹ After watching a historical documentary that features Abdellah Taïa discussing same-sex marriages amongst working-class men in the Siwa Oasis in Egypt, Karim decides to write an academic essay on same-sex practices amongst men of Maghrebi heritage living in France. Whilst researching for his assignment, Karim meets a young, gay man of Algerian heritage called Farid (Riyad Echahi), who leads him to question his own supposedly heterosexual identity and relationship. Throughout the course of the narrative, the two men become increasingly close and Karim eventually decides to split up with his girlfriend, Sihem (Sihem Benamoune), to travel to Morocco with Farid. In contrast to *L'Armée du salut*, in which Abdellah must leave Morocco to live his homosexuality openly,

⁵⁸ See, for example, *The Sex of Madame H*, dir. by Rémi Lange (Homovies, 2005) and *Devotée*, dir. by Rémi Lange (Les Films de l'Ange, 2008).

⁵⁹ In an interview about *Tarik el hob*, Lange acknowledges his own personal distance from the subjects he represents, but states that his desire to make the film sprang from his own experience of a relationship with a twenty-year-old Algerian-French man who found it difficult to negotiate his sexual desires and his ethnicity. See: Rémi Lange, 'Interview', (2004) <<http://tarikelhob.blogspot.co.uk/>> [accessed 23 August 2015].

Tarik el hob shows Karim travelling to Marrakech where he affirms his desires for men against the backdrop of his Maghrebi cultural heritage and traditions.

In her work on sexuality and space, Ahmed draws on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the sexual schema to argue that '[t]he body orientates itself in space [...] and this orientation is crucial to the sexualization of bodies' (emphasis in the original).⁶⁰

Like Butler, Ahmed is critical of Merleau-Ponty's universalising stance in *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, but thinks that his 'model of sexuality as a form of bodily projection' might help us to 'show how orientations "exceed" the objects they are directed toward, becoming ways of inhabiting and coexisting in the world'.⁶¹ By developing Merleau-Ponty's original insights on sexuality as a co-extension of life, Ahmed believes that we can better understand why desire should not be seen as being determined by object choice alone, 'but as involving differences in one's very relation to the world – that is, how one "faces" the world or is directed toward it'.⁶² As Ahmed explains, '[i]f we presume that sexuality is crucial to bodily orientation, to how we inhabit spaces, then the differences between how we are orientated sexually are not only a matter of "which" objects we are orientated toward, but also how we extend through our bodies into the world'.⁶³ In *Tarik el hob*, the re-orientation of Karim's desire not only puts him into contact with a range of previously unreachable objects and others, but alters his embodied existence, such that he begins to extend into different spaces and experience entirely new modes of being-in-the-world. Once he stops following the straight line of heterosexual desire, Karim begins to travel "sideways" towards Morocco, the East and his personal cultural heritage.

⁶⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 67.

⁶¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 67.

⁶² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 67-8.

⁶³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 67.

Tarik el hob opens with a scene that uses kinaesthesia to communicate a sense of its young protagonist's sexual ambiguity and queerness. The film begins with an image of Karim balancing precariously on a ledge outside his top-floor flat whilst his girlfriend anxiously tries to persuade him to descend. Lange's camera then cuts to a low angle shot of two cats sleeping on a ledge, before returning to a long shot of Karim playfully dancing and hanging off the side of the balcony. The scene ends with the young protagonist descending from the ledge and kissing his girlfriend Sihem passionately. On the one hand, these images could be seen to affirm Karim's heterosexual orientation; on the other, they articulate a sense of queerness through his unstable bodily posture and the use of camera angles that create a destabilising effect for the viewer.⁶⁴ This queer aesthetic can be understood through Katharina Lindner's work on phenomenology and film, in which she argues that queer '[f]ilms not only provide possibilities for (psychic) identification with particular characters', but open up 'opportunities for recognition and identification in tactile, muscular, and kinaesthetic terms'.⁶⁵ For Lindner, even if we cannot straightforwardly identify with a particular character as queer, certain films can convey a sense of queerness through embodied modes of identification, or unconventional narrative structure and form. In the opening sequence of *Tarik el hob*, Lange articulates a sense of queerness through the use of disorientating camera angles, but also Karim's unstable bodily posture, which functions as a metaphor for his indeterminacy and 'lack of sexual fixity'.⁶⁶ Thus, in parallel with Lindner's theorising, the sense of queerness in this opening scene does not emanate from our ability to identify psychically with Karim as a

⁶⁴ Rees-Roberts, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Katharina Lindner, 'Questions of Embodied Difference: Film and Queer Phenomenology', *NECSUS*, 1 (2012), 199-217 (pp. 209-10).

⁶⁶ Rees-Roberts, p. 38.

queer character, but from modes of identification that are embodied, proprioceptive and even kinesthetic.

If this opening scene suggests that Karim's heterosexuality is not as straightforward as it may initially appear, his heterosexual orientation becomes increasingly ambiguous the more the film progresses. Once he begins his research project, Karim begins to venture into previously inaccessible spaces (such as the gay bars of Pigalle) where he meets a range of homosexual subjects who would not otherwise have been visible as points on his horizon. However, if Karim's studies bring an array of different subjects into the newly expanded horizon of his life world, Denis M. Provencher argues that the narrative 'takes a different turn [...] when [he] meets Farid [...], a self-assured gay Algerian airline steward who helps Karim explore his own sexuality and "road to love"'.⁶⁷ From the outset, the two men's desire for one another is expressed through flirtations and furtive glances, but also via references to queer traditions in the Maghreb and the Middle East more broadly. Whereas Farid gives Karim a book of Persian love poetry that includes a hand-written dedication by Jean Genet, the two characters repeatedly discuss the body and its connections to sexuality and their Maghrebi cultural heritage. In one scene, they joke about active-passive encounters between men in the Maghreb and Karim playfully insinuates that Farid adopts the "passive" role in anal sexual relations. Elsewhere, the two men discuss marriage ceremonies between men in the Algerian city of Ouargla, whilst in one important sequence they both express a desire to travel to Egypt because they are attracted to what they perceive to be its sensuality and sensitive expression of masculinity. Like *L'Armée du salut*, these scenes encourage the spectator to contemplate the affective and erotic lives of differently located

⁶⁷ Denis M. Provencher, 'Tracing Sexual Citizenship in *Drôle de Félix* (2000) and *Tarik el hob* (2001)', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 12 (2008), 51-61 (p. 56).

sexual subjectivities; however, in stark contrast to Taïa's film, *Tarik el hob* constructs the Maghreb as a space where desire is attached to embodiment and homosexuality has a longstanding historical tradition.

If Karim and Farid seem to present the Maghreb (and Egypt in particular) as a kind of nirvana for living out their homosexual desires, Lange counterbalances their discussions with scenes that foreground the oral testimonies of a series of men of Maghrebi heritage who have experienced persecution in their home countries because of their corporeal desires for other men. Whereas the Algerian novelist Farid Tali (Farid Tali) describes his continuing sense of shame during sexual intercourse with men, an Algerian asylum seeker called Mohamed (Mohamed Garca) recounts his experiences of religious intolerance, persecution and familial rejection in his homeland.⁶⁸ In a similar way to *L'Armée du salut*, the inclusion of these interviews not only destabilises phantasmatic notions of the Maghreb as a haven for gay men, but confronts the dominant (orientalist) (mis)perceptions that associate Morocco with sexual promiscuity, lasciviousness and widespread licentious desires. Without presenting the Maghreb in a wholly negative light, *Tarik el hob* gives voice to those men who have had negative experiences in their homelands because of their self-identification as gay.

In addition to exploring Karim's queer corporeal desires against the backdrop of Maghrebi traditions and practices, Provencher argues that '[t]he references to ethnicity in this construction of same-sex desire [...] draw on and manipulate [...] traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity'.⁶⁹ This mode of representation is most evident in the scene in which Karim admits to Farid that he

⁶⁸ These non-fictional interviews add a phenomenological dimension to the narrative as they foreground the real-life experiences of a number of Maghrebi men who live in exile in France because of their corporeal desires for other men. See: Lange, 'Interview'.

⁶⁹ Provencher, 'Tracing Sexual Citizenship', p. 57.

loves male belly dance because it allows for a sensual and sensitive expression of masculinity through the body. Though Chapter Two of this thesis focused solely on female interpretations of belly dance, Stavros Stavrou Karayanni argues that there is clear evidence of the existence of male belly dance throughout Islamic history and culture. In a chapter entitled ‘The Dance of Extravagant Pleasures: Male Performers of the Orient and the Politics of the Imperial Gaze’, Karayanni claims that male belly dance performances were extremely popular not just in Egypt, but ‘over the entire Middle East and as far as Central Asia’.⁷⁰ Like female belly dance, male belly dance was historically performed by men of low social status and emphasised a movement vocabulary that consisted of ‘suggestive contortions: writhing, undulating, swaying the body with side twists, isolated muscle quivering, and rhythmically elaborate hip articulations’.⁷¹ Because of the undeniable sensuality of these movements, male performers were often deemed to be sexually available; however, as Anthony Shay points out, this dance form ‘[did] not have direct links with homosexual activity’ as ‘most of the men who [performed] it in social settings [led] largely heterosexual lives’.⁷²

Though male belly dancers did not necessarily engage in same-sex acts with male patrons, they often adopted a queer performance strategy that cultivated homoerotic desire in their exclusively male audiences. Like female belly dancers, male performers moved in a manner that emphasised sexualised areas of the body, such as the midriff, the torso and the pelvis; yet, by contrast to their female counterparts, they often wore a combination of male and female clothing that was

⁷⁰ Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, *Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), p. 77. Anthony Shay argues that male dancers existed in pre-Islamic cultures and gives the example of Bagos, a male eunuch/concubine. For more information, see: ‘The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia’, *Dance Research Journal*, 18 (2006), 137-62 (p. 139).

⁷¹ Karayanni, p. 73.

⁷² Shay, p. 148.

intended to heighten the spectacle of their performance and augment their erotic desirability as dancers.⁷³ However, if male dancers frequently dressed in men and women's garments to perform, Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay argue that they did not intend to hide their "maleness" or parody female interpretations of the dance form.⁷⁴ Rather, male belly dancers 'attracted large audiences and patrons precisely because they were popular as male performers. They did often adopt a flamboyant combination of male and female attire, but there were generally [...] subtle sartorial elements that marked the male dancer as male'.⁷⁵ In short, male belly dance blurred fixed boundaries of gendered behaviour and facilitated cross-dressing, carnal lust and the cultivation of male homoerotic desire.

Because of the queer potential of this dance performance, male belly dancers provoked anxiety amongst the white (male) colonisers and were heavily denigrated during the era of French colonial rule in the Maghreb. Not only were their bodies considered to exhibit a sensuality and emotional expressivity that was deemed "inappropriate" for men, but their physical movements were believed to contravene 'conventional expectations of corporeal gendered behaviour' in the West.⁷⁶ Unlike male ballet dancers, who were expected to remain strong and virile in order to offset any accusations of effeminacy, male belly dancers troubled dominant gendered binaries and instituted homoerotic desire in their (white) male spectators.⁷⁷ To a greater degree than their female counterparts, male belly dancers were perceived to be threatening because, as Karayanni explains, they were considered to constitute 'an

⁷³ Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay, *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 14.

⁷⁴ Fisher and Shay, p. 14.

⁷⁵ Shay, p. 150.

⁷⁶ Karayanni, p. 73.

⁷⁷ Karayanni, p. 76.

act of violence against [sanctioned] forms of kinesthetic, sexual, and [gendered] embodiment' in the West.⁷⁸

Today, spontaneous belly dance performances occur relatively frequently at communal celebrations in the Maghreb, but public dances are rarely performed by men because many people believe that they are incapable of making the corporeal movements needed to dance professionally.⁷⁹ This misguided notion stems in part from the suppression of male belly dance practices during the French colonial era in the Maghreb, but can also be attributed to recent feminist attempts to rehabilitate belly dance as what Karayanni refers to as a 'remnant of women's fertility rites associated with primeval goddess worship'.⁸⁰ As outlined in Chapter Two, these efforts have certainly helped to renew interest in belly dance as a source of female empowerment; however, Karayanni warns that placing too much emphasis on the essentially "feminine" nature of this dance form is wrong 'because it predicates itself on certain romantic notions that have distorted crucial aspects of [its] traditions'.⁸¹ Despite the fluidity and queerness attached to male belly dance in ancient Islamic cultures, it is currently (and erroneously) understood as an exclusively female dance practice that does not accommodate male bodies and cannot be executed "authentically" by men.

In the first belly dance sequence in *Tarik el hob*, Lange uses Karim's dancing body to challenge the idea that belly dance is an innately female activity and to communicate a sense of his protagonist's queerness to the spectator. Following Karim's admission that he is attracted to belly dance because it enables an embodied

⁷⁸ Karayanni, p. 97.

⁷⁹ Shay, p. 148. One of Egypt's most prominent belly dancers, Fifi Abdo, has reinforced this regressive attitude: '[i]t's impossible for a man to dance real belly dancing. The phrase itself describes the part from the hips to the waist and a man lacks the energy that a woman has'. Quoted in Shay, p. 148.

⁸⁰ Karayanni, p. 71.

⁸¹ Karayanni, p. 71.

expression of masculinity, Lange cuts to an image of the young protagonist dancing in front of a mirror in the privacy of his own bedroom. As Karim dances, Lange's camera focuses on the circular undulations of his waist and hips, as well as the expressive movements of his arms and hands. These corporeal movements may appear queer to Western audiences insofar as they show a male body dancing in a manner that has typically been conceived of as "feminine" in the West, but also because of Lange's disorientating camera angles and disjointed editing techniques. As Karim shimmies and twists, his dancing body is filmed via a series of overhead shots, slanted camera angles, close-ups and extreme close-ups that destabilise any sense of spectatorial control over the image and invoke a feeling of disorientation in the viewer. The effect of these filming devices can be grasped through Barker's work on cinematic motion, in which she argues that '[f]ilm and viewer share certain deep-seated muscular habits, beginning with the very tendency to move through the world in an upright position. We and the film are both inclined that way, as we are inclined to move and look forward, to face things directly'.⁸² Because both the camera and the viewer are predisposed to moving and looking in such a manner, Barker believes that they can become disorientated if they are positioned at a different angle or are forced to look at things slantwise.⁸³

Building upon Barker's analysis, Lindner argues that disorientating camera angles can disrupt our visual mastery over the image and are often used to express 'non-normative or queer orientations toward the world and others'.⁸⁴ Insofar as they force us to view the world from an oblique or disorientating angle, Lindner contends that disjointed filming techniques 'can be read, and *felt*, as [...] a foregrounding and "making strange"' of that which is 'straightforward, restrictive, and conventionally

⁸² Barker, p. 81.

⁸³ Barker, p. 81.

⁸⁴ Lindner, 'Questions of Embodied Difference', p. 211.

orientated' (emphasis in the original).⁸⁵ In the belly dance sequence in *Tarik el hob*, Lange's use of a variety of different camera angles creates a degree of confusion and ambiguity, but also articulates a sense of queerness by disorientating the spectator's spatial awareness and making "straightforward" orientations appear "strange". In a similar manner to the opening sequence of the film, Lange's filming techniques not only communicate his protagonist's queerness, but confuse conventionally-held viewpoints and throw dominant assumptions into a state of disequilibrium. In the same way as the films studied in Chapter Two use a mobile camera, close-ups and extreme close-ups to invoke kinesthetic empathy in the spectator, *Tarik el hob* adopts a disorientating filming style that destabilises the spectator's proprioceptive awareness and troubles fixed or conventional expectations.



Figure 19. Karim dressed as Vénus de Milo in the belly dance sequence in Morocco

The next belly dance sequence uses Karim's corporeality to break down intercultural barriers and articulate a more transnational form of queerness. Though

⁸⁵ Lindner, 'Situated Bodies, Cinematic Orientations', pp. 159-60.

Karim is initially reluctant to dance in front of Farid, the second extended dance scene shows him dressing up as Vénus de Milo and performing a sensual belly dance for his beloved on the balcony of their *riad* in Morocco. Whereas in the first belly dance sequence Karim is dressed in jeans and a jumper, this time he performs for his lover in a long white sheet that is tied at the waist so that he resembles the Greek goddess of love and beauty. This outfit sartorially signifies Karim's queerness as it references an iconic female figure from ancient Greek civilization, but also because it uses Selim's bare and slender torso to allude to ancient Islamic traditions that celebrated cross-dressing and the boy-like figure of the male dancer. To a greater degree than the previous belly dance sequence, Karim's corporeal movements collapse intercultural barriers and establish parallels between the (homo)sexual practices and ideals of (ancient) Eastern and Western civilizations.

In addition to drawing parallels between Eastern and Western traditions, this scene positions belly dance as a crucial tool in Karim's sexual re-orientation and identity formation. In contrast to the first belly dance sequence, Lange films Karim's dancing body via an extended tracking shot that captures the fluidity of his bodily movements, but also indicates his increasing sense of ease with his queer corporeal desires for Farid. As Karim dances, he actively invites Farid and the spectator to look at his body; however, rather than objectifying his protagonist, Lange deflects the dominant (male) gaze by focusing on the power and pleasure his protagonist experiences when he dances. In a similar way to Lilia in *Satin rouge*, belly dance not only provides Karim with a renewed sense of agency and self-confidence, but emerges as a metaphor for his sexual liberation and homosexual subjectification. At the end of this scene, Karim's dancing body is positioned as an outlet for a more

expressive sexual identity that embodies masculine and feminine traits, and has roots in both Eastern and Western cultures.

While these scenes emphasise Karim's queer corporeality through dance, Lange takes care to avoid objectifying his protagonists through the use of a digital video camera that invites a more haptic mode of looking. In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Marks argues that digital 'video can be haptic, and explore the eroticism to which the haptic image appeals'.⁸⁶ Though video has traditionally been thought of as a distant medium because of its shallow depth of field, Marks argues that its 'electronic texture' is multisensory and tactile and can be used to communicate a kind of 'visual eroticism that is different from the mastery associated with optical visibility'.⁸⁷ For Marks, video's 'denial of depth of vision' is not distancing or immaterial, but 'enables an embodied perception, the viewer responding to the video as to another body and to the screen as to another skin'.⁸⁸ In *Tarik el hob*, this quality of visual eroticism is most evident in the scene in which Farid watches Karim as he showers in his hotel room in Morocco. Rather than replicating Farid's desirous gaze, Lange films Karim through grainy, unclear close-ups that remain in close proximity to the surface of his bare and blemished body, but simultaneously undermine the possibility of visual mastery or voyeuristic gratification. For Nick Rees-Roberts, this representational strategy is important as it '[blanks] out gay culture's commercial and aesthetic demands for the *keur* pin-up. Without de-sexualising his characters, Lange shows their attraction to be less body-obsessed than is the case in standard gay representation'.⁸⁹ Put simply, Lange exploits the haptic qualities of digital video in order to express his two central

⁸⁶ Marks, *Touch*, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Marks, *Touch*, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Marks, *Touch*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Rees-Roberts, p. 39.

characters' desire for one another, whilst simultaneously refusing to objectify their bodies or compromise their agency in any way.



Figure 20. A still from the documentary on male marriages

If Lange avoids reducing his protagonists to objects, *Tarik el hob* nonetheless exploits the relationship between the body as an object of desire and the body as a desiring subject. Whereas Karim is constructed as a subject who takes on an active directorial role when filming for his research project, he is also positioned as the passive object of Farid's desirous gaze.⁹⁰ Likewise, although Farid begins the narrative as Karim's object of study, he soon begins to adopt a more active role when he takes control of the camera and its inquisitive gaze. This blurring of subject-object distinctions emerges most clearly in the film's final scene in Marrakech, in which Lange foregrounds an image of Farid placing a ring onto Karim's finger, before cutting to a similar still from the aforementioned documentary about marriage

⁹⁰ Provencher, 'Tracing Sexual Citizenship', p. 57.

between men in the Siwa Oasis in Egypt. While the juxtaposition of these two shots places the men's "marriage" within the context of its historical and cultural precedents, it can also be understood via Merleau-Ponty's famous passage in *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, in which he argues that touching hands can be used to demonstrate the point of exchange or reversibility between subjectivity and objectivity. For Merleau-Ponty, our ability to simultaneously touch and be touched can be read as a metaphor for self-other relations as it demonstrates the co-existence of subjectivity and objectivity in one single embodied being. As Merleau-Ponty observes:

[q]uand je presse mes deux mains l'une contre l'autre, il ne s'agit donc pas de deux sensations que j'éprouverais ensemble, comme on perçoit deux objets juxtaposés, mais d'une organisation ambiguë où les deux mains peuvent alterner dans la fonction de "touchant" et de "touchée".⁹¹

In the final scene of *Tarik el hob*, this inter-changeability of subject-object distinctions is articulated through the repeated images of two hands touching, but also via Karim's final words to Farid: 'tu peux me la mettre maintenant'. On the one hand, this dialogue could be seen to refer to the ring that Farid places on Karim's finger (common words for wedding ring ('alliance' or 'bague') in French are feminine); however, it might also be read as an indicator of the young protagonist's willingness to adopt the passive position in anal sex (slang words for penis ('queue', 'bite' or 'teub') in French are often feminine). This *double entendre* is significant as it reinforces Merleau-Ponty's assertion that desire is present in every aspect of existence, but also because it confounds active-passive models of sexuality in the Maghreb by suggesting that the ostensibly "straight" male will become the passive partner in the projected homosexual encounter. This final scene thus uses Karim's

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, p. 109.

body to accentuate the connection between his ethnicity and his sexuality, and to deconstruct the relationship between heterosexuality, active masculinity and penetration that dominates discussions on erotic encounters between men in the Maghreb. In stark contrast to *L'Armée du salut*, which constructs Morocco as a space that is alienating and repressive for homosexual men, *Tarik el hob* concludes by showing Karim turning away from Paris, the self-proclaimed capital of human rights, to affirm his desires in relation to his Maghrebi cultural heritage.

Embodying Queer Sexual Citizenship: Amal Bedjaoui's *Un fils*

Similar to *Tarik el hob*, *Un fils* focuses on the embodied existence of a queer Maghrebi-French man who lives and works in Paris. Unlike Lange, Amal Bedjaoui was born in Algeria, but moved to Paris where she studied filmmaking at the *Institut des hautes études cinématographiques* (IDHEC). After shooting three short films, Bedjaoui made a mid- to feature-length film called *Un fils*, which centres on a cross-dressing man of Maghrebi heritage named Selim (Mohamed Hicham) who makes a living as a sex worker in the bars and nightclubs of Paris. For the majority of the narrative, *Un fils* oscillates between daytime scenes, in which Selim visits his father Omar (Hammou Graïa), and night-time scenes, in which we gain access to the subcultural world that he inhabits.⁹² Like *L'Armée du salut*, *Un fils* draws the spectator into the lived reality of Selim's material experiences of sexual non-conformity; however, in stark contrast to Taïa's film, Bedjaoui divorces sexuality from Maghrebi ethnicity and examines Selim's corporeality in relation to (queer) French codes of gender and desire. Given the film's focus on queer French modes of existence, this section begins by outlining how sexual citizenship has been

⁹² I use the masculine pronoun here because Selim refers to himself in such a manner throughout the film.

conceptualised in contemporary France; thereafter, it examines the representation of Selim's diasporic body in space and time in *Un fils*.

Sexual Citizenship in France

In *Queer French: Globalization, Language and Sexual Citizenship*, Provencher examines the ways in which dominant and alternative modes of sexuality in France differ from the identitarian models that are prevalent in most Anglo-American societies today.⁹³ Analysing dominant French notions of identity, Provencher argues that 'the French language of sexual citizenship [...] does not tout individualism', but advocates the downplaying of difference in favour of adherence to the dominant white French heterosexual norm.⁹⁴ Because French republican universalism is often alienating for citizens that are distanced from this dominant heteronormative norm, Provencher claims that many non-normative sexual subjects in France have '[crafted] an alternative "queer" model' of desire that is indebted to the writings of Jean Genet.⁹⁵ Though he admits that many gay and lesbian people in France have never read Genet's writings, Provencher believes that the author offers a 'model of dissident sexual citizenship' that 'challenges a variety of social norms' and 'prescribes a trajectory for the modern homosexual without necessarily developing a "homosexual identity"'.⁹⁶ For Provencher, Genet's work provides queer French sexual subjects with a non-identitarian language of desire that confounds dominant sexual categories and celebrates the space of the margins, the abject and the deplorable.⁹⁷

⁹³ Denis M. Provencher, *Queer French: Globalization, Language and Sexual Citizenship* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), p. 11.

⁹⁴ Provencher, *Queer French*, p. 53.

⁹⁵ Provencher, *Queer French*, p. 11.

⁹⁶ Provencher, *Queer French*, p. 79.

⁹⁷ Provencher, *Queer French*, p. 55.



Figure 21. The opening sequence of *Un fils*

In *Un fils*, the character of Selim arguably conforms to Provencher’s model of “dissident sexual citizenship” insofar as he lives his gender and sexuality in ways that challenge assimilationist models of sexuality in France, but do not subscribe to the identitarian expressions of desire found in many Euro-American societies today. The young protagonist’s dissident mode of sexual citizenship is evident from the opening sequence of the film, which begins with a medium close-up of the back of his head and shoulders as he cleans a bathroom sink and mirror. Whilst the silence and bright strobe lighting imbue the image with an almost ethereal feel, this sense of calm and serenity is soon interrupted by the disembodied sound of heavy panting in an off-screen space. In *Phenomenology and the Future of Film*, Jenny Chamarette argues that sound and image are usually intertwined in the experience of watching a film, such that ‘[s]ound informs the ways in which viewers apprehend, receive and interpret images’.⁹⁸ Here, Bedjaoui’s use of a disembodied sound not only disrupts

⁹⁸ Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 94.

the usual contiguity between sound and image in cinema, but appeals to a more carnal and embodied mode of apprehension that pulls the spectator into the immediacy of Selim's sensuous experience. In a similar way to the first sequence in *L'Armée du salut*, these de-contextualised opening images establish an inter-corporeal connection between spectator and protagonist that plunges the spectator into the material reality of the nocturnal underworld that Selim inhabits.

After just a few seconds, Bedjaoui's camera stops focusing on Selim and tracks backwards to reveal a couple having sex in a bathtub to his right. As the couple have sex, the man (Xavier Maly) stares relentlessly at Selim, before getting out of the bathtub and gently stroking his hand as he cleans the sink. For Waldron, this gesture enables Bedjaoui to contrast 'the trick's limp, coarse, hirsute body' with her central protagonist's toned torso, musculature and immaculate skin.⁹⁹ Certainly, Bedjaoui's camerawork juxtaposes Selim's perfectly sculpted torso with the classically less desirable physicality of the older white male client; however, it also positions the younger protagonist's body as the object of white male sexual gratification and pleasure. In stark contrast to *Tarik el hob*, which represents Karim's corporeality through a haptic lens that undermines attempts at objectification, the opening sequence of *Un fils* sets Selim's body up as an object to be admired and desired. Although Bedjaoui uses sensory acoustics to draw the spectator into her character's experience of dissident sexual citizenship, the opening minutes of her film thus risk reinforcing the dominant neo-colonial discourses that position the "beur" male body as a source of white male sexual fantasy and desire.

⁹⁹ Waldron, 'Sexual/Social (Re)Orientations', p. 186.



Figure 22. Selim and Louise in the first cross-dressing scene in *Un fils*

If this opening sequence highlights Selim's "maleness" and positions his body as the objectified other of a neo-colonial gaze, the scene in which we see him cross-dressed for the first time forces us to reassess our initial understanding of his body and embodied desires. The scene begins with Bedjaoui's camera roaming slowly around a dimly-lit nightclub, until it eventually comes to settle on Selim's friend and co-worker, Louise (Isabelle Pichaud). As Louise looks at something in front of her, Bedjaoui builds suspense by refusing to follow her gaze, such that Selim enters the shot from the left in a bright red sequined vest top and jeans. In Judith Halberstam's work on transgender characters in film, she argues that '[t]he exposure of a trans character whom the audience has already accepted as male or female, causes the audience to reorient themselves in relation to the film's past in order to read the film's present and prepare themselves for the film's future'.¹⁰⁰ In the initial exposure sequence in *Un fils*, Selim's body is positioned as a site of incoherence

¹⁰⁰ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 77.

between the masculine gender the spectator thought he possessed and the less than determinate gendered identity he actually embodies. Similar to the first belly dance sequence in *Tarik el hob*, Selim's indeterminate identity is not only legible at the level of his body, but throws the spectator's initial understanding of his gendered embodiment into doubt.

If this scene offers a somewhat sensationalist revelation of Selim's cross-dressing, Waldron argues that it also demonstrates the extent to which the young protagonist's performance of his gender 'cannot be allied with any one of the two conventional poles of sexed physicality and conduct'.¹⁰¹ In a similar manner to *Tarik el hob*, *Un fils* represents Selim's body in ways that transcend fixed binaries of masculinity and femininity; however, to a greater degree than Lange's film, Bedjaoui uses her character's corporeal comportment and gestures to confound conventional understandings of gender as grounded in anatomical "truths". This representational strategy can be understood through Gayle Salamon's work in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, in which she seeks to understand the lived and embodied experiences of people who do not conform to the gender assigned to them at birth. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's work on the sexual schema, Salamon argues that the "truth" of a body's gender cannot be ascertained from its visible material contours alone, but lies in the interplay between that body's materiality and the subject's psychical conception of themselves. As Salamon explains:

[w]hat one might read from the contours of the body is something less than the truth of that body's sex, which cannot be located in an external observation of the body, but exists instead in that relation between the material and the ideal, between the perceiver and the perceived, between the material particularity of any one body and the

¹⁰¹ Waldron, 'Sexual/Social (Re)Orientations', p. 190.

network of forces and contexts that shape the material and the meaning of that body.¹⁰²

Because the “felt” sense of the body is what delivers its perceptual “truth”, Salamon believes that gender cannot be understood through binary distinctions that are grounded in anatomical difference alone. Like Karim in *Tarik el hob*, the physical contours of Selim’s body position him as anatomically male, but his clothes, behaviour and gestures manifest a gender that exists beyond the framework of binary thinking. In contrast to Louise, Selim sprawls out over the sofa, such that his legs are splayed and his body takes up a significant amount of space around him. For Waldron, this casual comportment combines with Selim’s musculature to connote ‘a virile model of masculinity’, whilst his make-up and sartorial choices foreground the more stereotypically feminine traits of his embodiment.¹⁰³ He is dressed in a sparkly red top that he has borrowed from Louise and a close-up of his face reveals that he is wearing eyeliner to foreground his eyes and blusher that accentuates his cheekbones. In a similar way to male belly dancers, the material contours of Selim’s body position him as male, but he embodies a gender that cannot be understood through hegemonic conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity.

In addition to troubling gendered binaries, the first cross-dressing sequence challenges dominant representations of Maghrebi-French men in contemporary French cinema. In *French Queer Cinema*, Rees-Roberts argues that images of “*beur*” men in recent French film and pornography are often underpinned by a ‘lingering neo-colonial fantasy of Arab masculinity’ as ‘hypersexual, exclusively virile, active’.¹⁰⁴ For Rees-Roberts, white gay culture in France tends to trap “*beur*” men

¹⁰² Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 62.

¹⁰³ Waldron, ‘Sexual/Social (Re)Orientations’, p. 190.

¹⁰⁴ Rees-Roberts, p. 17.

within a neo-colonialist framework that fetishises hyper-masculinity and undermines the possibility of gendered ambiguity or male passivity.¹⁰⁵ Given the prevalence of this representational strategy in queer French film and pornography, Bedjaoui's decision to foreground her central protagonist's gender indeterminacy could be seen to be subversive as it overcomes the emphasis on virility and active sexuality that features so heavily in dominant representations of queer Maghrebi-French men in France. However, if *Un fils* uses Selim's embodied performance of his gender to offer a gentler vision of Maghrebi-French masculinity, this representational strategy arguably risks reinforcing the associations between femininity, male passivity and homosexuality that Hayes claims are so prominent in articulations of same-sex desire amongst men from the Maghreb.¹⁰⁶

Despite the fact that *Un fils* subverts dominant French stereotypes, it nonetheless foregrounds Selim's sexual identity at the price of a more nuanced examination of his ethnic alterity. Though Selim visits his father Omar on a daily basis, Bedjaoui represents their relationship in universalising terms that provide few overt references to their ethnic distinction from the dominant white French population. By contrast to Karim's apartment, which is adorned with posters of the Egyptian musicals of Farid Al-Atrache, Omar's home is practically empty of signifiers that relate to his Maghrebi cultural inheritance or homeland. There is a small verse of the Koran hanging in the hallway and a large ceramic bowl decorated in Islamic art sits on the dining room table; however, as Waldron points out, '[b]eyond these subtle references, [Selim's] existence is stripped almost completely bare of objects and customs that hail from the Maghreb'.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Selim and his father speak solely in French and the film's most prominent piece of diegetic music

¹⁰⁵ Rees-Roberts, p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ Hayes, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Waldron, 'Sexual/Social (Re)Orientations', p. 188.

is a sombre American blues number entitled *Love Me Papa*. Whilst this representational strategy enables Bedjaoui to give her narrative of filial estrangement a more universal slant, it also conforms to dominant discourses on the assimilation of ethnic difference in republican France.¹⁰⁸ By contrast to *Tarik el hob*, which locates Karim's body in spaces that are replete with references to his Maghrebi cultural inheritance, *Un fils* downplays Selim's ethnic difference and constructs his body in relation to (queer) French codes of gender, ethnicity and desire.

If Selim lives his body in ways that diminish his ethnic "otherness", many of the white French characters in the film objectify him because of his corporeal alterity. For instance, in the nightclub scene, Louise attempts to seduce an older man named Max (Aurélien Recoing), but his gaze remains fixated on Selim who is sitting nonchalantly in the corner of the club. Similar to the opening sequence, Selim is constructed as the object of white male sexual desire; however, in contrast to stereotypical assumptions, the two protagonists' subsequent sexual encounter is coded in reciprocal, affectionate and even tender terms. In her work on self-other relations, Beauvoir argues that reciprocity can be achieved through the 'libre reconnaissance de chaque individu en l'autre, chacun posant à la foi soi et l'autre comme objet et comme sujet dans un mouvement réciproque.'¹⁰⁹ In such instances, Beauvoir believes that each lover 's'éprouverait [...] comme soi-même et comme l'autre; aucun n'abdiquerait sa transcendance, aucun ne se mutilerait; tous deux dévoileraient ensemble dans le monde des valeurs et des fins'.¹¹⁰ However, if Beauvoir believes that reciprocity can be achieved through egalitarian inter-personal relations, she argues that it requires a constant effort to ensure that each participant

¹⁰⁸ In an interview, Bedjaoui claims that she wanted the narrative to remain as universal as possible: '[j]e voulais que ce film touche à tout le monde, que tout le monde puisse s'identifier à ces personnages [...], que le fils se raconte un fils et le père se raconte un père'. See: *Un fils*.

¹⁰⁹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: Les Faits et Les Mythes*, p. 232.

¹¹⁰ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: L'Expérience vécue*, p. 571.

does not attempt to possess or dominate the other, but assumes ‘la contingence de l’autre, c’est-à-dire ses manques, ses limites, et sa gratuité originelle’.¹¹¹

Examining the concept of reciprocity in relation to cinema and spectatorship, Sobchack argues that certain films encourage the spectator to ‘[feel] his or her literal body as only one side of *an irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity* that has as its other side the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen’ (emphasis in the original).¹¹² Similar to Beauvoir’s theorising, Sobchack believes that some films use a combination of synaesthesia and coenaesthesia to blur the boundaries between self and other and thereby undermine the idea of mutually exclusive locations or subject positions. As Sobchack explains, reciprocal encounters between spectator and film can give us the impression of ‘being *both* “here” and “there”, [of] being able *both* to sense *and* be sensible, to be *both* the subject *and* the object of tactile desire’ (emphasis in the original).¹¹³ In the first lovemaking scene between Max and Selim in *Un fils*, the use of close-ups and extreme close-ups, blurred images, ambient sound and dark lighting seeks to plunge the spectator into the explicit eroticism of the scene, but also blurs intersubjective boundaries, such that the audience is encouraged to share the protagonists’ shifting subject positions as they achieve a state of reciprocity through their pleasurable erotic encounter. In contrast to the rather brutal active-passive discourse that features prominently in *L’Armée du salut* and *Tarik el hob*, this scene configures same-sex relations in reciprocal terms that not only overcome neo-colonial hierarchies of power, but move beyond the conventional notions of active masculinity that dominate cultural representations of queer Maghrebi(-French) men in both France and the Maghreb.

¹¹¹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: L’Expérience vécue*, pp. 554-5.

¹¹² Sobchack, p. 79.

¹¹³ Sobchack, p. 66.

However, the sense of equality that is established between Selim and Max in the love-making scene is undermined when it is revealed that Max experiences the sexual encounter as nothing more than a source of visceral pleasure and transient romantic connection. As Selim seems to have interpreted the older man's desire for affection and sex as the beginnings of a relationship, he feels hurt when Max tells him that he no longer wants to see him again and attempts to pay him for his services. Selim's response to Max's rejection can be grasped through Ahmed's work on the embodied and affective experience of pain in interpersonal encounters. For Ahmed, pain is 'an unpleasant or negative sensation' that sometimes 'corresponds to bodily damage', but can also be felt in emotional, subjective and psychological terms.¹¹⁴ Like pleasure, 'pain recalls us to our body surfaces' and makes us acutely aware of our existence as material embodied beings; however, in contrast to the experience of pleasure, pain is an isolating emotion that can often lead to 'a body that *turns in on itself*' and away from others (emphasis in the original).¹¹⁵ As Ahmed explains, '[b]odily surfaces become reformed not only in instances when we might move away from objects that cause injury, but also in the process of *moving towards the body and seeking to move away from the pain*' (emphasis in the original).¹¹⁶ In the rejection sequence in *Un fils*, Selim's hurt is articulated through his wounded facial expressions, but also via his movement "inwards" and away from the other that is inadvertently causing him pain. He looks down at the ground in a dejected manner, before leaving Max's apartment without waiting to be accompanied to the door. In marked contrast to the lovemaking scene, this sequence constructs pain as a profoundly isolating emotion that reconstitutes intersubjective barriers and undermines the state of reciprocity the two men achieved through their pleasurable

¹¹⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 23.

¹¹⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 26.

¹¹⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 26.

erotic encounter. When read in tandem with Merleau-Ponty's theorising on the sexual schema, *Un fils* implies that Selim's sexuality infuses every aspect of his existence and cannot be separated from his lived and embodied experiences or emotions. Like Abdellah in *L'Armée du salut*, this scene shows that Selim does not divorce desire from affect, but experiences his interior emotions in an intensely corporeal way.

If this scene reconstructs self-other distinctions, the ensuing sequence suggests that Selim's non-normative body has no place within the heteronormative structures of republican France. Following Max's rejection, Selim steals some drugs that he finds in a box on a shelf in the older man's apartment. Later that evening, he is stopped by a group of transphobic men who brutally beat him because he is cross-dressed in flared jeans and a diamante vest top. Upon returning to his hotel room, Selim ingests the stolen drugs and dies. This unexpected unfolding of events is extremely pessimistic and suggests that contemporary French culture's emphasis on heteronormativity ultimately produces a situation in which homophobic and transphobic violence can and does occur. Whereas *Tarik el hob* depicts its two central protagonists turning away from France to explore their desires in relation to their Maghrebi cultural heritage, *Un fils* uses Selim's death to imply that homophobia and transphobia still exist in a country that is otherwise considered to be the cradle of human rights.¹¹⁷ Although in different ways, these two films thus challenge the imperialist assumptions that position France and the West as more tolerant of sexual difference than the "repressed" and "repressive" countries that make up the Maghreb and the Middle East.

¹¹⁷ This point is arguably reinforced by the homophobic marches that took place across France in protest against François Hollande's gay marriage bill (March 2013).

Conclusion

The films examined in this chapter all represent queer Maghrebi(-French) men who experience their sexuality as a fundamental component of their existence. Whereas *L'Armée du salut* focuses on a Moroccan teenager who lives his desires in a corporeal way, *Tarik el hob* and *Un fils* concentrate on young Maghrebi-French men whose sexual and spatial (re-)orientations structure every aspect of their lived and embodied existences. In all three films, desire and affect are shown to be intimately interrelated; however, the directors offer very different portrayals of their protagonists' emotional experiences in interpersonal relationships. Whilst almost all of Abdellah's sexual encounters are coded in exploitative terms in *L'Armée du salut*, *Tarik el hob* and *Un fils* offer fairly positive representations of same-sex desire that ultimately unsettle active-passive models of sexuality amongst Maghrebi(-French) men. In *Un fils*, in particular, the erotic encounter institutes a state of reciprocity that breaks down intersubjective barriers and articulates a (momentary) feeling of mutuality. Despite differences in approach, these films all mediate self-other relations through the body and highlight the extent to which their protagonists experience their desires in physical as well as psychological terms.

If these three films construct sexuality as an inherent aspect of existence, they offer very different depictions of their protagonists' relationship to the Maghreb and their Maghrebi cultural inheritance. In *L'Armée du salut*, Taïa constructs Morocco as a space that facilitates the sexual exploitation of young boys' bodies and is alienating and oppressive for homosexual men. Though Taïa uses his film to campaign for greater sexual freedom for homosexual subjects from the Maghreb, his representational strategy arguably risks cementing the neo-colonial discourses that position Morocco and the East as sexually repressive spaces that are less liberated

than the “tolerant” and “progressive” West. Such reductive associations are arguably overcome in *Tarik el hob*, which shows its central protagonist turning away from French models of desire and embracing his homosexuality through references to his Maghrebi cultural heritage. In contrast to both of these films, *Un fils* downplays Selim’s ethnic embodiment and constructs his sexuality through allusions to (queer) French codes of gender and desire. The opposing approaches of these three films could be interpreted as a result of their directors’ own lived experiences and differing relationships to the Maghreb. Whereas Bedjaoui might identify more readily with French republican values because of her status as a Maghrebi-French woman living in France, identity politics may appeal more to Taïa because he has had direct experience of oppression in Morocco. Whatever the reason for their differences, these three films all demonstrate the extent to which queer Maghrebi(-French) men’s experience of their sexuality does not form a complete or monolithic whole and is determined by external factors, such as space and context.

Importantly, none of the films examined in this chapter engage with the question of religion, even though Islam is often forwarded as one of the principal reasons why homosexuality is not accepted in the MENA region today. Given the amount of references to Maghrebi cultural traditions in *L’Armée du salut* and *Tarik el hob* in particular, the lack of attention paid to Islam is noticeable and begs us to question why filmmakers from both France and the Maghreb are so reluctant to engage with the issue of religion in their films. Certainly, this reluctance could be due to the fact that Islam is an extremely contentious issue and one that is still considered to be too “taboo” a topic to be broached; however, these films’ strategic avoidance of the subject creates a problematic silence that threatens to strengthen the restrictive view that contemporary interpretations of Islam cannot be reconciled with

homosexual desire. Rather than attempting to engage with the more liberal approaches cited in the *Qur'an* in the introduction to this chapter, these films arguably reinforce a notion of Islam as a homophobic religion that is incompatible with homosexual lives.

This significant shortfall notwithstanding, it should be noted that *L'Armée du salut*, *Tarik el hob* and *Un fils* all make brave and crucial interventions into the paucity of nuanced representations of queer Maghrebi(-French) men on contemporary Maghrebi and French cinematic screens. Not only do these three films challenge white Euro-American formulations of sexual identity, but they successfully expand the parameters of queerness to include the lived and embodied experiences of men of Maghrebi heritage.

Conclusion

The overarching aim of this thesis has been to convey the pivotal, yet overlooked role that corporeality plays in articulating identity, the emotions and self-other relations in films featuring people of Maghrebi heritage. In order to do so, it has examined a series of recent Maghrebi and French films that feature Maghrebi(-French/Swiss) people and mediate their characters' identities and intersubjective interactions with the "other" through their bodies. Whereas the films in Chapter One position their protagonists' bodies as vehicles for the expression of cultural identity and intercultural exchange between the countries of the Maghreb and France, those in Chapters Two and Three show women of Maghrebi heritage resisting patriarchal and religious controls and (re)claiming their (gendered) identities through their bodies. In the films in Chapter Four, the directors foreground queer Maghrebi(-French) men and position their bodies as sites for the expression of sexual identity, self-other relations and dominant attitudes to same-sex desire in the Maghreb and France. Despite differences in approach, all of the films examined in this corpus construct consciousness as incarnate, foreground the intertwining of the senses and emphasise the embodied nature of emotional experience.

This accent on embodiment is further evidenced through the cinematographic style adopted by the directors throughout this corpus. Without exception, the films studied here encourage the engagement of the senses and privilege filming techniques (such as a haptic gaze, dark lighting, indistinct images, mobile camerawork, close-ups and extreme close-ups) that elicit a bodily response in the spectator and downplay the importance of vision. As discussed in the introduction, this representational strategy echoes Marks' work on the haptic, in which she argues

that films that are made in-between cultures often aim to ‘represent configurations of sense perception differently from those of modern Euro-American societies, where optical visuality has been accorded a unique supremacy’.¹ In parallel with Marks’ theorising, the directors in this corpus arguably appeal to the multi-sensory as a means to subvert the dominance of vision, which has traditionally been associated with a (neo-)colonial desire to objectify the “other” in the Maghreb. This argument is evidenced most clearly in the films in Chapter Two, which deploy the devices of kinesthetic empathy and the haptic to complicate the spectator’s ability to “know” and control their protagonists via a totalising gaze. In appealing to a more embodied approach to looking, the films in this corpus arguably attempt to pull the spectator into an intimate relationship with the image that minimises the distance needed for objectification and helps to break down intersubjective barriers of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and cultural identity.

Because of the emphasis that these films place on the body and the multi-sensuous, corporeal phenomenology has been invaluable in informing my understanding of their representations of embodied subjectivity for two main reasons. Firstly, as argued in the introduction, phenomenology’s emphasis on non-dualism and the mind-body connection destabilises the dominant (neo-)colonial discourses that champion the reason and rationality of the West and devalue the “irrationality” of all non-Western cultures. As these discourses have traditionally been used to reduce Maghrebi(-French) people to their somatic alterity, phenomenological theory has helped me to better understand how the films in this corpus might destabilise dualistic thinking and (re)claim the Maghrebi(-French) body as a source of agency and empowerment. Reading the films in this corpus

¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. xiii.

through a phenomenological lens has thus highlighted the important role that they play in disrupting the dominant (disembodied) tradition upon which criticisms of Islamic “irrationality” and “inferiority” rest.

Secondly, although phenomenology is ostensibly Western in origin, applying its insights to this field has allowed me to reveal points of inter-connection between Eastern and Western philosophical and theoretical thought on the body. In the introduction, I drew on the work of scholars, such as Shaikh, Kugle, Lazreg and Marks, to suggest that phenomenology shares many similarities with spiritual, theoretical and philosophical discourses on the body in and from the MENA because of its non-dualistic foundations and emphasis on lived experience. This argument was confirmed throughout the films in this corpus and was illustrated with particular clarity in the penultimate sequence of *Exils*, in which Naïma’s engagement in a Sufi trance ritual allowed her to (re)incorporate her mind and achieve a state of transcendent unity with herself. In suggesting that conceptualisations of consciousness as incarnate are present in Islamic theology and in contemporary cultural practice in and from the Maghreb, the films studied in this thesis arguably destabilise the dominant media and political discourses that construct contemporary Eastern and Western civilizations as fundamentally incompatible.

Despite the fact that the films examined here undermine dualistic thinking and trouble East-West binaries, many of them show their protagonists entering into a state of severe alienation from their bodies because of the patriarchal values in contemporary Maghrebi societies. Whereas the characters in Chapter One are portrayed as alienated in Algeria because of its misogynistic traditions and customs, the heroines in Chapter Three are shown to be estranged because of patriarchal religious traditions that place restrictions on their corporeal movements and

behaviours. In *L'Armée du salut*, in Chapter Four, Abdellah's corporeal desires for men cause him to feel alienated within the heteronormative structures of the family and (rural) Moroccan society. Importantly, in all of the films cited above, alienation is felt at the level of the body and emerges as a pre-reflective and primordial response to the seemingly patriarchal traditions of the Maghreb. Some of the films in this corpus could be therefore be seen to reinforce the dominant (Western) stereotypes that construct the Maghreb as a hetero-patriarchal space that alienates women and homosexual men and is incompatible with the supposedly more liberal values of France and the West.

Because some of the films in this corpus represent the Maghreb as an oppressive place, they could arguably be accused of indulging in reductive stereotyping to attract Western viewers. As discussed in the introduction, Armes argues that contemporary Arab cinema is often designed to appeal to international audiences, 'European funding organizations and potential coproduction collaborators'.² Similar to Armes, Marks argues that Arab cinema 'is almost entirely dependent on European and other Western funding, including foreign co-productions, European and other televisions, and NGOs and cultural organizations'.³ She sees the funding relationship as a fragile one that operates according to a logic of 'mutual pre-emption', whereby filmmakers from the Arab world are often encouraged to emphasise 'certain desired aspects of Arab experience, such as attitudes towards the West, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, Arab-Israeli co-operation, women's voices, sexuality, and – with voracious fascination – the veil'.⁴ All of the films in this corpus are subtitled and some of them clearly foreground

² Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 1.

³ Laura U. Marks, 'Experience—Information—Image: A Historiography of Unfolding in Arab Cinema', in *Cinema at the Periphery*, ed. by Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones and Belén Vidal (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 232-54 (p. 239).

⁴ Marks, 'Experience—Information—Image', p. 239.

themes that might satisfy European production companies or play up to the expectations of international spectators. In *La Fille de Keltoum*, for instance, Charef constructs Algeria as a remote and exotic desert space that operates according to ancient patriarchal traditions and is oppressive for local women. Likewise, *Bled number one* envisions Algeria as a misogynistic country that is threatened by latent Islamic fundamentalism and alienates its Maghrebi-French protagonist. In *Millefeuille*, Bouzid perpetuates dominant negative stereotypes of the veil and represents Islam as a religion that suppresses women's right to agency, self-sovereignty and freedom of expression. Though *L'Enfant endormi* is sympathetic to its central heroines, it constructs Morocco as an archaic country that is divorced from modernity and functions according to superstition, spiritualism and mystical ritualistic traditions. To differing degrees, these four films foreground themes that might appeal to spectators in the West and could be said to reinforce dominant negative stereotypes of the Maghreb. Equally problematically, they all adopt a realist filming aesthetic, which imbues them with a veneer of authenticity that could be said to encourage audiences in the West to accept the partial vision of the region that they promote.

Despite the fact that some of these features appear to pander to the expectations of Western audiences, there are several films in this corpus that draw on regional cinematic codes or seem to be aimed specifically at local spectators. In *Satin rouge*, for instance, Amari is inspired by the films of Samia Gamal and draws heavily on the conventions of Egyptian musicals and melodramas. Likewise, *Tarik el hob* makes reference to the films of Farid Al Atrache, whilst *L'Armée du salut* features a famous Egyptian love song from the 1950s Egyptian musical *Days and Nights*. Though *Amours voilées* was criticised in Morocco for its adherence to

supposedly Western values, it never received international distribution and remains the most successful feature to date at the Moroccan box-office. The film's unexpected success suggests that its representation of female sexual emancipation appealed to local people and was not simply an attempt to garner a greater number of international viewers.

In addition to targeting local spectators, there are a number of films within this corpus that appear to have a particularly ethical agenda and actively work to deconstruct arbitrary distinctions between cultures. For example, *La Graine et le mulet* is situated in France and has been compared to the work of French *auteurs*, such as Maurice Pialat, but actively promotes Tunisian music, dance and culture.⁵ Likewise, although *Tarik el hob* is predominantly set in Paris, it turns away from French culture in order to explore its central protagonist's homosexuality through references to his Maghrebi cultural heritage. Furthermore, as stated earlier, the penultimate sequence of *Exils* sees Naïma engaging in a traditional Sufi trance ritual in order to overcome her alienation and (re)connect with her country and culture of origin. Rather than appeasing the expectations of Western spectators, these films can be viewed as examples of "transvergent cinema" insofar as they negotiate a space in-between cultures that, in Higbee's words, 'rejects the idea of an epistemology structured around notions of hierarchy or fixed centre or binary structure'.⁶

If these films offer a more polycentric perspective, they remain reluctant to engage with a number of seemingly contentious issues. Firstly, the films in this corpus repeatedly interrogate Maghrebi women's place in Islam, but do not show their heroines happily negotiating the religion with their everyday existences. This approach could certainly be seen to reinstate a vision of Islam as a patriarchal

⁵ Vincendeau, 'Southern Discomfort', p. 46.

⁶ Higbee, 'Beyond the (Trans)National', p. 87.

religion; however, it is important that female and male filmmakers in and from the Maghreb are now able to make and release films that openly challenge patriarchal structures and criticise contemporary interpretations of Islam in the Maghreb. Secondly, some of the films examined here foreground representations of queer Maghrebi(-French) men, but fail to interrogate the contentious relationship between homosexuality and the Islamic religion. As argued in Chapter Four, the lack of references to religion in *Tarik el hob* and *L'Armée du salut* arguably functions to reinforce stereotypes of Islam as a homophobic religion that cannot accommodate homosexual subjects or non-normative sexual desires. And lastly, none of the films in this corpus represent queer women of Maghrebi heritage. Though lesbianism remains a highly taboo topic across the Arab world, the near-complete absence of cinematic representations of queer women of Maghrebi heritage threatens to buttress the widely-held, yet erroneous view that female same-sex desire does not exist in the MENA region today. These very real limitations notwithstanding, it is important to note that contemporary Maghrebi filmmaking has done much to counter regressive stereotypes by representing people of Maghrebi heritage as agentic embodied subjects who are unafraid to challenge hegemonic hierarchies of power. Given the changes in the region since 2011, it is arguably not a question of if, but when, Maghrebi filmmaking will begin to push the boundaries of representational possibility even further, by addressing such taboo topics as lesbianism and homosexuality amongst (practicing) Muslims of Maghrebi heritage.

If the films in this corpus have revealed a number of blind spots, it is worth reflecting upon some of the limitations of the scope of this project. I argued in the introduction that one of the principal obstacles that I have faced as researcher in this field has been my own inability to read or speak in Arabic. Out of necessity, all of

the films in this corpus are subtitled in English or French and, as suggested earlier, are therefore more likely to fit into the category of what Armes terms ‘an “art-house” Arab cinema’, which is aimed at international spectators and often adopts themes that are designed to appeal to Euro-American funding companies.⁷ Undoubtedly, my inability to speak Arabic has made certain types of film unavailable to me and might therefore have led me to reach conclusions that I may not have reached had I focused on Arabophone films with no international distribution alone. However, this limitation has also proven to be extremely fruitful as it has encouraged me to re-think the boundaries between cultures and to consider the extent to which certain representational tropes might exist locally, regionally, nationally and transnationally. By examining films with a dual focus on the local and the global, I have been able to trouble what Tarr refers to as ‘the imagined homogeneity of national cultures’ by showing that contemporary Maghrebi cinemas are multiple, fluid, complex and, above all, interstitial.⁸

Aside from these linguistic limitations, perhaps the greatest challenge I have encountered when writing this thesis has been the question of whether or not it is problematic to apply a Western theory, such as phenomenology, to a non-Western context, such as the Maghreb. As discussed at length in the introduction, I am aware of the ethical implications of such an approach; however, I believe that (corporeal) phenomenology has provided me with an invaluable theoretical framework for understanding the emphasis on embodiment in contemporary cinematic practice in the Maghreb. On a personal level, adopting a phenomenological framework has proven salutary throughout this study, but became particularly important for me in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis, in which I became acutely aware of my

⁷ Armes, *New Voices in Arab Cinema*, p. 3.

⁸ Carrie Tarr, ‘Franco-Arab Dialogues In/Between French, Maghrebi-French and Maghrebi Cinema(s)’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 13 (2009), 291-302 (p. 299).

own personal distance from the subjectivities I discuss, but also of the dangers of using white Western-centric discourses (such as queer theory) to understand (sexual) subjects in and from the Maghreb. At these points in particular, phenomenology helped me to bracket my own personal experiences and think, instead, about how the films studied represent their characters' lives and desires in relation to the specific spatio-temporal contexts from which they originate. Throughout this thesis, phenomenological theory has not only illuminated my understanding of the films in this corpus, but has enabled me to establish critical connections between abstract theoretical paradigms and the filmic representation of the material reality of lived experience amongst people of Maghrebi heritage.

Finally, the lack of comparable approaches to this study has meant that I have had to construct my own methodological framework for understanding the representations of embodiment in the films in this corpus. There were certainly times when this was challenging as it required me to uncover the largely overlooked links between phenomenology and theological and philosophical work on the body in and from the MENA. However, there were also times when adopting such an approach was extremely rewarding as it reminded me of the vital importance of phenomenological concepts of embodiment for making “sense” of the representations of the body in these films. Future studies might build upon the foundations established in this thesis by applying a similar methodology to Arabophone films, diverse cultural contexts and/or different forms of cultural production, such as photography, art or literature. Such investigations could tell us whether the approach to embodiment that is present throughout this corpus is specific to recent feature-length filmmaking in the Maghreb, or whether it might be identified as common cultural practice across the MENA region and perhaps even

further afield. At a time when the perceived divisions between the East and the West are becoming increasingly entrenched, such research reminds us of the important contribution that contemporary films featuring characters of Maghrebi heritage can make to debates on dualistic distinctions, hegemonic notions of the “here” and “there”, and wider perceptions of identity, embodiment, cultural difference, gender, religion and sexuality.

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Quand les hommes pleurent, dir. by Yasmine Kassari (Doc Diffusion France, 2000)
Rachida, dir. by Yamina Bachir-Chouikh (Global Film Initiative, 2002)
Salut cousin!, dir. by Merzak Allouache (Les Films du Roseau, 1996)
Satin rouge, dir. by Raja Amari (Zeitgeist Video, 2002)
Sigara wa kas/A Cigarette and a Glass, dir. by Niazi Mostafa (Arab Film Distribution, 1955)
Tarik el hob, dir. by Rémi Lange (Arab Film Distribution, 2001)
Ten'ja, dir. by Hassan Legzouli (Pierre Grise Distribution, 2005)
The Sex of Madame H, dir. by Rémi Lange (Homovies, 2005)
The Yacoubian Building, dir. by Marwan Hamed (Arab Co for Cinema Production & Distribution, 2006)
Toul Omri, dir. by Maher Sabry (Les Films de l'Ange, 2008)
Un fils, dir. by Amal Bedjaoui (Eurozoom, 2003)
Vénus noire, dir. by Abdellatif Kechiche (MK2 Diffusion, 2010)
Viva Laldjérie, dir. by Nadir Moknèche (Les Films du Losange, 2004)
Vivre me tue, dir. by Jean-Pierre Sinapi (Arte France Cinéma, 2002)
Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?, dir. by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche (Haut et court, 2001)