Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran

Ali Nobil Ahmad

Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran, 'a celebration of film by women and their representation in cinema from Morocco in the West to Tehran in the east',[1] does not lend itself particularly well to succinct review. Squeezed into a ten-day period at the end of March 2008, its programme was practically bursting at the seams. Leaving aside the sheer volume of work on display (I stopped counting at 35 films), its scope was vast and sweeping at virtually every conceivable level: genre (full-length features, shorts, video art and documentaries); geographical spread (films were by and about women from across the Middle East, set in locations as diverse as Europe and Afghanistan, and shown in several cinemas across London and Cambridge); temporality (the festival was an exhibition of contemporary cinema but simultaneously a retrospective of classics dating back to the mid-twentieth century); and subject matter (themes included, most prominently, the contestation of patriarchy and male hegemony, but also under examination were experiences of exile, migration and, in the case of *The House is Black*, life in a leper colony – both literally and as a metaphor for a much broader set of afflictions that beset the human condition).

The breadth of the festival's ambition is perhaps explicable in part by its having been funded and supported by a host of powerful institutions, including the EU (via Med-screen, which aims to promote films from the Arab countries and MEDA region) and the French Institute, together with the British Film Council's Audience Development Fund. The organisers appear to have made shrewd use of governmental resources (particularly those available at the European level) to promote and advance marginalised film and cultural production alongside a progressive political agenda, namely, to combat the raft of negative stereotypes that restrict our understanding of those parts of the world from which these films emanate and which they depict. Its objectives, articulated succinctly by James Neil in an interview with Saeed Farouky, are noble enough:

> The purpose of curating the festival was to offer an aspect of Middle-Eastern cinema (the work of women directors) which has not been programmed before in London and to screen articulate voices from the region at a time when there is much misrepresentation through documentary and news media. We wanted people to celebrate ordinary people's lives through the films and see images and stories that they could identify with and engage with in a critical manner.[2]

The novel focus on women, together with the regional rather than ethnic or national parameters of the selection criteria, would certainly appear to mark this festival out from previous endeavours in recent years,[3] opening up a fresh set of possible ways to represent and think about Arab, Kurdish and Iranian films and experiences by showing them to be differentiated along the lines of gender. The terms 'Islam' and 'imperialism' were consciously averted by the curators in their framing of the industries (and societies) under discussion, presumably to subvert culturalist readings of the films and avoid alienating mainstream audiences (respectively). The problem with this approach is that it suppresses discussion of key political issues and themes that are central to realities (and Western perceptions) of religious orthodoxy in the Middle East. In the above quote, for instance, Neil makes no mention of Islamaphobia's centrality to the 'misrepresentations' he refers to.

Matters were helped immensely, however, by the intelligent use of pre- and post-films talks to frame films such as Handan Ipekçi's *Hidden Faces* (Turkey/Germany, 2007), a thriller about 'honour' killing that derives much of its narrative tension from the threat to its central female character who is being hunted down by a cold-blooded uncle bent on her eradication. (At an all-day symposium attended by academics and interested members of the public, Neil stated that his decision to programme the film was dependent on the director's attendance, without which the danger of misinterpretation would have been too great.)

Many of the most prominently featured films were less coy than the curators in their depiction of Middle Eastern gender politics, and left few doubts about the rigidity of patriarchal codes in structuring women's lives. In classics such as Néjia Ben Mabrouk's *The Trace* (Tunisia/Switzerland, 1982–1988), Moufida Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace* (Tunisia/France, 1994),[4] Heiny Srour's *Leila and the Wolves* (Lebanon/UK/Belgium, 1984) and Fatma Zohra Zamoum's short, *A Ball of Wool* (France/Algeria, 2006), oppression weighs down on the protagonists with pounding consistency at virtually every turn of their lives. With the exception of *Leila and the Wolves*, which tackles the double standards women face when struggling side by side against an imperial aggressor, these films have a claustrophobic feel: confinement to domestic spaces, together with the boredom and frustration it brings, is experienced by the female subject as a kind of daily imprisonment, albeit one that is fiercely

resisted and contested. Though mindful of the role that women play in upholding the gendered order, they represent a strand of conscious or feminist filmmaking, in that they seek to actively recover and represent feminine agency, depicting women in their daily quarrels with the gendered structures of power that tightly constrain their choices within both the family and wider society.

Women's filmmaking in the Middle East is not, however, reducible to this brand of consciously political critique. It may come as a surprise to Westerners, but pioneering women filmmakers have played a formative role in the construction of mainstream Arab and North African film industries, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt.[5] They have also, perhaps more famously, played (and continue to play) a critical role in Iran, and have long been active players in Palestine where, as lecturer Kay Dickinson pointed out at the symposium, the idea of separating film production by the sexes through festivals that screen only women's work seems somewhat alien – a 'Western imposition' that some women filmmakers themselves find problematic. (Interestingly, some of the Arab directors she had interviewed in her research complained of encountering most chauvinism when working with Western men who are far quicker to patronise them by assuming their ignorance of basic technical issues.)

If the films on show at the festival (and the talks around them) highlighted the difference between the historical facts of women's presence in filmmaking on one hand, and on the other, their actual representation in films, it remains an issue that could be explored in greater detail. The question of how, why and whether women make films that are different in their representation of the sexes from those by male directors is an intriguing one, especially in the context of some of the more slick, recent examples influenced by contemporary styles and bodily aesthetics. Hala Khalil's *Cut and Paste* (Egypt, 2006) and Jocelyn Saab's *Dunia* (Egypt/France/Lebanon, 2005), both of which starred Hanan Turk before her infamous decision to don the headscarf, together with Nadine Labaki's *Caramel* (Lebanon/France, 2007), are all films about the middle and lower middle classes. If these groups often find their paths to upward social mobility blocked, it seems fair to say they are distinct from those mired in grinding rural poverty that were the focus of earlier classics such as *The Trace*.

Caramel highlights religious and sexual diversity in the Middle East at a time when a tectonic shift towards thinking of the region as homogenously Islamic is taking hold. Well shot, attractively lit and with a soundtrack to match, it features useful performances and somehow manages to tackle taboo-breaking issues such as same-sex female desire, societal hypocrisy and gendered double standards without feeling controversial. It is, to all intents and purposes, an entertaining, Hollywood-style 'chick flick', and was promoted independently as such at a separate press viewing. Labaki's own face (and body) are arguably being used for marketing the film in a way typical of many films made by (and for) male viewing pleasure, which again underlines the difference between women's and feminist filmmaking.

There were whispers in circulation that certain directors had been complaining about the ghettoisation of their work by the festival's focus on their position as women. One would take such objections more seriously if they were accompanied by principled withdrawal or refusal to participate in the first place. It seems somewhat hypocritical to object after the event, especially given that the festival openly sought to cast an anthropological window onto Middle Eastern women's experiences in addition to its concern with filmmaking and filmmakers. People know the score at these sorts of gigs: it is up to the texts themselves, and the way they are framed, to resist easy appropriation by those bent on imposing reductive interpretations. Most were strong enough to do this. Complaints, ironically, appeared to be coming from directors of the weaker films (those which got in precisely because they were made by Middle Eastern women rather than for their artistic value).

Indeed, it seems unlikely that all the work on show would be able to compete on equal terms with 'mainstream' filmmaking (for want of a better term) if artistic innovation, form or even quality in a general sense were the only criteria.[6] The festival organisers appear to have gone for an inclusive approach to historically important (rather than critically acclaimed) films. The result, by my reckoning, was an inevitably mixed bag: for the most part, the good, the bad and the mediocre rubbed shoulders without any problem. Occasionally, however, they sat uncomfortably alongside the sublime: *The House is Black*, rightly hailed as a masterpiece, was twenty-two minutes of brilliance that stole the show, reminding us of the difficulty of viewing Iran's unique filmmaking culture through the same analytical lens as medium-brow movies like *Caramel*. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (France, 2007) stood out too in many respects, sitting somewhat awkwardly beside the others in its sophistication and uniqueness of form.

And yet, overall, the festival showed that viewing cinema through consciously defined but carefully delineated categories for political ends can be productive if done thoughtfully – if, that is, the purpose of invoking such labels as 'women's cinema' is precisely to provoke consideration of their meaning and empty them of their objectifying

connotations. If analysed in smaller constellations, moreover, the films do indeed show common preoccupations and interesting trends. Some of these are surprisingly subtle, and connect seemingly disparate projects through form. Shirin Neshat's art film *Passage* (Egypt, 2006) sets the image of a funeral procession to Philip Glass's orchestration. Whether intentional or not, it invoked the strikingly haunting visual trope of women clad in burkas on a beach that reappeared throughout *Leila and the Wolves* where it was employed as a device to reveal the absurdity of gendered double-standards (men frolic about in shorts, cooling themselves in the water, while women swelter in the Mediterranean heat under oppressive layers of black cloth).

Another subset of films dealt with various kinds of migration: *Persepolis*, of course, but also Yamina Benguigui's celebrated documentary *Immigrant Memories* (France/Algeria, 1997) and Hala Al-Abdallah Yacoub's *I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave* (Syria, 2006). This last pompous, self-indulgent and self-regarding 'meditation' on exile, the least successful of the three, was, one has to say, laughably pretentious and has nothing substantive to say about its purported topic that we did not already know. Indeed it merely reminds us that 'exile' is easily appropriated as a trope by radical chic, 'post-colonial' pseudo-intellectuals in metropolitan locations bent on subjecting our eyes and ears to the worst kind of bourgeois masturbation.

As one of the few self-funded 'works of art' on display, it is not without irony that this was one of the few films on view *not* attributed in part to European production money (most of the others are connected in some way with one or more Western film industries, a fact which demonstrates the difficulty in defining 'diasporic' and 'exilic' films). Made, in all likelihood, with a certain kind of European viewer in mind, it won an award for best documentary at the Venice film festival in 2006.[7] One wonders what Syrians themselves would make of it, were it to be shown in their country. No doubt here its 'authentic' credentials stem partly from the fact that it would be unlikely to escape censorship and so must represent some kind of truth. But in the context of the Middle East, where the seriousness of the realities of forced migration is so palpably acute, such postmodern ruminations seem almost tasteless in their self-indulgence. (At the very least, we would do well to bear in mind the analytical distinction between exiles and refugees.[8])

All this is a far cry from the traditions of gritty social realism documenting real lives that characterise some of the best films from the Arab world, where human resilience in the face of great suffering and oppression is a continuous theme. Randa Chahal Sabbag's wonderful *Souha: Surviving Hell* (Lebanon, 2001) provides a timely talking-heads reminder of the nuance between a terrorist and a freedom fighter at a time when the dominant discourse would have us conflate the two. So too Maysoon Pachachi and Karen Alexander's *Bitter Water*, about Palestinian refugees (Lebanon/UK, 1982). Together with Hiba Bassem's *Baghdad Days* (Iraq/UK, 2005), these are all films about wars that have plagued the region – films about the tragedies and the injustices that flow from the effects of contemporary imperialism. The politics of gender, in such contexts, often tends to recede into the background, at least ostensibly. So too do 'fiction' and experimentation with form (the use of documentary is partly due to lack of resources, but also a reflection of the fact that real life under occupation is, in many ways, stranger than fiction).

We witness the vulnerability of the male body in *Baghdad Days*, a young filmmaker's video diary account of her struggle to pursue her studies amidst the chaos around her following the Anglo-American invasion. If it is technically unremarkable, its true meaning and value can only be fully appreciated when one considers the costs and risks endured in its production by the Independent Film and Television College in Baghdad, an organisation set up in 2004 by two Iraqi filmmakers who, having lived outside the country for many years, decided, heroically, to return and contribute to reconstruction in the only way they knew.

Perhaps predictably, such films received disappointingly little coverage and critical engagement from the mainstream press. The full extent of the festival's achievements thus remains untold, an injustice to the diligence of the curators whose success in generating funding and acquiring the rights to show so many films is to be commended, even if this success was not without its costs. Less (film) would have been more, and would have allowed greater time for reflection upon some of the more vexatious issues that were at stake. I am thinking, of course, of two particular i-words that barely got a mention, even when their significance reached elephantine proportions, filling the cinema hall so palpably that they began to obscure my vision of the screen.

NOTES

1 http://www.tangierstehranfilm.org/

2 Provided by James Neil in correspondence.

3 The NFT has featured 'Arab cinema' seasons since 2004: see http://www.zenithfoundation.com/aboutus.htm.

4 Gil Hochberg, 'National Allegories and the Emergence of Female Voice in Moufida Tlatli's *Les silences du palais*', *Third Text*, no 50, spring 2000

5 Roy Armes, 'Women Pioneers of Arab Cinema', in *Screen* 2007, no 48, pp 517–20

6 Artistic value is, of course, culturally and socially constructed. But it seems valid to make some judgements about quality without spelling out all the caveats that would accompany them in a more in-depth piece.

7 An inquest should be held into how this film won such a prestigious award – it underlines the point made in the previous footnote: namely, the acute difficulty of attributing objective value to art.

8 Darko Suvin, 'Displaced Persons', *New Left Review*, no 31, January–February 2005, pp 107–23

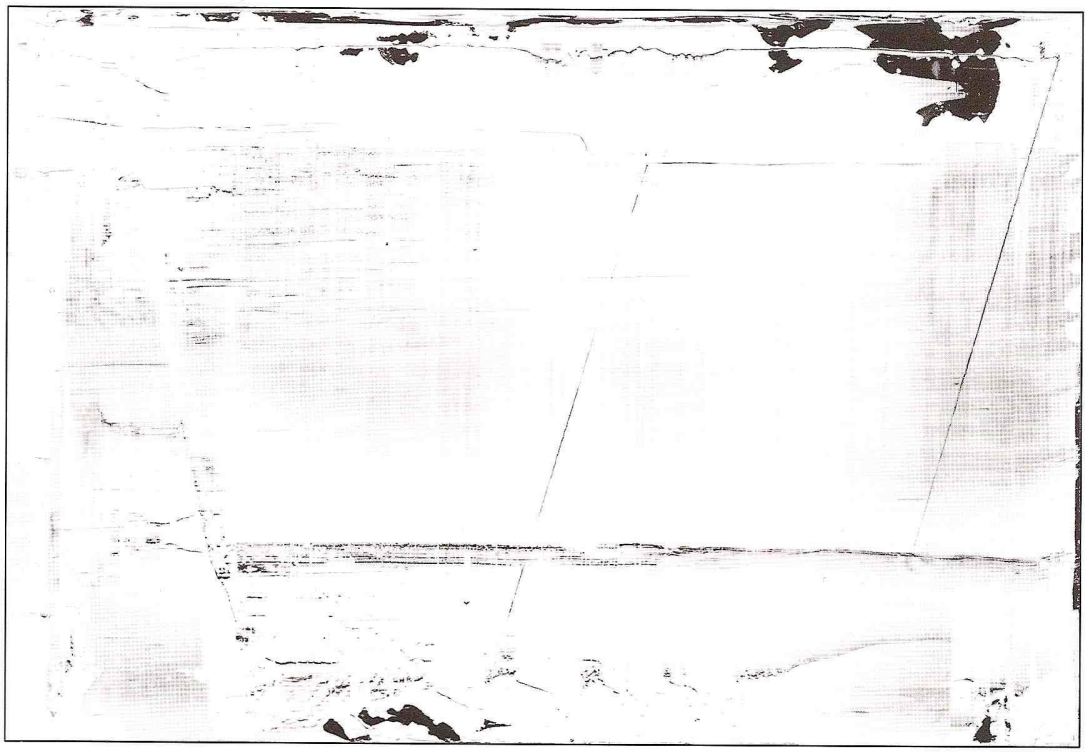
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Zero Intensity

Victor Tupitsyn

There are exhibitions that incorporate the waste of artistic production. Their goal is to put tracings of art-as-process back on the map,[1] including the trajectories of interrupted paths – Heidegger's *Holz und Nebenwege*. The danger, however, is that in all such shows the 'jadedness' of time and space may become a centrepiece. A consolation prize on the one hand, an aesthetic phenomenon on the other – particularly since, for many of us, the aesthetic is a therapeutic means to reduce (or to sweeten) the bitterness of loss. One example of this is Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*.[2] In 1962, when Richter began to compose this installation, the triumph of 'name' over 'place' was not quite as evident. Therefore, my reference to *Atlas* is simply a prelude to the present.

It is naive to think that trust in a work of art is in direct proportion to the level of its intensity. The informed viewer relies on a sort of intersubjective consensus to determine the importance of artworks, even if their rating does not coincide with his or her own opinion on the subject. Being informed often borders on the desire to shift the responsibility for making decisions from 'I' to 'we'. It was precisely this temptation that one encountered at Marian Goodman Gallery in Paris which displayed Richter's recent works, including small 'painter boards'. Most of them looked like leftovers from a construction site – the stuff that usually gets thrown away after a wall is painted. Besides this, there was no effort at intensity



Gerhard Richter, *Weiss 899-6*, 2006, oil on aludibond, 30 × 44 cm. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris/New York