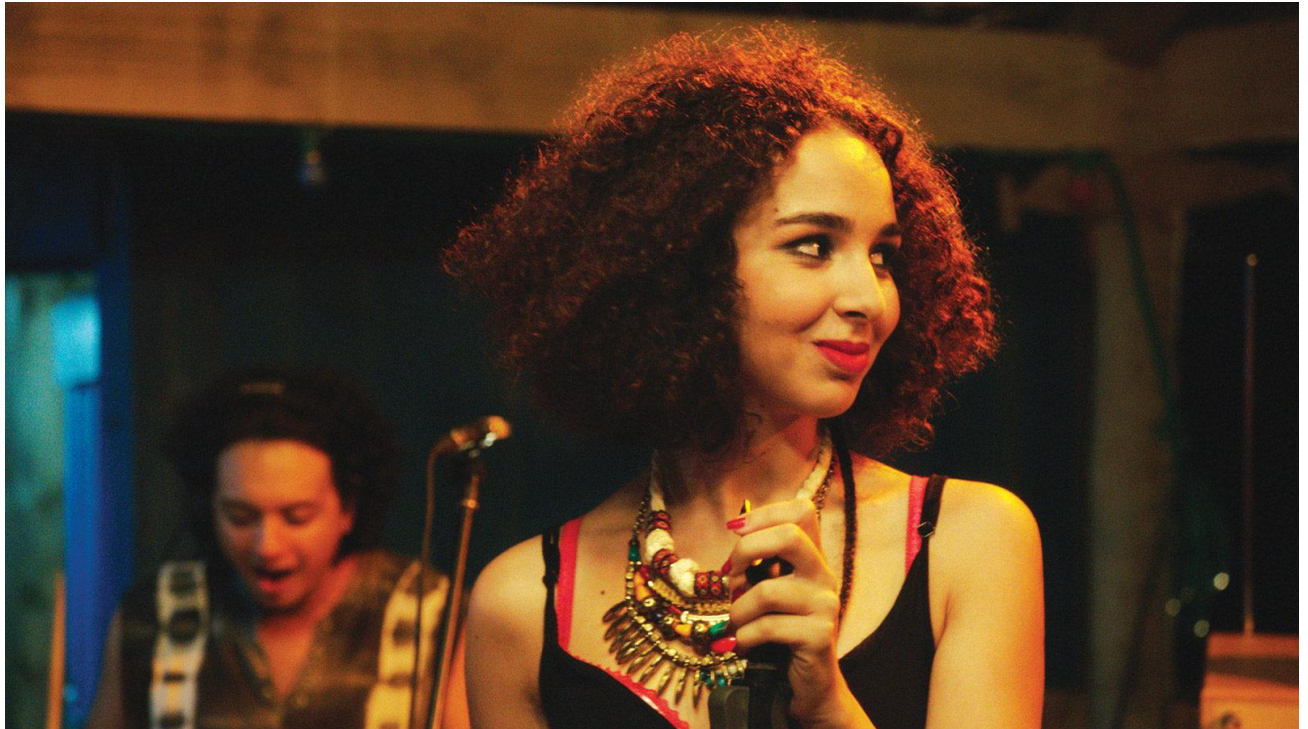


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The Representation of Women in Tunisian Cinema Post-2011

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Introduction

During the last months of 2010 events started to unfold in the Maghreb and led to what is today commonly seen as a crucial historical moment for a lot of countries in the region. This series of protests and unrest was a manifestation of a sentiment of injustice felt by a lot of people throughout the Middle East. On the 17th of December 2010 a young Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, immolated himself in Sidi Bouzid, a *muḥāfaẓah* (governorate) of Tunisia. This 26 year old young man sold fruits and vegetables in the streets to earn a living. On that day, the police confiscated his merchandise. After their refusal to give it back, Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in front of the local *muḥāfaẓah*. This sad and desperate act sparked something among the Tunisians. The next day, protests against Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime and all its excesses were organised all around the country. The young man became a symbol of the Tunisian protests. On the 4th of January, he died. Thousands of people attended his funeral. After days of social unrest and protests, Ben Ali finally left power. The 14th of January 2011 signed the end of 23 years of regime. Ben Ali escaped to Saudi Arabia where he still lives today. The CDR - Constitutional Democratic Rally - created by Ben Ali in 1988 was the main - one could even argue only - party in Tunisia. In March 2011, the CDR finally disappeared.

Tunisia is, and has been for a while, considered one of the most progressive countries within the Maghreb. When Bourguiba declared the independence of the country in 1956, a new constitution was written. It is recognized as the first one written in the Arab World. The latest constitution of the country, which was passed in 2014 after two years of discussion, clearly states that men and women are equal in front of the law, and that there will be no discrimination between the former and the latter. This new constitution is the fruit of some of the seeds that the revolution planted. Some actually argue that the revolution gave a voice to ideas that were previously planted, mainly during the Gafsa revolts of 2008. I will tackle this episode of Tunisian history in the second chapter of my thesis in association with my second case study.

Women played a very important part in spreading and maintaining the protests during the Arab revolutions. In his 2016' book *Unfinished Revolutions* Ibrahim Fraihat gives the example of Yemeni women, who were the ones leading and maintaining the uprising against their leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and played on social and cultural customs to get the men to do the same. He also argues that they were, and still are, central in the post-revolution re-building of society. During the revolution they held a very polyvalent role as they were key actors in the revolution, but they were also victims of different kinds of violence such as rape and sexual aggressions. Aside from happening in the social

sphere, these aggressions were also used as repression tools by the state. This is a technique that Mouammar Kadhafi, for example, used during the Libyan Civil War of 2011 (Fraihat).

Women held, and still hold, a very central and paradoxical role in society, and particularly in this historical period that I am focusing on, the post-Arab revolution years. They extensively contributed in spreading the word on the world wide web and its social media, they played on gender roles and stereotypes to bring men to the streets, but they were also victims of violence from the state as much as from civilians. This very dichotomous vision of women echoes the double standards they have to face in everyday life in their societies and cultures.

The role and condition of women has often been used as an allegory or metaphor for the general state or condition of the country. This can be seen in many countries and a wide variety of disciplines. In her documentary *La révolution des femmes - un siècle de féminisme arabe* Feriel Ben Mahmoud explains how, during colonial times, it was thought that once the condition of women would improve, the condition of the whole country would too. Habib Bourguiba, the Tunisian leader who guided the country after its independence in 1956, did the PSC (Personal Status Code) for that reason. These laws gave Tunisian woman more freedom than ever. They are actually still considered the ones with the most rights in the region. This ensemble of laws introduced important changes in Tunisian society, such as the abolishment of polygamy, the acceptance of civil and religious marriage, the change of the minimum legal age for marriage (18 girls, 20 boys), liability of both men and women for adultery, right to vote for women, and so on. This was a major improvement for the condition of women in the country. One of the reasons for these laws was that Bourguiba was convinced that the general state of the country would not improve without the help of women. Yet, the whole of society, did not necessarily keep up with these legal improvements. This is one of the reasons why women are facing a double standard when it comes to their role in society. This also applies to the professional sphere, such as the cinema industry, in which women had a hard time conciliating their job requirements - like going away on a shoot for a few days, weeks or months - and their 'domestic duties' as women.

The topic of the Arab Spring being vast and complex, I am not aiming to do an exhaustive analysis of this period, but rather to look at it from the perspective of cinema, and particularly how these events had an impact on how some specific groups of people or topics are depicted.

As the epicentre, or at least the place of 'birth', of these social movements, Tunisia held a particular position in the general context of social unrest in the region around 2011. This was one of the reasons to pick Tunisia as the focus of this research. Events of such proportion impacted the whole society, cinema included. I will adopt an historical and dialectic approach in order to look at the evolution and shifts of the presence of women in the industry, and their representation when they became characters of this cinema.

The history of cinema has been punctuated by important moments that have had a great impact on the industry as a whole, and the topic of the films themselves. I will, thus, start the first chapter of this thesis by going into a brief history of Tunisian cinema, with a special emphasis on the women within it. This contextualization will, then, allow me to transition to my first case study, *As I Open My Eyes* by Leyla Bouzid. In the third, and last, chapter I will focus on *The Beauty And The Dogs* by Kaouther Ben Hania. I have chosen both of these films as case studies as, in my opinion, they would not have existed without the Tunisian revolution. Since my focus will be sociological rather than aesthetic, a cinematographic analysis of these case studies will not be my focal point. It seems to me that a focus on these films with a historical approach and an analysis of the narrative tells us much more than the actual cinematography.

In the second chapter I will analyse how Bouzid tackles the topic of the revolution by setting up her story in the pre-revolution Tunis where Farah, a young singer, tries to find her voice as a young woman coming of age in the midst of social turmoil. This case study will allow for an exploration of the shifting presence of women on the screen, especially the younger generation.

I will then go into my third chapter with the second case study, *The Beauty And The Dogs* by Kaouther Ben Hania, which is part of a new important moment in Tunisian cinema history. A film like this one would definitely not have seen the light of day, as it is, without the uprisings. I will explain why by going through a quick analysis of the film and its national as well as international reception.

Films are a means of expression, a strong insight into society. Films such as the ones of Bouzid and Ben Hania tell something about the state of things, about the society they take place in. Both tell something about the Tunisian revolution and the place of women without necessarily approaching the topic head first. With this thesis I will attempt to show what these films actually tell us.

Chapter I

Contextualization

Brief history of Tunisian cinema

I. HISTORY OF TUNISIAN CINEMA

Tunisian cinema holds a particular place within the History of cinema on the African continent and in the Middle East. The first *cinématographe* was established in 1896 in Algiers (Shafik), just before being established in Tunis in 1897 by Albert Samama-Chikli (Cultures et Cinémas). Nine years later Omnia Pathé was built in Tunisia, one year after one of the ‘revolutionary’ ideas of Charles Pathé: to rent films rather than to sell them. So far, cinema had conquered its audience through more nomadic types of spectacle and entertainment such as fairs. From 1907, the experience of cinema itself changed significantly, in Europe as much as in North Africa and the Middle-East (Corriou).

Tahar Cheriaa is one of the important figures of Tunisian cinema. In 1950, he created the FTCC - Fédération Tunisienne des Ciné-Clubs - which played an important role on the political and cultural scene. He became later on the director of cinema in the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, as well as one of the ‘fathers’ of Tunisian production companies. He is the founder of the *Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage* (JCC - Carthage International Film Festival), one of the most important film festivals in the region, the other being FESPACO in Burkina Faso. Each are held biannually, in alternance with one another. Created in 1966, the JCC were an important step in the establishment of a post-colonial Tunisian, and Middle Eastern, cinema.

Cine-clubs hold a particular place in the history of cinema in the region as they were created, and slightly institutionalised by the federation, before the independence. They continued to exist after the independence and were an important meeting point for cinema lovers as well as for a new politically engaged generation. Over the past decades the number of movie theatres in the country has extensively decreased, going from 90 in 1985 to 17 in 2010. Florence Martin actually argues that ‘movie theatres have become refuges for lovers with nowhere else to meet, and have thus acquired a terrible reputation’ (Martin). Cine-clubs worked as an alternative place for watching movies and discussing them.

In terms of the actual aesthetics and narrative of Tunisian cinema, there were a lot of changes over the past 60 years. In *Arab Cinema - History and Cultural Identity*, Viola Shafik argues that there was a major turn towards realism after the different waves of independence in the region in the 50s and 60s. One of the reasons for this realistic turn was that, during the occupation, the cinema industry was exclusively European - mainly French. It was imported by the Lumière brothers, and the majority of the infrastructures developed were by Europeans, for Europeans. This was particularly the case in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, which were colonised by France. After the independence, the cinema of this region was preoccupied with dealing with their colonial past, in majority through realism. As Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemsen explain it in *Theorising National Cinema*, ‘in these countries, cinema was from the outset absorbed into the colonial legacy: it was consumed by it, totally

preoccupied by its legacy and wounds, constantly reacting to its ever-increasing burden on the national psyche' (Valentina Vitali et Paul Willemen 230). Shohini Chaudhuri confirms this idea by arguing that 'the colonial powers restricted and devalued local culture in the territories they ruled; this was particularly true of the French who upheld their language and education system as superior. These colonies had to wait until the 50s-60s to use the cinematic medium to tell their own stories' (Chaudhuri 56).

Finally, Nouri Bouzid argues that the next key shift in Tunisian cinema was the Six Days War of 1967. He considers it to have deeply upset and changed the intellectual life of the Arab World: 'the 1967 defeat changed perception of the individual and his position in society, and also challenged the prevailing myth of virility' (Shafik 37). Even though this war did not directly involve Tunisia - only Israel and its direct neighbors - it impacted a certain image of the Arab man and his place in society, which had a wider impact than the war itself.

All these key moments of the history of this region marked generations of directors, one way or another. With this thesis I intend to focus on a new generation that started making films in the 2000s. In my opinion, they have been marked by the Uprisings as significantly as by the historical events previously mentioned, whilst, at the same time, stepping away from the main focus of the previous generations.

II. WOMEN IN TUNISIAN CINEMA

The history of women in Tunisian cinema industry goes way back and has not been easy. Indeed, in 1922, Albert Samama Chikli made a film titled *Zohra*. The main character was played by his daughter, Haydee Chickly Tamzali. She, thus, became the first Tunisian actress, which was a very important step. Yet, one question arises: where were women in the rest of the industry?

In his 1998' book *Silence, elles tournent !* Abdelkrim Gabous attempts to brush up a panorama of Tunisian women in Tunisian cinema. One of the main points he makes is that women were 'reduced' to certain jobs that 'suited better' their status of women. Indeed, I have previously explained that Tunisian women are considered as having the most rights in the region. Even though their legal status is a leading example in the region, the weight of tradition is nonetheless very present. Sometimes, it keeps these statuses in the theoretical sphere instead of pushing it into the practical one. Women have to face a double standard that weighs heavily on the choices they make for their personal as well as professional lives. They are mothers, take care of the house, and are the 'true guardian of tradition, the glue that holds (her) people together in the face of many threats from without as well as from within the national sphere' (Weber-Feve). They are often expected to put this role ahead of any other.

In *Re-hybridizing Transnational Domesticity and Femininity*, Stacey Weber-Feve clearly explains how this had an impact on their position within the cinematographic industry. They would often end up in gendered - and sedentarian - positions, such as cosmetic or clerical work. This reduces tremendously their involvement in the filmmaking part. Weber-Feve pinpoints the fact that the role of editor was one of the most important positions that women would occupy as, she argues, it is what gives meaning to the film. Moufida Tatli, one of the pioneers of Tunisian cinema, was the main editor on a great number of films made by important figures of the Tunisian cinema industry, such as Ferid Boughedir. She, later, made her own film *The Silence of the Palace* in 1994. She came to be a director through first working alongside with all the great names of Tunisian cinema. Women that wanted to occupy other, less 'sedentarian', positions often made the choice of not building a family.

Abdelkrim Gabous underlines that - unlike Egypt - there was no star system in Tunisia. Egypt, also called 'Hollywood on the Nile', built its industry around this star system. Women, and mainly belly dancers, were the reason why people were going to the cinema. They were more famous than the directors of the films, or of their male counterpart. Generally speaking, the job of actress was considered unrespectable in Tunisia as it was quite unstable and there wasn't an important Tunisian cinematographic history or culture.

‘Until the mid-1990s women made up little more than 6 percent of the total number of feature filmmakers in the Maghreb, and there were even fewer women feature directors active in the Middle East’ (Armes). This has slightly changed as, Roy Armes argues, around a quarter of all new directors are women. What is very striking about this new generation is the fact that the majority lives, has lived, or studied abroad, and mainly in Europe. He also argues that, despite their general focus on the common topic that is the lives of women in the Arab world, they present it in very different ways. This is often done through a great diversity of narrative choices, as well as through aesthetic and cinematographic novelty. Armes finally argues that ‘they by no means form a unified group, and indeed, their principal characteristic is perhaps their very diversity’.

What is, again, noteworthy is the fact that women directors that left the country, either temporarily or definitively, generally belong to slightly less traditional families with a more middle class background. As Armes puts it, ‘this mass of educated and articulate women has changed the way in which a whole array of aspects of Arab society are experienced and depicted’ (Armes). They are also the fruit of history, of revolutions and a change in the general way of thinking. The two directors that I am focusing on for this thesis, Leyla Bouzid and Kaouther Ben Hania, are good examples of this. Both were born after the independence, have done part of their studies abroad, did their first feature film in the 2000s, and come from a more educated and less traditional family. We shall go into more details about this in the next chapter of this thesis.

III. ARAB UPRISINGS AND CINEMA

In the book *Itinéraires arabes en révolution (2011-2014)* Pierre Vermeren and Khadija Mohsen-Finan argue that the events going on in the country were first considered a simple *intifada* - uprising - before turning into a *thawra*, a revolution. They build upon this argument explaining that *thawra* was generally used to designate important historical revolutions. The use of such terms shows the weight that was actually given to these events. Tunisia was not the only one to live a *thawra*. It rapidly spread all over the region, Egypt and its Tahrir Square being one of the other most emblematic examples of this 'revolutionary' period. Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, Bahrein were some of the other countries that followed during this rebellious season. The events in the region caused the fall of three important dictators: Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia), Hosni Mubarak (Egypt) and Mouammar Khadafi (Libya). A lot of the countries are still dealing with the aftermath of these events. Some argue that Tunisia is the one with the 'smoothest' transition so far as it led to a new constitution and free elections. Others argue that they are still quite far from having found a balance.

This ensemble of demonstrations and protests came to be known as the 'Arab Spring'. This term has a complex origin. There are a few theories about who used it first, in which context, etc. The etymology of the term not being my main focus, I will just attempt to provide a few explanations and demonstrate why I will not be using this term in my thesis. The reference to the spring has been used during many important democratic and historical events around the world. As Sylvie Aprile puts it, spring refers to the principle of regeneration; it refers to new beginnings. It was generally used to talk about events that sparked something new and positive, such as democracy, hence why the use of 'Arab Spring' could fit the events that started in 2010. In *Foreign Policy Magazine*, Joshua Keating argues that the term 'Arab Spring' was actually first used 'to refer to a short-lived flowering of Middle-Eastern democracy movements in 2005'. It was then re-used to talk about these new revolutionary events. One of the problems in the use of such terms is its positive connotation. For many - still today - the use of the term 'spring' is highly inappropriate as this 'season of events' caused the death of large amounts of people all over the region, was the place of many rapes and sexual aggressions (Tahrir Square being one of them with mass rapes (Talon)). Another acceptable expression could have been 'Jasmine Revolution', which has been widely used in the media as well - nationally and internationally. The use of 'Jasmine' can be explained by the fact that it is one of the symbols of Tunisia. It entails whiteness, purity, among other positive connotations. The problem is that, as mentioned in relation to spring, this use seems as inappropriate for the very same reasons. A second reason for not using that term is the fact that it was actually used by Ben Ali himself in 1987

when he came to power (AFP). So, even though the collapse of such authoritative regimes created hope, I will rather use expressions such as Arab revolutions, Tunisian uprisings or *thawra*.

Ben Hania and Bouzid belong to a new generation of directors, a talented generation that is not afraid of speaking out and challenging the status quo. The revolutions that happened in the Arab world around 2011 had an impact on the industry. First of all, the focus on Arabic countries has greatly increased in international festivals. I will discuss it further in the last chapter of this thesis. Secondly, the fall of dictatorial regimes, such as the one of Ben Ali in Tunisia, has impacted the amount of films made in these countries, and their topic. In an article of January 2015, Fawzia Zouari argues that it has mainly affected the documentary genre – in particular the amount of documentaries made - since it wasn't possible before to directly criticize the regime. The impact was greater on the documentary genre rather than fiction due to the fact that, during these events, many people felt like taking it to the streets and recording what was happening. In times of revolution and social turmoil, documentaries are used rather than fiction features as it seems to be the most direct way of recounting facts and recording history. In most cases it also requires less budget, which tends to be quite limited in these countries, especially when it comes to projects which are a bit more politically engaged. In my opinion the 'balance' has, since then, been restored. Directors now deal with the topic of the revolution in majority through fiction¹.

The independence (1956), the Three Days war (1967), and now the Arab Uprisings, are all events that shook the foundation of Tunisian society. The revolution inscribes itself in the same lineage of impactful events as, in my opinion, it shook the Tunisian society as much as the independence did at the time. Both signified the end of a form of dictatorship. In both cases, things did not change from one day to the other. Yet, they gave birth to a new generation of directors that were, and are, ready to question the status quo, to re-think what was taken for granted, and to re-consider the basis onto which their society was built. The Arab Uprisings go a step further in comparison to these other key historical events by bringing women back at the forefront of this struggle for freedom and independence.

¹ For example, in Tunisia : Kaouther Ben Hania and Bouzid, *Millefeuille* by Nouri Bouzid, *Inhebbek Hedi* by Mohamed Ben Attia, *El Jaida* by Salma Baccar. In Egypt, *Clash* by Mohamed Diab, *The Nile Hilton Incident* by Tarik Saleh, or in countries a bit less directly involved, like Israel/Palestine : *Bar Bahar* by Maysaloun Hammoud

Chapter II

Coming of Age and The Tunisian Revolution

Leyla Bouzid - As I Open My Eyes

I. THE DIRECTOR AND HER FILM

Je crois en l'amour,
Pas celui des livres et des cieux,
Celui de la rue, rouge vif, dans la nuit obscure

Joujma in *As I Open My Eyes* by Leyla Bouzid

Leyla Bouzid belongs to a new generation of directors that has been heavily influenced by the Arab Uprisings. This 34 year-old director holds an interesting place in the history of cinema. She is the daughter of Nouri Bouzid, one of the most emblematic figures of Tunisian cinema. The French cinémathèque introduces him as one of the most radical and aesthetically coherent Tunisian directors, but also as one of great audacity when choosing the topic of his films.² I find it important to dwell a bit further into who Nouri Bouzid was as he is still today a key figure of Tunisian cinema and has had an impact on the following generations. He was young enough during the independence to have been marked by it, the same goes for the Three Days War mentioned in the previous chapter. He is also a good illustration of the fact that the ideas that were fought for during the Arab Uprisings were not new, but rather a materialisation of a discomfort that was there for years – even decades.

‘For Bouzid, society will get its emancipation through women. This will happen through sacrifices and violent rejection from men and the traditional family.’³ Nouri Bouzid’s main focus is sexuality and conflicts between tradition and modernity. This, I find, is one of the recurring themes of the films made by this new generation of directors, post-2011. They are continuing the path that important directors such as Nouri Bouzid have led and paved, and further their research, exploration, and defiance of the status quo in their films. I will go into more details on the topic later while going through *As I Open My Eyes*, the main case study of this chapter.

Leyla Bouzid has been doubly influenced by all the events that happened in the Tunisian society the past 50 years as she is part of this new generation that was born after the events of 1956 and 1967, and that had parents strongly influenced by it because they lived through it. This had an impact on their

² ‘Nouri Bouzid est peut-être le cinéaste tunisien le plus radical, en tout cas le plus cohérent dans sa démarche esthétique et morale, refusant les compromis’ (Cinémathèque Française)

³ ‘Pour Bouzid, c’est par les femmes que la société tunisienne s’émancipe. Mais au prix de sacrifices et de douleurs du fait du rejet violent des hommes et de la famille traditionnelle.’ (Translated to English by me) (Cinémathèque Française)

lives and how they raised their kids. Her father was known for being strong-headed and not being afraid of voicing his opinion – mainly through his films.

While being important, my emphasis on this genealogical fact is not trying to undermine the work of Leyla Bouzid as a director. It merely re-replaces her in a historical and artistic frame that might contribute to gaining a better understanding of her work. *As I Open My Eyes* is her first feature film, but it is far from her first cinematographic project. She has worked on a lot of shorts, and films, especially with her father. In 2012 she worked on his film, *Millefeuille*, which also dealt with the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution through the story of two young women.

The project of this film actually existed when the revolution happened. Nouri Bouzid decided to change the setting of it and, which is the reason why the whole narrative is unfolding in parallel to the revolution. This film tells the story of Zained and Aïcha, two young Tunisian women. One wears the headscarf, the other does not. Both work in a restaurant in Tunis to earn a living and both are trying to fight for their freedom and independence, as young Tunisian, and as women. The film follows them through Tunis, is their journey to find their voice in a fast-changing and muzzled society that is faced with the rise of religious extremism. The fact that this film was already in the making at the time of the revolution is a great indication that part of the Tunisian society was already preoccupied with the increase of Islamist movements and the general state of the country. This film tackles quite directly the possible consequences of the revolution, and new conceivable futures.⁴

In an interview at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) in 2016 for her film, Leyla Bouzid explains how she first had the idea of approaching the topic of a young woman around the time of the revolution through the story of a young ‘bloggeuse’. This first idea made a lot of sense – and still does - as I previously mentioned women held a very important place in spreading the word around the uprising, especially on social media and other open platforms. In a society where certain groups of people are repressed and see their freedom of expression limited, other means of expressions are found. Women, which are still in effect treated as unequal to men in a majority of situations, have found an alternative place to fully express themselves: the world wide web. After realising that this idea would not be the most cinematographically interesting, Bouzid decided to make Farah, her main character, the lead singer in a band. This choice was still very coherent on a socio-political point of view as, as we shall see in this chapter, music was – and generally is - a pillar in moments of social upheaval. Music is difficult to contain and control, hence why it sometimes becomes a target for repressive states.

Bouzid worked with Khyam Allami on the music of the film, and had the lyrics specifically written for the film by her friend, and poet, Ghassem Amami. Allami was born in Syria of Iraqi

⁴ This topic has been largely dealt with, mainly in Egypt, with films such as *Clash* by Mohamed Diab, which shows the problem that the country is now facing, in the aftermath of the revolution. They are facing a split of the society between a tendency towards the secularisation of society, and another one towards a radicalisation of it with the Muslim Brotherhood.

parents before growing up in London. The collaboration between Bouzid and Allami was very fruitful as it gave birth to Joujma, the band in which Farah plays the lead singer. The principal instrument of the band is the Oud, a very characteristic and important instrument in Middle-Eastern culture. This instrument is mainly characteristic of the Middle Ages and Modern era in the Arab world. In this film, Allami and Bouzid attempt to make it an active part of the contemporary Arab culture. They try to make it a bit more 'rock and roll' or, rather, change its image. They incorporate this traditional instrument with other instruments that are more widely spread around the world and more used by the younger generation. By doing so they take a step towards making it an inherent part of the contemporary Arabic music. In the website dedicated to his work on the film, Allami writes that the aim was 'to develop a new and youthful sound for the band, informed by Tunisian folk music such as the vocal driven songs from the city of El Kef, and inspired by artists such as Patti Smith, PJ Harvey and the female leads in alternative rock bands such as Sonic Youth and Stereolab' (Hallami).

As I Open My Eyes tells the story Farah, an 18 year-old girl the summer following her last year of high school. She has just passed her baccalaureate and is now taking a step towards adulthood. She lives in Tunis with her mother, her dad being in Gafsa, a few hours from the capital, working with mining companies. She is part of a band where she sings songs about the *bled*, about the hopes and dreams of a generation, about Tunisia. Farah and the band, Joujma, are getting more and more gigs; they are slowly making a name for themselves. In the meantime, Hayet gets progressively more and more worried about Farah and her whereabouts. This is mainly motivated by Moncef, an old acquaintance of the mother now member of the police, which warned her of the fact that her daughter is being watched and hanging out with the wrong kind of people – in his opinion. Hayet then tries to stop Farah from singing by putting some pressure on her and telling the whole family that she is about to start studying medicine – which Farah does not want to do. Hayet uses the weight of the family to keep her daughter out of what she sees as potential trouble. Farah decides to continue doing music, until the day she disappears in a bus station. We learn later on that she was taken in by the police for questioning. This event is what will eventually manage to break her light and defiant attitude. By the end Hayet is the one trying to give Farah her voice back. At the end of the film Farah has lost her innocence and became a woman.

With this film Leyla Bouzid presents the life of a young woman the summer before the uprisings. She attempts to show the struggle of a new generation that feels stuck in a society where poverty and unemployment are still way too high. She shows a society where a constant feeling of paranoia reigns, creating the sensation that an invisible Damocles sword is constantly threatening to fall on their heads.

This film is particularly interesting as a case study in relation to the Tunisian Uprising as, similarly to a film like *The Beauty and the Dogs*, which I am going to focus on in the third chapter, the political context and reference to the upcoming uprisings are strategically placed in the storyline and cinematography, for the audience to pick up on. The reference to the revolution itself is, in my opinion, rather extra-diegetic. One of the reasons for it is that it has not happened yet. What Bouzid does is reconstructing the atmosphere that preceded it, which, to a certain extent, justifies and explains why the revolution unfolded only a few months later. Indeed, the film itself, even though not directly criticizing the Ben Ali regime, is implicitly critical of it. The film would not have been possible as it is before the uprisings as it shows a generation with desires, both carnal and societal.

II. PRE-REVOLUTION TUNISIA – national reception

Mon pays, oh mon pays,
pays de poussière.
Tes portes sont fermées et portent malheur.
Monte le volume. Stib Stib !
Mon pays, pays de poussière !
Tes portes sont fermées et portent malheur.
Les affamés se mangent des insultes. Tes chiens ont des dents en or
Et les démunis n'ont que des gencives.
Monte le volume, Stib Stib !
Les assoifés supplissent le bon dieu
Demain, ils s'exilent si le destin le veut.

Joujma in *As I Open My Eyes* by Leyla Bouzid

The film revolves around two main themes one being music, the other being the relationship between the state representatives and civilians. This is all represented against the backdrop of the Ben Ali regime and upcoming revolution. I previously mentioned how the reference to the revolution was rather extra-diegetic. In this part I will focus on the diegetic references to the regime and its upcoming end. I will then look further into the two main themes the director chose to use to illustrate the hopes and dreams of a generation, which has to deal with a controlling and suffocating state.

In the diegetic space of the film, a few hints are dropped here and there regarding the current state of affairs in the country. One of the most important references to the socio-political context of the country, and indirectly referencing to the Arab Uprisings, is Gafsa. As previously mentioned, Farah's dad, Mahmoud, works in Gafsa. After a discussion that he has with Hayet, his wife, the audience understands that he works there, rather than in the capital where his family lives. This is due to his refusal to join the party. This simple conversation is a strong reminder of the complete corruption and hegemony of the Tunisian state at the time of Ben Ali. He decided to sacrifice his family life in order to respect his ideology and keep a distance from the dogma of the state. Mahmoud decided not to compromise and stay faithful to his ideology and opinions. By the end of the film this changes as he decides to get the card of the party to be moved to Tunis where he can take care of his family, especially his daughter. Indeed the tension in Gafsa is increasing, and Farah and her mother are not on speaking terms. One night Farah locked her mother in her room so that she could go perform at a concert. From then on, the mother-daughter relationship became a bit tense, requiring the presence of

the father as a mediator. The presence of Mahmoud back home became necessary to restore the balance and calm in the family.

The fact that the father works in Gafsa is particularly relevant as it carries a lot of meaning in terms of the genealogy of social turmoil in the country. In the film he works with the Gafsa Phosphate Company (C.P.G), which play a leading role in the Tunisian mining industry. In 2008 Tunisia lived through the most significant social unrest since the Tunisian bread riots of 1984. The CPG has been one of the main – or even sole – revenue generator in the region. Around the time of the demonstration in the region, the price of the phosphate has incredibly increased, thus contributing to the company making a large profit on their sales. Yet, this did not change the job situation in the country. In and around Gafsa are where one can find the highest rate of unemployment, especially amongst educated people⁵. By focusing on Gafsa, Bouzid makes it the epicentre of the revolution. The tension that we see depicted in the film is an indicator – and reference to – the fact that by the summer of 2010 the social turmoil was already there, and the revolution was just around the corner. Taking Gafsa as an example of the revolution yet to come was also a way to put it back at the centre of focus and show that the revolution, or at least the ideas and complaints that led to it were present many years before and did not come out of thin air, from one day to the other.

Throughout the film, Farah prioritises music over anything else. It is her passion, but it almost seems to become a necessity for her. She feels the need to sing and express this anger and frustration, but it also is what makes her happy – like for the rest of the band. It gives her purpose.

Music holds a particularly important place in Arabic culture. The exhibition ‘Al Musiqā’ which took place at the Paris’ Philharmonie in May of this year is a good reminder of that. The exhibition goes through the history of music in the Arab World, from the desert songs to the religious ones such as *al adan*, *tajwid*, or *mawlid*, to contemporary artists which are often drawing inspiration from Arabic traditions and mix them with some more western influences (Philharmonie de Paris). One of the important focuses of the exhibition is Oum Kelthoum, the ‘mother of the Arab world’. She is considered to be one of the most important voices in the region. Egyptian born, she was a symbol and important figure for generations from different countries of the region. Kelthoum was close to the state, which had Gamal Abdel Nasser at its head around that time. She became the voice of the State as she was a symbol and a strong patriot. The day she died thousands were in the streets to mourn her death. A symbol was dead.

Making music, as the films makes abundantly clear, was a very meaningful choice as it held an important position during the uprisings. A lot of artists use the immateriality of music and its contagious capabilities to criticize power. It federates people, it is accessible, it is understandable by all, circulates easily, and does not know any physical boundaries. In the film music is used to criticise

⁵ According to *L'économiste maghrébin*, in 2014 32,1% of the population was unemployed, 26% of it being from Gafsa, which is the highest percentage.

the general state of things in the country. Later on in the film *Bohrène* refers to the fact that Joujma – the band - is starting to get more followers on social media, and that is how they are spreading the word and will get Farah back.⁶

Moments of struggle and oppression often give birth to great bursts of creativity. Nawal El Saadawi, important figure of feminism in the Middle East, simply understands creativity as a revolt against injustice. The use of the Oud in such a context, with very contemporary inspiration, and a woman lead singer, works efficiently as a metaphor of the struggle that the Arab youth is facing, like in Tunisia. The majority of films made the past few years in the region depict a youth torn between tradition and modernity. The incorporation of the Oud in a rock band can be seen as a metaphor for a changing society. It is an association of the old and the new, of tradition and modernity, which leads to something new and harmonious.

The second central issue of the film is the relationship between the civilians and the state, and its police in particular. In the case of this film, police violence is brought upon the band by the music they play. The state sees it as a threat; they thus try to choke the voice of this youth before it catches too many ears. The topic of the relationship of civilians with the state and their representatives is a common point between Bouzid and Ben Hania, who both approach it, from a different angle. In *As I Open My Eyes* Leyla Bouzid manages to create a heavy atmosphere of paranoia and uneasiness. The audience does not really see any police during the first half of the film. There is no proof at any given point that the members of the band are actively being watched. She generally attempts to raise issues without facing them headfirst, but rather by creating an atmosphere for the spectator, through which he will be able to understand the main characters.

In her interview with IFFR in 2016 she explained how, when the revolution happened, she thought it would finally give the space to directors and artists to finally talk about the Ben Ali years, about what was once taboo. It did happen, to some extent. The revolution saw an increase of documentary, as explained before, but also of fictions dealing with the aftermath. Leyla Bouzid decided to go back to the past, and show how she remembered and lived it.

Both Bouzid and Ben Hania tackle the role of the police in the Tunisian society in their films, while both films are set up in different periods. Looking at both films alongside the other offers a clear view of the situation in the country on the topic before and after the events. The difference is not striking, and this is because the ‘cleansing’ of the society is not done. The head fell but the body is, in majority, still standing. In one of the latest scenes of the film of Leyla Bouzid, Farah is being interrogated by the police. The scene, even if not physically violent, is quite shocking. It actually leaves a strong doubt on whether Farah has been sexually molested or not. In both films policemen leading

⁶ This conversation happens with Hayet after Farah is gone missing

interrogations cross both physical and moral boundaries. In *The Beauty and The Dogs*, Mariam is being tormented by the policemen who are playing with what happened to her. They try to apply some kind of mental pressure in order to make her give up her search for justice.

In my opinion, the sentiment of paranoia that Bouzid manages to convey comes from very particular and well-thought choices. One of them is the use of the amateur camera by Ali, the 'manager' of the band. He is the one guiding them from one gig to the other, finding them a place to rehearse, but also recording them during live concert and rehearsals. At a few intervals throughout the film, the spectator sees through the lens of the amateur camera. This cinematographic choice contributes to making this feeling of paranoia evermore present. The use of this type of images makes one feel like he is spying, catching a moment that they were not necessarily supposed to see.

Ten minutes in the film, Farah and the rest of the band are celebrating their upcoming concert in a bar in the centre of Tunis. After striking a conversation with a man there Farah starts singing *As I Open My Eyes*, the main song of the film. Ali takes his camera and starts filming. A man present in the bar gets angry for being caught on camera. The gesture showing that he is upset is very subtle and quick, but it contributes to the feeling of voyeurism that the use of this camera creates.

Later on in the film the audience as well as the other characters discover that Ali was actually an informer for the police. It is actually never made clear whether he really was working for them, but thinking back to his role and his constant filming of the band, the doubt sneaks in. First Bohrene, the Oud player, gets arrested and questioned. Then, later on, Farah mysteriously disappears. It will actually take for her mother to call her contact at the police, most probably an old lover, to get information on the whereabouts of Farah. Even though this is the last thing she wants to do, Hayet would sacrifice anything for her daughter. Once she is released, Ali asks Farah how she thinks she has not been arrested before. There the doubt settles: was he trying to save the band or simply report them to the police? Was he playing with the system to help them out and keep them off the hook, or was he just informing the police and helping the system to shut these new rebellious voices down?

The doubts and questions that the situation raises in the film are an indication of how complex this issue was in the Tunisian society, but also legitimates the uneasiness that was being felt from the beginning. This rediscovery of the character of Ali makes one reflect back on the opening scene of the film. In this first sequences, the audience could see Bohrène and Farah in a sensual embrace. Everything is shot with close-ups, adding to the feeling of proximity, both physical and emotional, of the characters. A counter shot from behind comes straight after. Someone is looking over from behind a tree. This person is Ali. The first that comes to mind then is the fact that the two lovers are trying to keep their relation, especially the physical one, secret. Discovering that Ali was an informer later on the film makes us reflect back on this first scene and see it as a first step towards the creation of a feeling of paranoia or, rather, of having someone spying over one's shoulder. This opening scene is

not only a metaphor for the desires of a new generation; it also is one of the Ben Ali regime – an invisible presence watching over from behind the bushes.

Violence and censorship do not have to be blatant to be efficient. This feeling of being watched over can often lead to self-censorship, which ends up being exactly what the state wants. In effect, the other way of censoring the youth was the use of the law 52 by the state. This law allowed the state to condemn a person consuming or in possession of Marijuana of one year in prison and up to one thousand dinars fee. This law has been one of the most used by the state to throw the youth in prison, especially the less docile one. The text of this law was actually not changed before 2017.

Even though the feeling of paranoia is quite strong, Joujma's music brings about a relieving and uplifting melody. The music itself is quite upbeat and happy. The lyrics are engaged and present a critic of a certain way of life, but are also an escape from it.

III. INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION - The shifting presence of women on the screen

Tel l’oiseau de nuit,
génération après génération,
je rêve d’une étincelle,
qui rougit le ciel.
D’un jour, que nul n’a jamais vu.
Tel l’oiseau de nuit, les larmes de mon coeur coulent.
J’ai vu un monde détruit,
des situations meurtries.
Et tant de coeurs, de coeurs éteints.
Tel l’oiseau de nuit fuyant l’inéluctable.
Leurs fusils sont chargés, leurs chiens sont enragés,
on se demande, ce qu’ils veulent déclencher.

Both case studies of this thesis are centred around the hopes, dreams and role of a changing youth. In both films there is a particular focus on young women. This choice can be analysed and understood in very different ways. One might argue that this focus on young Arabic women might be a way to get more funding as it is clear that a topic such as the emancipation of women in these countries is something that Western film industries are attracted to, and more than happy to fund.⁷ Even though this is definitely an aspect to keep in mind when analysing these movies, it would be a bit reductionist to limit the focus on young women to this. I firmly think that the choices of the directors on the topic of their films are very much influenced by the type of funding they receive, their personal history, the leading trends on the cinema – and specifically festivals – market. It is all-porous and a director is sensitive to all these factors and tendencies.

The topic of the emancipation of women might be trendy, but it is also very timely. Josef Gugler actually argues that the topic of ‘gender relations’ is quite recurrent in Arab cinema. The first films ever made in the region, *The Fool of Kairouan*, made in 1939 by a French director was already dealing with the topic of arranged marriage and the condition of women. The thing that changed is the way it is being treated and depicted. Gugler also argues that, even though gender relations are not new in Arab cinema, they are also still generally confined to the domestic sphere. This is partly true.

⁷ In his book Gugler says: ‘directors know that some topics are more likely to find favour than others. Such is the case of the denunciation of the oppression of women’ (Gugler 5).

In both case studies, the ‘nod’ of the narrative revolves around domestic / family relations. In *As I Open My Eyes* the mother / daughter relationship is quite central. In *The Beauty and the Dogs*, there is no real narrative emphasis on the family in the sense that they are not physically present at all in the film, but they have an underlying – mental and moral - presence. At the end of the film the policemen use family as an argument, as a way of applying pressure on Mariam. Another good example is *Bus 678* of Mohamed Diad (released in 2010) where policemen threaten women that have filed a complaint against sexual harassment. They attempt to make them feel guilty about it by bringing up the idea of the shame and unnecessary attention it might bring on their families. This argument is often used by male counterparts to dissuade women from filing any official complaints. The only reason why Mariam goes through with it in *The Beauty and the Dogs* is because a policeman dares to rebel against his superiors and tell her that it is her right to file a lawsuit.

Here I would like to open a discussion regarding the idea according to which women in the Middle East are oppressed – in other places in the world as well obviously – and that is mainly because of men. The thing I want to answer here is ‘yes, but it more complicated than that’. Indeed, the general vision that men have on women in the region is a bit backwards, but that is according to western standards. In addition to this, it is important to pinpoint that, in this whole patriarchal discourse about the place of women in society, it has been made clear that they are in charge of the house and the education of kids. This way of thinking towards women in society and in the domestic sphere has actually often been transmitted by the mother to her kids. As mentioned earlier, they are the keeper of tradition and family, they are the ones transmitting knowledge and beliefs. As Magda Wassef puts it, ‘transmitted by the mother, secular traditions are forged from one generation to the next’. Women ‘perpetuate all the taboos and prohibitions they have inherited’ (Hillaeur, 367-368).

For Nawal Saadawi feminism is not a matter of gender as some women are more patriarchal than some men. This is exactly why the hope and belief of Nouri Bouzid that the liberation and emancipation of the country will only come after the emancipation of women will require going to the root of some beliefs of the Tunisian society. It is actually the case in *Millefeuille* of Nouri Bouzid as the mother is the one pushing her daughter to wear the headscarf. The mother is often the one used and referred to in arguments regarding keeping tradition,⁸ and any other important domestic affair. A similar example can be found in *Much Loved*, the very controversial film of Nabyl Ayouch. One of the most crucial scenes of the film is when the mother of Noha, played by Loubna Abidar, refuses to see her daughter coming back to her house because of the chatter it created in the neighbourhood. The interesting thing here is the hypocrisy of such a scene. The mother relies on the money that her

⁸ In *Millefeuille* the future groom tells to Zaineb’s parents – future parents in law – ‘My mother loves Zained, but she wants her to wear a headscarf’. It turns out, later on in the film, that the mother did not care for it but the husband used her as an excuse to get Zained to wear a headscarf.

daughter brings her to live and raise her grandkids. Yet, she is not prepared to face the shame that the chatter of the neighbours bring her.

In *As I Open My Eyes*, the mother / daughter relationship is slightly different. Hayet is also the keeper of traditions and the domestic sphere in this film, but this does not come from a strong belief in patriarchy or a wish to transmit it. Hayet attempts to stop Farah because she knows way too well what type of world her daughter is facing. One could assume that Moncef, the policeman and possibly ex-lover is trying to help her, was what Ali is to Farah: a friend that is likely to have chosen the state over his friends at some point in his life. In all cases, the younger generations are the ones depicted as holding the hope for change in the society while older generation generally keep being represented as prisoners of the domestic world.

All these films have something more in common. *As I Open My Eyes* was a first feature film of Leyla Bouzid, but also for a lot of the crew. These directors making their debut feature-films also want to have a cast that is novice. This choice is, partly explained by the fact that, as new directors, they might not have a lot of choice on the matter. It is a bit more difficult to get famous and/or professional actors for a debut feature. Yet the choice of having young non-professional actors in the film, often in leading roles, has something to do with the fact that the directors wanted their films to be as genuine and as close to reality as possible. Bouzid did castings in a high school in Tunis in order to find Baya Medhaffar, which turned out to be everything she wanted for the role.

Chapter III

Tunisia Post-Revolution

Kaouther Ben Hania, *The Beauty and the Dogs*

I. THE DIRECTOR AND HER FILM

Kaouthar Ben Hania was born in 1977 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. She studied cinema in Tunisia as well as in France, where she followed a summer school at La Femis during the summer of 2004. She also studied at the School of Arts and Cinema of Tunis, where Nouri Bouzid was one of her teachers. The latter was, and still is, a very important figure of Tunisian cinema. Throughout her studies she made short films that have, for the majority, had a great reception. She won the Golden Tanit at the JCC (Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage) of 2016 in Tunis for her short film *Zained Hates the Snow* (*Zaineb takrahou ethelj*). She did her first feature film, *The Slasher of Tunis* in 2013, where she already touched upon the place of women in Tunisian society.

This docufiction told the story of the ‘challat’ - Arabic word meaning ‘slasher’ - of Tunis, a man that was slashing the behind of women that he considered scantily clad. Ten years later Kaouthar Ben Hania tried to find him and investigate a bit why he did what he did. By the end the audience realises that there was not only one challat but many, imitating an act that they considered justified and legitimate. While watching this docu-fiction, the most shocking scene is when Marwan, who created a video game based on the actions of the Challat, goes to an imam to present his project. The imam receives it quite positively, agreeing that the game follows the values and principles of Islam and the Koran by showing that a decent and respectable woman will be rewarded for her behaviour. In the game this entails slashing all the other ‘unrespectable’ women - extra points for the skinny ones, well thought indeed. This type of reaction from a recognized religious authority is actually quite scary. This on-camera conversation shows very well that this questionable perception of women has penetrated various spheres of society, religion included. In this first feature film Kaouthar Ben Hania already mixed up genres - documentary and fiction - in order to give a more poignant and much stronger work. The documentary aspect that this film takes is very unsettling and makes the audience believe and reflect on what is being said and demonstrated in it. This is the case of the aforementioned scene with the imam where one does not know whether to believe it or not.

The Beauty and the Dogs is Ben Hania’s latest feature film. It was part of the 2017’s competition of the JCC. It had been in the competition of *Un Certain Regard* at Cannes Film Festival a few months earlier, and has been screened at a lot of international festivals since. The film tells the story of Mariam Chaouch, a 21-year-old Tunisian woman originally from outside of Tunis. One night she goes to a student party. During the evening, she meets a young man, Youssef, who will be by her side for the rest of this long and difficult night. The next sequence shows Mariam in the streets, in a state of shock, trying to run away from something, or someone. The spectator understands later on that she got raped by two policemen. During that time, the third one attempted to extort money to Youssef. The movie follows her fight to file a complaint against the perpetrators of the rape. How can one do this

when the rapists are part of the body of the state supposed to insure the protection of its civilians? What happens when the perpetrators are part of the justice system?

The film is loosely based on a book written in 2013 by Meriem Ben Mohamed (alias of the author). *Coupable d'avoir été violée* (which literally translates as 'guilty of being raped') tells her story. In this book Meriem explains what happened to her one night of September 2012. She got raped by two policemen after she had gone to the restaurant with her fiancé. Whilst the two first policemen were with her, a third one blackmailed her fiancé. Meriem Ben Mohamed's story had provoked many discussions in Tunisia, where a lot of women defending the applicant were threatened of rape. As Abdelwahab Meddeb puts it in an article written a few days after this event, the victim was depicted by the state as guilty under the premise that she did not respect the morals and that the way she was dressed was provocative. This discussion reveals a lot about the way in which women are seen in certain patriarchal and phallogocentric societies. Indeed, women are considered to be the ones creating desire, they are sinners and temptresses. They are the ones guilty of having tempted men with their ways and bodies. It is also noteworthy that until July 2017 there was a law allowing a 'perpetrator of sexual violence' to marry his victim to avoid charges – if she was less than 15 years old. Even though not directly related to our topic, it is a clear example of the inequality of treatment of women in the country and, the gap that exists between mentalities on the topic and actual laws (see Watrin).

It is essential to underline the fact that these types of aggressions against women were still happening after the revolution. The story of Meriem Ben Mahmoud dates back from 2012, and is most probably not the latest one. The Tunisian revolution was a moment of rebellion against a system and a type of ideology. The revolutionary social upheavals managed to overthrow the regimes they were rejecting, but it did not free the entire society from its flaws and rotten members. The police, representative of the state, did not get 'cleaned' from one day to the other. The central topic of the film is not culturally or temporally bound. Indeed, one of the questions that the film raises revolves around the way women are perceived and treated, which is a debate present in a lot of different societies. Indeed, this type of behaviour is not one with frontiers. One example could be the exhibition that took place in 2017 at the University of Kansas, which displayed the clothes that female victims of rape wore at the time, thus trying to disprove the idea according to which women getting raped are often dressed in a provocative manner. This exhibition attempted to invalidate the idea and stereotype according to which the way women dress generally explains whether the sexual harassment or aggression they have been a victim of is their fault or not (see Vagianos). In this film Ben Hania tackles an international issue on a specific political backdrop. She manages to turn a local news item into a relatable topic, whilst informing her audience about the contemporary Tunisian culture and society. The relatability of the story is also reinforced by Ben Hania's cinematographic choices, which we will look into later on in this chapter. It also speaks to a local audience as it gives a voice to a new generation, and delivers a slightly pessimistic view on the aftermath of the revolution while staying positive about it. The last

image of the film is a sign of hope, and an encouragement for the people that have supported the revolution, as if to say: keep fighting, change requires determination and patience, but it will eventually happen. Do not give up because all our individual voices are what made the revolution possible in the first place.

II. WHAT IT TELLS US – National reception

“Sexual exploitation functions no longer as a metaphor for class inequality or colonial domination but stands for itself as a mere sign of gender inequality stretching from colonial to post-colonial society.”

- Viola Shafik (Hillaeur)

The Beauty and the Dogs got a great reception by the Tunisian as much as an international audience. In my opinion, the most important characteristic of this film is its use of the long take, the divide of the film into chapters, and the fact that it plays with cinematographic genres. These cinematographic choices are quite striking and impact greatly the reception and effect of the film. Indeed, the choice of the long take to tell a story that happens over one night associates the film with theatre - in terms of the game of the actor - and documentary - as it follows the main actor in her search for justice. It gives a greater impression of realism to the film and the story itself. In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that The first question would, thus, be: why these choices?

As explained previously Kaouther Ben Hania's background is a mix of documentary and fiction. *Zineb Hates the Snow* was a documentary, while *The Slasher of Tunis* pretends to be one. She said herself in an interview that, at first glance, this 2014 film seems to be a documentary, but is actually 90% fiction as the majority of it has been rehearsed and carefully planned. The director plays with the different genres of cinema in order to create a fiction flirting with documentary and realism (Rochebrune). This flirtation comes from the cinematographic and aesthetic choices of the director. Indeed, the documentary aspect of this film does not come from its cinematography but rather from the way of telling the story. The whole film follows one night in the life of a woman. The divide into chapters is what, in my opinion, breaks the documentary impression that the film gives while referring to it. This is when the film leaves the documentary sphere to reach the realist one. Not everything is a true, verified and proved fact, but it stays close to the truth. The long take adds to it as no mistake is allowed. The choice of filming every chapter of the film with one single shot puts a lot of pressure on the actors, but also brings it back to, once more, documentary and theatre. The two are quite different but similar in the way the actors appear. In theatre, there is no break or retake. The story unfolds with the actor never leaving the skin of the character. In this realistic, single-takes film the actor plays similarly as a theatre actor, but also reminds one of documentaries because of the recounting aspect of it. In my opinion it can remind one of theatre and documentary because of the fact that the absence of ellipses – due to the fact that everything is shot in single takes – gives the impression that the story is not manipulated.

Finally, the choice of filming exclusively with long takes means that there is no use of reverse shot. This shot/reverse shot technique is very conventional and used on a very regular basis. It allows,

in certain situations, to see both aspects of a situation. In a conversation for example, the director would usually alternate shot/reverse-shot in order to show both protagonists and thus providing the viewer with some clues for understanding the situation. In this film, there is no such thing. Ben Hania does not provide her viewer with any other point of view than the one of the camera following Mariam. One of the consequences of this choice is the incapability for the viewer to escape this story. He will follow Mariam all the way.

One thing that has become clear to me during my research, and that I want to emphasize here before going into a more detailed analysis of the film, is the fact that the context in which the film was made tells us a lot more about the current state of affairs in Tunisia, than the film itself. The second important aspect to tackle in relation to the film is its international and national range. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the topic of the film is of international resonance, which is probably one of the reasons why it was so successful outside of the country (one of the other reasons being the cinematography). Yet, the story talks to a local audience as well. References to the current state of things/atmosphere in Tunisia have been scattered throughout the film. KBH clearly placed her story in a post-revolution Tunisia without ever addressing this frontally.

• Structure

The film is made of 9 chapters of 6 to 17 minutes. Each of them represents a unit of time, and often of space. They are continuous sequences, a 'plan-séquence'. The whole film and, thus, the nine chapters, present the events of one single night. The chapters give a rhythm to the story and punctuate it.



Figure 1

Chapter 1 (9:54):

The film opens with the image of Miriam getting ready for the party, in the toilets of the 'club'. The camera plays the role of the mirror here. She looks directly in it, thus giving the impression to the viewer that she is staring at them. From the beginning, Miriam's look challenges the rule of the fourth wall, the frontier between intra and extra diegetic spaces. It challenges the spectators and tries to break the distance that is normally exists between the character and the viewers, between fiction and reality. This sequence ends with Mariam leaving the club with Youssef, a young man she only just met.

Chapter 2 (6:58):

Mariam is running away in a state of panic. Youssef is running after her. She gets intensely scared at the sight of a car. He convinces her to go to a clinic. Once she arrives there the audience realizes that she has been raped. She is rejected by the woman of the clinic under the premise that she does not have any papers with her. The latter have been lost in the car of the policemen while she was forcefully there. They leave the clinic in the direction of the public hospital.

Chapter 3 (12:09):

Mariam and Youssef are at the public hospital. They try to see a doctor but they are rejected by the employees of the hospital. Mariam is brought to different doctors but it always boils down to the same issue: she first needs a paper from the police. While they were waiting Youssef mentions the story to a journalist who is there. She gives her card to Mariam. This scene is particularly interesting because it is the first one referencing the recent events of the country:

Youssef : What is the use of the revolution ? People died for their rights. So that these savages would pay. If accept the humiliation, that's on us. Your rights you have to snatch it with your own hands. Give up and they will eat you alive.

For Youssef this whole evening is not about Mariam, it is about fighting for one's rights. He has stopped believing that things will change through representatives and other official and political actions. If each individual does not fight for himself, nothing will change. This is the mentality that allowed for the revolution to start, the belief that all individuals have to rise up together to make a change.

Chapter 4 (10 :29):

Mariam and Youssef are at the police station. The whole scene takes place in one office, where the two protagonists attempt to file a deposition. After a heated argument, the policeman informs them that they have to go to the station closest to the place of the incident in order to give their deposition.

This whole scene ends up adding to the tension of the film, the feeling of unfairness towards Mariam, and the relationship to the police.

Chapter 5 (8 :39) :

Mariam and Youssef are at the back of a taxi, driving towards the right police station. Youssef is on the phone with his cousin, trying to get the surveillance footage of the ATM where the policeman brought him to extort money. Mariam talks to some policemen outside the station. After telling her story to one of them, she is sent home. Youssef refuses that and drags her back into the station.

Chapter 6 (6 :38) :

The scene takes place in the office of a pregnant policewoman. She takes her deposition and asks Mariam to put her underwear in an evidence bag. She will be driven by colleagues to the hospital where she will, finally, see a medical examiner. On her way to the police car that will get her to the hospital Mariam hears the ringtone of her phone. The latter was lost, with her bag, in the police car where she got attacked. She finds her bag at the back of a white car parked there. A few seconds later, she is faced with the policemen who have raped her. She runs away and ends up back in the office of the policewoman where she attempts to finally denounce the perpetrators of the crime she has been a victim of. No reaction from her. It is clear that the policewoman must have struggled to get where she is and get respected by her male counterparts. She decides not to do anything about it. This chapter abruptly finishes on an image of Mariam and the three other policemen all trying to make their version of the story be heard.



Figure 2

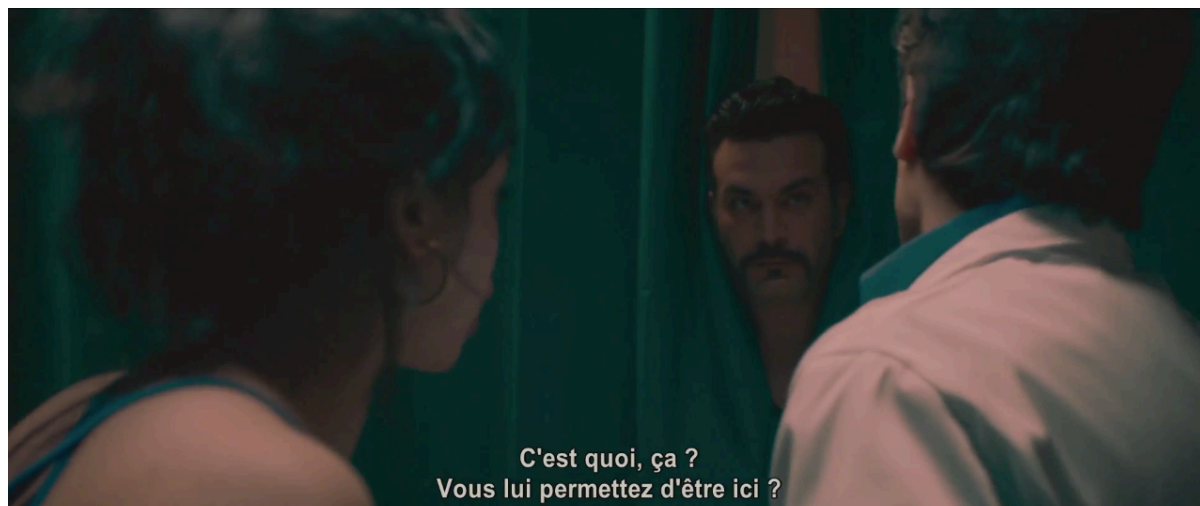


Figure 3

Chapter 7 (10 :13):

Mariam is with the medical examiner, who attempts to give her a gynecological assessment. She is crying for the first time. One of the policemen looks through the curtains of the examination room onto Miriam. This scene is a visual intrusion that reminds one of the rape that Mariam was the victim of. It is also the first direct visual reference to it. Mariam runs away but is forced to come back into the van. She is driven back to the women's foyer, where she lives. One of the policemen tries to pressure her into dropping her charges. She tries to sneak into the foyer, which closed its doors at 10pm. When she is about to be caught by the guardian of the foyer and her dad, the same policeman arrives and 'saves' her from this situation. She does not want to be caught by her dad as she is ashamed of the whole situation. In exchange she promises to drop the charges.



Figure 4

Chapter 8 (10 :28) : Mariam is back at the police station with Youssef. He is arrested for assault against a policeman, the one he had a heated argument with in chapter 4. Mariam finds herself confronted with her rapists once more. She runs away from them and locks herself in the bathroom. Once there she calls the journalist she had met at the hospital to ask for help. She gets out of the toilets after she starts hearing the sound of someone screaming. It is her scream, coming from the phone of one of the policemen. He filmed the whole assault. She tries to get the phone but she is pushed on the floor and passes out.

This chapter is quite visually and emotionally charged, for the protagonist as much as for the audience. This is only the second time that the audience is confronted with a direct reference to the rape. This one is prominently auditory (on the part of the spectator) and aural (for Mariam). This chapter, added to the previous one, reconstitutes the rape. Ben Hania refers to it by decomposing some of the senses involved in it. Apart from the obvious visual metaphor that this image presents (fig 4) of Mariam being knocked out by the rape, one could also argue that, with this image, the rape is being belittled. It is being belittled by the policemen who have treated the complaint as a very negligible fact so far, it was belittled by the policewoman when she looked down on Miriam and made her feel guilty for being dressed like this and, to a certain extent, it was belittled by Youssef who uses it as an opportunity to assert his rights and continue the fight that the revolution had started



Figure 5

Chapter 9 (18:15): The final, and longest, chapter of the film opens on an image of Mariam sleeping in an interrogation room. Three men are there, one of them wakes her up. They all go in the next room in order for her to sign her minutes. She is told that the ‘monsters’ that have done that to her have been arrested. When reading her minutes she realises that it is for her to drop the charges. She gets angry, and the policemen agitated. They try to manipulate her emotions by making her feel guilty, making her think of the shame that this whole affair would put on her and her family. She is given her

initial deposition back. When going over it, she sees that the deposition states that she was committing adultery. As she is not married, and was not either at the time, she argues that this part of the deposition is false. She gets into an argument with one of the policemen that makes her understand that she is guilty of having a disrespectful attitude, one that is not tolerated. He then tells her that she has to go to prison because of her misbehaviour. Chedly, one of the policemen, finally tells her to leave the precinct and directly go to the prosecutor of the Republic. She leaves the building, and the movie ends on a shot of her, alone outside, in the Tunisian sun, with her veil worn on her shoulders, as a superhero cap.



Figure 6

The cinematographic analysis of the film allows for another level of understanding of it. The first important element is the use of the long shot. This has clearly contributed to a feeling of suffocation. It seems like there is no end to this fight and search for justice. It takes the audience through major Tunisian institutions, as to give a panorama of it. The second element is the use of the colours. There is a clear choice of the blue and blue-green colour throughout the film. It is particularly clear at the beginning of the film where the dress of Mariam sets the tone. The lights at the party are of the same shade, at the hospital as well, during the scene at the medical examiner as well (fig. 2 & 3), and so on. This colour is generally known for its very cold and dull characteristics. Towards the end of the film, the general tone of colours turns towards the white. It almost feels as if the colours were over-exposed. The excess of light at the end of the film seems to represent the awakening of Mariam. This film tells the story of a life-changing experience for its main character. It opened her eyes to the world and the state of things in her country. This ordeal made her a woman and forced her to be more aware of the people around her, their intentions and motives. She learned that she had to fight for justice and to get what she wants. The bright images at the end work as a metaphor of the awareness of the world that Mariam is gaining. The choice of the long takes emphasise Mariam point of view, which is, then,

reinforced by the choice of the colours. There is another important lesson to be learned here: there is no need to be a woman, a feminist, or politically engaged to fight for your rights.

In the first chapter of this thesis I have attempted to explain how, throughout history, the theme of women and their struggle in society was used as a metaphor for class inequality and colonial domination. The depiction of the women, at home, veiled, was some kind of way of representing the condition of the country itself, or its relationship with other exterior actors. Hillaeur – using Viola Shafik – argues that for the past few decades what has changed is the way these themes are depicted. They have been around for a while, but their meanings have shifted. The inequality that is depicted in relation to women is now used for what it is, which is the depiction of gender inequality. I agree with this to a very great extent, but this film disproves exactly this argument. *The Beauty and the Dogs* fits, in a way, very well into this tradition of using women as a metaphor for a bigger issue. The film definitely denounces the way women are treated in contemporary Tunisia, but it mainly shows that, a few years after the revolution, not much has changed. It shows a disillusioned youth (Youssef) and an apolitical one (Mariam).

III. INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION

‘There is a certain irony in the situation. Directors attempting to create authentic national cinemas now depend on financial aid from former colonial powers’

(Hillaëur)

As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Tunisia has a very particular relationship with France. The latter being an old colonial power, the contemporary relations of the two are still very intertwined and complex. I have previously explained how the history of cinema in Tunisia is particularly related to the one of Europe. After the independence of the country, there was a sort of nationalisation of the industry through a turn in the thematic focus of the film as well as with the development of local schools, cinemas, companies, etc. Nowadays, the cinematographic relationship of the two is still very present, mainly through co-productions. In the past few decades, especially since the independence, Tunisian cinema has managed to develop through European co-productions, and other types of partnerships. One could see that as a new type of hegemony from certain European countries as these types of relations necessarily impact the content of the film being made.

A lot of films in the region reach the big screen through foreign funds. In the case of films from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, which were former French colonies or protectorate, the funds came from France. The local governments do not always have the capacity to fully fund these projects, or simply not willing to. It is, for example, understandable that a film such as *Much Loved*, directed by Nabyl Ayouch, did not get any Moroccan funding. The film tackles a prominent issue in the Moroccan society, prostitution. The film was actually forbidden in the country and reached the screens for the first time during the JCC in Tunisia. Aside from being another statement about the will of Tunisia to be at the forefront and one of the most ‘advanced’ Arab countries, it underlines the fact that the film would never have seen the light of day if it solely relied on Moroccan funds, or public support.

Now, the central question that this kind of scenario raises is the following: granted that the lack of local funds impacts the existence of a film or project, to which extent does the use of foreign funds impact a film? Where it gets more complicated is when these same countries share a complex past, power relations, or have a very different culture. France had a major presence in African and Middle Eastern countries. Indeed, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were under French domination for a few decades. This colonial period also saw the emergence of a very particular vision of the Orient. As Edward Said develops in his seminal book *Orientalism* of 1978, these views on the ‘Orient’ were not created for themselves, for their own sake, but in contrast with ‘Western’ countries. This developed a

vision of the general 'other' that lived in these countries. This orientalised vision of the region consisted in a very stereotypical vision of people, customs and places.

One effective way of illustrating this idea would be to think of Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers*. This 1833 painting represents quite well the existing fantasies towards Arabic women. There was this desire - for French/European men - of seeing what was under the veil. For a few decades the middle-eastern woman was seen as this mysterious and veiled being, belonging to the domestic sphere. In her documentary *La révolution des femmes - un siècle de féminisme arabe* Feriel Ben Mahmoud, that we previously mentioned, explains how the veil actually came to be used as a means of protestation against the occupying countries or, more generally, against Western countries around the time of the occupation of the territory. Some countries, such as France, ended up talking about it as an example of the backward way of thinking of these countries, of how they treated their women, and thus found a way of justifying their presence in these countries. It was one of the opportunities they had to pose as the liberator of women for the rest of the world, especially other colonial and economic powers.

This history of the representation of women in the Middle-East has greatly impacted the way they are represented in films as well, especially when made by foreign directors. In the case of films made by local directors with foreign funds, the producers have their word to say. One could assume that the general taste would be towards a representation of the Tunisian woman, in this case, coherent with the collective imaginary of one of the countries participating to its production. Even though the mentalities have tremendously evolved since then, there is still an important presence of stereotypes towards countries of this region. There is still a strong opposition between 'us' and 'them', on a cultural level as well. In their video *Edward Said – Framed: The Politics of Stereotypes in News*, the channel Al Jazeera, through the voice of Sorious Samura, tells us that Orientalism is not a thing of the past, but also of the present. It is the fact of being 'fixed, captured and framed', and that has not stopped. It is important to look beyond what is being told, and think beyond the narrative.

When local directors want to make films attractive to a wider audience, to one that is not the one of their country, they also have to think and question the way they are seen outside of their own national sphere. This will, if not dictate, at least influence their way of depicting certain issues, or the choice of the topic of their film itself.

The Beauty and the Dogs has had a great international reception. It was welcomed at a lot of international festivals where the public was very touched by the story. The national and regional reception was very similar. Some have argued that the cinematography and the lack of direct and strong references to a socio-political Tunisian context were an attempt to be more attractive for an international audience, but below I shall argue that these choices were a bit more nuanced and not purely to attract a larger audience.

In my opinion the cinematography adds a lot to the appeal of the film to an international audience. It is aesthetically quite familiar for a European art-house audience that is used to frequent film festivals, which I am part of, and makes its story more accessible. These choices can partly be explained by the education of Ben Hania. Indeed, she got an international education and got trained in the cinema school in which Nouri Bouzid was a teacher. He, himself, did his studies in Belgium. Roy Armes explains in his book on *New Arab Cinema* that the younger generation of directors, such as Kaouther Ben Hania or Leyla Bouzid, are generally 'typically members of a bi- or tri-lingual elite, often educated at some of the most prestigious universities in the West and trained at the foremost film schools in Europe, the United States, and Russia' (see Armes)

One could argue that, nowadays, even though there is still a tendency to stereotype certain countries and groups of people, the discourses and views on certain issues are slowly changing. The whole topic is very tricky and complex as there is a rather hegemonic representation of the Arab world, Muslims, Arab women. There was a development of the film industry after the independence from western countries, but it is still very reliant on them; a situation that Hillaeur correctly calls 'ironic'. In these cases, the former colonial powers are the ones that give more 'freedom' to certain directors that would not be able to do the film in their own country because of lack of financial support, but more generally because of the topic. Then there are collaborations with Western countries, which impact the way the film will be made and the topic depicted, because production companies would not invest in films only made for a local audience that would not work at all on the box office. Here it seems relevant to give a reminder of the fact that the number of film theatres is very small in Tunisia and that films are, thus, more often than not, also aimed at an international audience. This reshapes the narrative on certain topic and countries as local directors are now making films about their own country and are seen internationally.⁹ But then this new narrative was necessarily influenced by the participation of international funds. It seems to be an endless loop.

In the second chapter I have mentioned the importance of music in the film of Leyla Bouzid and in the Middle East in general. I have also explained how Oum Kalthoum was a key figure in Egypt, but also almost everywhere else in the region. Her songs were sung by Arabs throughout the region and over different generations. This was despite being Egyptian, and thus singing in Egyptian Arabic. In the first chapter of this thesis I have explained how the Egyptian film industry was the most important in

⁹ This mass of educated and articulate women has changed the way in which a whole array of aspects of Arab society are experienced and depicted. Often the changes are subtle, and in no case is there an attempt to romanticize women's lives or to avoid criticism where this is due. But there is a new perspective, which is most evident in the treatment of women's sexuality. Here, the closer a filmmaker is to France, the more openness tends to be displayed. (see Armes)

the region. The hegemony of Egyptian films was easy in certain countries which did not develop their cinema industry. That was the case of the countries of the Gulf. *Wajdja* was the first Saudi film ever made; the country definitely did not contribute to the increase of film produced in the region. Josef Gugler mentions some shocking numbers in his 2015 book: between the 1920s and 2008 Egypt produced more than three thousand films while, in the same time span, all the other Arab countries combined produced less than a thousand.

‘While films from other Arab countries face a veritable language barrier because their local vernaculars are not readily understood across the Arab world, Egyptian music stars have spread the Egyptian vernacular throughout the Arab World for generations, and Egyptian films have come to be readily understood everywhere’ (Gugler 1). Oum Kelthoum is one of the great Egyptian music stars who contributed to spreading the Egyptian Arabic across borders. That helped in developing a cinema industry a bit more localised, but it also did not help developing a very national cinema as ‘the Arab-language market [...] is dominated by the privately financed Egyptian film industry’ (Gugler 5). This fact is a reminder that, in addition to other international power dynamics at play in the making of a film, there are also important local ones.

In the end, one could argue that the cinema industry of the region has never really gotten its full independence from western countries. The influence of the latter – which is often mainly financial - generally impacts the existence of a project.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have tried to demonstrate how the Arab Uprisings had a massive impact on the cinematographic industry. Aside from a general increase in the amount of films made post 2011, especially in the documentary genre, there have been changes in the actual structure of the industry, in the narratives of the films but also, less evidently, in the power dynamics thanks to which the films are made. The number of film festivals dedicated to the Middle East and North Africa has also tremendously increased. There was also a rise in the interest for films of the region with a particular focus on women's issues and place in society.¹⁰ This increase in number probably had an impact on the making of films itself. In this region of the world, directors are very reliant on international funding, which are steered by festival awards and similar kinds of recognition.

This opens up a very engaging conversation on the correlation between these different entities. Indeed, these international festivals are leading institutions in the area and have the capacity to create trends in the industry. Gugler underlines the fact that, in the past few years, festivals are the ones that have essentially decided what would make it or not in terms of international cinema. That has a few consequences, one of them being the funding of certain films. As explained in this thesis, Middle-Eastern films are made in co-production with other – mainly European - countries. Funding for these films relies heavily on general trends of the industry, trends are influenced by the type of films released, which in turn are influenced by the funding they receive.

This mutually influential relationship (between funds and festivals) has an impact on the films made, the choice of topic, and so on, but the invitation to international festivals does as well. Indeed, the success of a film at an international festival sometimes allows for recognition in one's own country, and can provide some kind of leverage to the director when faced with some rejection from its home state. In order to get this kind of recognition, certain choices and sacrifices have to be made. One of the most obvious sacrifices might be the choice of the topic, which might have a tendency to go in the direction of the trend of festival, or types of topics that touch an international audience. The latter are often very sensitive to it, which also helps films get more funding. There is an eternal loop of influence and dependence between these different components of the cinema industry. None of them can really live without each other but they exert a strong influence on one another.

¹⁰ A few examples of film festivals dedicated to Arabic cinema that were created after the uprisings:
Malmö Arab Film Festival – 2011 and its Arab Women Film Festival - 2013
Shubbak (biennial festival of contemporary Arab culture in London) – 2011
Arab Film Festival Rotterdam (2014)

This general loop of power, funding and influence is very representative of the state of the cinema of the region. The emergence of the cinema industry, and other similar art forms, is deeply rooted and entangled with the colonial pasts of the countries of this region. Many Arab cineastes have studied abroad, mainly in Europe. This has influenced their way of thinking, their cinematography, among many other things. As Leyla Bouzid points out in an interview, this distance to the home country can also be seen as an asset as it can allow a critical distance to settle. Taking a step back can be the best way of gaining a fresh insight into certain issues. On the downside, this distance can also create a gap and the feeling of being misunderstood by the local audience. The next element influencing the making of films is the reaction of the home country, which generally refuses to fund and/or screen anything too engaged.

On a more positive note, even though a lot of influences are coming from everywhere, this new found fame and attraction for Arab cinema gives directors of this region a chance to tell their own narrative, thus allowing for a different exploration of existing stories, which might be a bit more representative than those of an old colonial power.

Tunisian cinema is a good example of a general change in the area, but also important in itself as the Arab Uprisings brought down a wall of fear, allowing people - including directors - to talk about a wide variety of topics that contain a critic of the general state of things, of the country and the state apparatus.

Finally, I would like to finish this dissertation by adding a nuance to this research on women filmmakers. Throughout my thesis I have used examples of women from the capital, Tunis. These women are not representative of the whole country. In her article 'Tunisiennes après la révolution' Florence Beaugé explains that the fall of the dictatorship allowed people to see clearly the state of their country. During the Ben Ali years they did not realise the extent of the illiteracy and poverty of the country, especially among women. The conditions of life are strongly unequal, especially between the capital and the rest of the country. There is also another divide between the north and the south, which is more conservative (they voted in majority for the Islamist during the 2014 elections). In both cases, north and south, women feel detached from what they call the 'bourgeoises' of the capital. Following this idea, Leyla Bouzid and Kaouther Ben Hania contributed to providing a new angle on the topic of the condition of women in the post-Ben Ali Tunisia. They are contributing to the widening of certain narratives on their country but cannot be considered as the only ones. Yet, they still have some fights to fight together, whether they are from Tunis, Gafsa or Monastir, and they will keep united on that front.

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