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POLITICAL ISSUES IN TUNISIAN WOMEN'S CINEMA

Mathilde Rouxel

Introduction

Many of the first images of Tunisia were shot by settlers, as the landscapes and patrimony were an ideal setting for dramas of all types. When the Tunisian people proclaimed their independence in 1956, no infrastructure existed for cinematographic creation. The Cinema Department (S.A.P.T.E.C, Société Anonyme Tunisienne de Production et d'Expansion Cinématographique) was created in 1957 by the Secretariat of State for Information, which was the first step toward the creation of cinematographic institutions.¹ Besides the official circuit, the Tunisian Federation of Amateur Cinema was created in 1959, and took on an important part in the history of Tunisian cinema, starting with documentary.

In 1966, ethnologist Sophie Ferchiou became the first woman filmmaker in Tunisia. She gave a visual depiction of the results of her studies on Tunisian workers, both men and women. A long line of women filmmakers followed in her footsteps and began filming in order to denounce society's status quo, the state negligence toward minorities, or the rise of religious extremism.

From the beginning, documentary films made by women in Tunisia discussed politics. I define "political cinema" by following the French essayist Nicole Brenez, who argues that the main issue for political cinema is "historical efficiency" (Brenez 2012, 23). More than fiction, documentary cinema must produce its own norms to deal with reality. The movies I analyze that are made by Tunisian women depict politics in many different ways. They all deal, however, with the question of the relationship between the individual and the collective, from the very first 1970s films that question the establishment to movies shot during and after the 2011 revolution. As François Niney recalls, documentary film is not only an eyewitness account but also "a symbolic language . . . engaged on singular

realities” (Niney 2002, 14). The political nature of these movies will also be defined in this study by its capacity to carry a different message from the official narrative: to name the alienations is to name the possibilities of the riposte. Brenez affirms the omnipresence of cinema alongside oppressed people: working on a cinema that is being produced outside the formal circuit or in the shadow of a more mainstream cinema means working on a cinema that accompanies emancipation struggles (Brenez 2014, 32).

In the 1960s, Tunisian festival director and film critic Tahar Chériaa wrote that Arabic cinema “will be militant, it will above all be a cultural act, it will above all have a social and political value. . . or it will be nothing” (Khayati 1996, 56). It appears that a history of Tunisian women in film bears testament to this aspiration: Sophie Ferchiou’s works present a reality erased from common narratives and challenge the policies led by Bourguiba and the spreading patriarchal conservatism in Tunisian society. As noted by sociologist Sarah E. Gilman, Bourguiba’s “paternal mission” to support women’s liberation was not “bubbling up from below,” and “lacked direct participation of Tunisian women or anyone else outside Bourguiba’s circle of political elites” (Gilman 2007, 97). Selma Baccar’s famous *Fatma 75*—the first film made for Tunisian cinema by a woman—also attempts, in a different manner and through specific aesthetic choices, as will be described later, to rewrite history in opposition to the official narrative. This first generation of women filmmakers, whether feminist or leftist, do not hesitate to take risks in order to highlight taboo topics, and were part of a movement that was widespread throughout the Maghreb and Egypt in the 1970s, according to Noureddine Saïl. They were the generation that wanted to show “real problems,” as “cinema was a voluntary act seen by filmmakers as a necessity” (Saïl 2012, 20).

The generation that followed would not give up the fight. The iconic filmmaker Nadia El Fani—who started directing in the 1990s—is, in this regard, a reference for this kind of militant social-minded filmmaking. She stood throughout her career as a disruptive voice against the established order, challenging gender relations, communist activism, and the role of Islam in Tunisian society.

In order to establish a thorough overview without offering a mere chronological interpretation of the role of women in the history of Tunisian cinema, I will discuss these politically engaged documentaries via three separate approaches. First, I will question the boundary between documentary and fiction and analyze the transition from the 1970s ethnographic approach to the affirmation of subjective creation through satirical mockumentaries in 2010. I will then linger on the quintessential political moment that was the 2011 revolution, started by riots and gatherings that sent dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on the run to Saudi

Arabia. Then I will study revolutionary and postrevolutionary movies in order to define the aesthetic means used by young women filmmakers to establish, through images, the possibility of a new voice for the Tunisian people. Finally, I will attempt to broaden the study by breaking away from strictly political movies and engaging with seemingly apolitical films. To do so, I will study patrimonial documentary films, for which I postulate a political value in the underlying tension that pitches local popular culture against the growing standardization of a fully Western-oriented Tunisian society.

From the Ethnographic Documentary Movie to the Mockumentary: Evolution of Aesthetic Forms in the Service of Political Discourse

According to Denise Brahimi, Tunisian cinema of the 1970s and 1980s “endeavors to speak up about the dysfunctions of a highly conformist society that is more repressive than it appears and often harmful and sometimes lethal for individuals who, in one way or another, live outside society’s standards” (Brahimi 2009, 12). These standards have remained very patriarchal, despite some progress in women’s liberation. Brahimi’s observation thus also resonates with depictions of women at the margins of society in films by Tunisian women.

There are many examples of societal critique by Tunisian women filmmakers, from Ferchiou’s ethnographic documentary movies in the late 1960s to Kaouther Ben Hania’s mockumentary *The Challat of Tunis (Shallat Tunis/Le Challat de Tunis, 2013)*. From their first images, through classic documentary perspectives or more bold and experimental choices, criticism against the state of society has become sharper. Some filmmakers have not hesitated to voice their criticism, blurring the line between fiction and documentary, and several have risked censorship for speaking up—what could be more politically oriented than a documentary film made under an authoritarian regime?

Tunisian women, as noted by Tunisian filmmaker and academic Sonia Chamkhi, benefit from a “singular status, where social policy marked the lives of women well beyond the elite circle” (Chamki 2012, 28). Ever since its independence, Tunisian society has participated in moves toward women’s liberation in an exceptional fashion for the Arab world: the Code of Personal Status, enacted in 1956, protects Tunisian women against polygamy and repudiation, and offers them the same rights as men in terms of divorce and religiously mixed marriage. Bourguiba imposed mandatory education for girls and made it not mandatory for them to be veiled. Despite the modernization, however, Tunisian society under Bourguiba’s regime had its critics.

In the late 1960s, Ferchiou made her foray into filmmaking via her background in anthropology. She stands out as the first female filmmaker in the history of Tunisia with a series of ethnographic documentary movies. Ferchiou took an interest in traditional practices and ancestral Tunisian customs. Despite the informative aspect of her movies, true criticisms against Bourguiba's system in her oeuvre appeared only at the end of the 1970s, especially with her exposure of women's work on farms in *The Mistresses of Agriculture (Rabbat al-manzil fi-l-filaba/Les Ménagères de l'agriculture, 1975)*. The movie begins with these words: "In Tunisia, the woman is the most active element in agriculture. But integrated in the predominant family production structure, her work is often unpaid and symbolically linked to her inferior status" (1:20). Ferchiou's critique is clear from the first sentences of the movie, which are swiftly followed by a series of examples showing the hierarchical division of work that dominates the patriarchal system of agricultural environments. "For olive-picking, whether in Sahel or way down south, the sexual division of labor is very clear. The man, whose status is superior, stands on a ladder and shakes the olive branch in a frenzy while the crouching woman picks up the fallen olives one by one" (5:35). Women take up the most screen time and are depicted working in fields and kitchens alike while taking care of the children playing around them. They never look at the camera. Women hoe, dig, pick, and bundle up harvested vegetables and then work to clean up these vegetables at the well. "But this strictly female-oriented work is not regarded as an agricultural task. It is categorized as household work, similar to laundry." The movie is traditionally made as a voice-over in "direct-address style,"² which adds additional information about life in the fields. But these twenty-six minutes of documentary contradict the official message on gender equality that Bourguiba's political campaign was trying to broadcast both nationally and internationally. By narrating the voice-over herself, Ferchiou is directly criticizing the system. In an article published in 1996 titled "Féminisme d'État en Tunisie: Idéologie dominante et résistance féminine" (State Feminism in Tunisia: Dominating Ideology and Feminine Resistance, 122), she asserts that Bourguiba launched his program of reforms in women's rights upon gaining national sovereignty, but the state feminism he supported was not a response to feminist considerations.

Three years earlier, on the occasion of International Women's Day 1975, Habib Bourguiba ordered a movie to be made on the history of feminism in Tunisia by the Tunisian Women's Union, an association close to the regime described by Sophie Bessis as a "transmission belt of the regime discourse in female environments" (Bessis 1999). The purpose of this work was, naturally, to shed a positive light on Bourguiba's measures,

which were intended to place Tunisia on the map of progressive countries. This work fell to Selma Baccar, who, after making her debut at the Tunisian Federation of Amateur Filmmakers, took directing classes in Paris and started working in television after her return to Tunisia. With *Fatma 75* (1976), the final product of this official order, Baccar was the first Tunisian woman to direct a film for the movie theater. In spite of this exceptional position offered to her, she did not abide by the party line, and made an audacious movie in both background and shape, thus resulting in its censorship in Tunisia for more than thirty years. Even more clearly than others, this movie meets Nicole Brenez's definition of political cinema as the place where political stakes interact dynamically with creative stakes. Baccar chose formal creativity to serve a strong political comment: her radical narrative choices allowed her to rewrite official history. *Fatma 75* tells the story of a young student, Fatma, whom the university asks to create a presentation on the history of feminism in Tunisia. This presentation is an opportunity to retrace a social history of women from the Queen of Numidia, Sophonisbe, to the contemporary age. In an innovative format between documentary and fiction, Fatma travels through reconstituted ages to show the progress of the twentieth century—but also to show that the struggle is far from over. The historicity suggested by Baccar did not gain approval from Bourguiba's officials. The way she presented Tahar Haddad's theories was notably divisive. Born in 1899 and active until 1935, this unionist thinker was one of the first to commit himself to women's liberation in Tunisian society, in particular by calling for the abolition of polygamy.³ By showing Haddad as a forerunner, Baccar denied Bourguiba's claim to be the father of reform ideas concerning personal status laws. Baccar also did not accept the rewrite of the story suggested in the official narrative, which made Bourguiba's wife out to be a feminist activist early on, while Bchira Ben Mrad—founder of the Muslim Union of Tunisian Women in 1936, and active until independence—was erased from the official history. This film, with the help of French cinema critic Guy Hennebelle, managed to cross the border and land in a feminist film festival in Holland. A copy subtitled in Dutch toured the world until the censorship was lifted in 2006.

Tunisian women's rights are a subject of both pride and debate for the Tunisian people. Filmmakers are bound to defend them in a region where women's liberation is far from a priority and is increasingly perceived as a danger by societies ever more strongly influenced by Islam. This subject is often addressed in TV documentaries. Even if these documentaries are of a more traditional style and sold worldwide, they perpetuate in their own way the social documentary movement. They meet the need to accompany struggles and the importance of filming a political experience, in order to

oppose Benjamin's assertion that "History is written by the victors" (Benjamin 2006) by writing another memory. The Franco-Tunisian director Feriel Ben Mahmoud uses women's liberation as a recurrent theme in her movies, most notably in *Tunisia: A History of Women* (*Tunisie, une histoire de femmes*, 2005), the premise for *Feminism Inshallah: A History of Arab Feminism* (*Révolution des femmes: Un siècle de féminisme arabe*, 2014). In 2013, when the Islamist Ennahda Party secured a place in the Tunisian government, Ben Mahmoud filmed the much more critical *Tunisian Women: On the Front Line* (*Tunisiennes, sur la ligne de front*) with the intention of defending freedom for women against the turn to religion in Tunisian society. Religion is a sensitive topic in Tunisia, especially under Ben Ali's dictatorship, which sought to standardize a model society. Filming permits for Nadia El Fani's movie *Neither Allah nor Master* (*La'ikiya insba' Allah/Laïcité Inch'Allah*⁴) were delivered only because she lied about the title and content. Shooting started in August 2010 during Ramadan, with the aim of proving that Islam's prohibitions were far from being respected by the entire Tunisian society, despite appearances given by the empty streets of Tunis and its closed shops. From the beginning of the film El Fani appears on screen rather than staying behind the camera. This allows her to question society without endangering her interlocutors, since she chose her interlocutors to fit and lend legitimacy to her personal ideas.

The call for a secularization of Tunisian society was amplified by the outbreak of the first anti-Ben Ali demonstrations, which led the dictator and his wife to flee to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. The opportunity for a democratic debate was finally at hand for El Fani. The second part of the movie illustrates these unprecedented discussions, giving a glimpse into the depth of upcoming changes in Tunisian society. The revolution marked a turning point in the movie: people who were hiding to eat during Ramadan in the first part of the movie demonstrated and risked their lives to get the opportunity to build a new model of society. But the secularists were not the only ones in the ranks of revolutionaries. The theater release of El Fani's film provoked the wrath of Islamic fundamentalists, who attacked the cinema showing the movie (Malterre 2011) and threatened to kill the filmmaker for her atheism (Martin 2013, 273). In this way El Fani became a participant in revolutionary struggle.

Despite the violence, El Fani kept denouncing the failings of society. In her 2013 film *No Harm Done* (*Même pas mal*), she associated her own cancer with the religious extremist tendencies that had spread since Ben Ali's departure. The comparison sparked a massive outcry.

El Fani's films do not meet the requirements of the classic documentary movie. Highly subjective, filmed in the first person, they express uncompromisingly the filmmaker's radical point of view. She states in her

own words, in the voice-over: I am Tunisian, a woman, a lesbian, and an atheist. The struggles she portrays in her movies become hers. She stages herself speaking out and provoking the conservative middle class and the hypocrisy of “decency” in not speaking out. She never hesitates to put herself at risk, even by risking exile: a trial for “violations of the sacred, of customs and religious precepts” (El Hammi 2011) prevented her from entering Tunisia as a free woman for six years (2011–17).

Other strategies have been used to denounce the excesses of religion, defend the freedom of women, and speak out against institutional censorship. An example is Ben Hania’s mockumentary *The Challat of Tunis* (*Le Challat de Tunis*, 2013), which features fictional characters. As defined by Craig Hight, a mockumentary “is popularly understood to be a fictional audio-visual text . . . which looks and sounds like a documentary” (Hight 2015, 26). Ben Hania picks up on a news item from 2003, the thread of an urban legend about a biker called “The Challat” (The Blade) who roams the streets of Tunis slashing women’s buttocks with a razor blade. She interviews people, particularly men, about the case and about their opinions on how women “should” dress in order to command respect, using this strategy to show that the normative role of women in society is understood by her interlocutors to be established and more or less unquestionable.

The discourse drawn by these fictive interactions shows how nonfiction can be used to document a certain reality. Through a casting exercise to find an actor to play “The Challat” in the film, Ben Hania further combines fiction and reality. The audience is no longer entirely sure whether an actor who shows up and presents himself as “The Real Challat” has been directed as part of the film to do so or not.

Ben Hania also depicts an encounter with the authorities who prevented her from filming in some of Tunis’ neighborhoods. Even after the revolution, cameras were perceived as enemies. Viola Shafik recounts “the three corners of the Arab taboo triangle” (Shafik 2007a, 251) that put people at risk of censorship and intolerance: sexuality, religion, and politics. Reinforced under Ben Ali, censorship and control over creativity contributed to a nation’s exasperation. Inevitably anger broke out during the 2011 revolution, and with it hundreds of images were circulated, many of which were created by women.

Revolutionary and Postrevolutionary Movies: Creating a Citizen’s Voice under Ben Ali (1987–2011)

Women documentary filmmakers partly vanished from the scene under Ben Ali, and it became increasingly difficult to make films about contemporary Tunisian society. “I was afraid that the film could not go to committee and that it could not be edited,”⁵ director Kalthoum Bornaz

said in the media after the revolution about her last feature film *The Other Half of the Sky* (*Sbatr mahaba/L'Autre moitié du ciel*). Nonfiction seemed even more dangerous than fictional stories, and screenplays were meticulously controlled. Selma Baccar, who made a few heritage documentary films in the early 1980s, also worked in television, producing⁶ and directing fictional TV programs. Sophie Ferchiou only made two movies after 1980: *Stambali* (1996) and *Sculpted Words* (*Paroles sculptées*, 2005), both of them again addressing Tunisian patrimonial customs. Only Nadia El Fani, who started her cinematographic career in 1990, made a few politically and socially themed documentary movies, concurrently with her shorts and feature fictional films. *Sons of Lenin* (*Awlad Lenin/Ouled Lénine*, 2007) is perhaps the most ambitious, as she attempts, through her father's life, to trace the communist movement in Tunisia before its ban by Bourguiba after independence.

A quick glance at the catalog of documentary movies made by women and released during the years of dictatorship allows us to assess the weight of the lead blanket that crushed artists and filmmakers at that time. After Ben Ali's departure and the lifting of institutional censorship, the contrast in terms of freedom of speech is extreme. Post-2011, cinematographic production increased to an unprecedented degree, in an attempt to respond to the issues of the moment. Though the films produced during this period differ in perspective, they all show a blatant disruption to the filmmakers' conceptions of both the world and the use of cinema, and those set within historical context appear more informed. In 2011's *My 14th* (*Arba't 'asbr, Mon 14*), Ismahane Lahmar desired that every Tunisian be able to express themselves freely. Relieved by Ben Ali's flight, the filmmaker sought to give a voice to skilled workers, students, and Tunisians who were willing to express their experiences of January 14. There are multiple testimonies that follow one another, making it seem as though the entire Tunisian people, both united in revolt and adamant in their demands, are speaking out in this movie. In reality, cameras brandished under the dictatorship were only shooting certain oppressed categories of the population. A new expression of "tunisianité"—a term invented by Kmar Kchir-Bendana in her inquiry on the ideological identity of Tunisian cinema (Kchir-Bendana 2003)—appeared. Building a torn society back up, the people must be the only one choosing new tools in order to define itself.

The theme of rebuilding a society that collapsed is also engaged in Nadia El Fani's movie. The film opens with democratic debates held in the aftermath of the dictator's flight. El Fani's film is the first example of this passion of women filmmakers for the establishment of a democratic government. Most were personally involved, outside of their work as artists, in laying the foundations of a new society. Film editor and director Kalthoum

Bornaz also used her talent to further democracy, making portraits of politicians she supported during presidential, legislative, and municipal elections. She created short activist movies, such as *Fadbel Moussa, Strength and Determination* (*Fadbel Moussa, force et détermination*, 2014), which appears as both a campaign advertisement and an ode to a long-awaited democracy. Selma Baccar, who ran and won a campaign to become the representative of her region, placed her camera in the cause of revolution: she went to the south of Tunisia to help refugees fleeing the chaos of post-Gaddafi Libya. In *Refugees of Both Sides* (*Réfugiés des deux rives*, 2011), she showed the terrible reception conditions in a refugee camp in Ben Gardane. In this short movie, which she shot alone with one camera operator, Tunisia is critically depicted as a country that had already suffered the backlash of revolution and seen the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Though women filmmakers had already represented the Tunisian people under Ben Ali—as seen in *From the Side of Women Leaders* (*Du côté des femmes leaders*, 1993), in which El Fani presented and staged women politicians throughout the country—the revolution allowed them the right to claim a place and a role in political debate. Thrilled by the transformation of the political establishment to a democratic regime, Sonia Chamkhi made a documentary movie about the electoral campaign, *Women Activists* (*Munadilat/Militantes*, 2012), which followed women who tried to encourage others to vote. Individuals and party representatives tell stories of oppression and liberation. Their attitudes are the result of a long struggle against the patriarchy, and their traditional values remain apparent. The revolution, for female politicians and filmmakers alike, has also been the opportunity for changes to women's emancipation. The rising power of the Islamic Ennahda Party was a roadblock on the way toward social and political change, but it did not keep the movement stagnant. The resistance of these women and their will to speak up was evident once again in Feriel Ben Mahmoud's *Tunisian Women on the Front Line* (*Tunisiennes, sur la ligne de front*, 2013).

Women fighting not to be forgotten by the revolution enjoyed unprecedented attention in the media and movies in postrevolutionary society. Yet others found it difficult to come out of the shadows—too oppressed to find their place in the struggle for freedom of speech. This is the subject matter of Hinde Boujemaa's *It Was Better Tomorrow* (*Ya man 'asb/C'était mieux demain*, 2012). The movie introduces us to Aïda, a woman who tried to find shelter during the revolution. Accompanied by her son, who is a violent adolescent, she knocked down the doors of empty flats and settled in squats in front of the filmmaker's camera. Boujemaa chooses to move away from the demonstrations to take an interest in the margins of the revolution and to find hope there for social change. A sexually abused mother of three, without

financial or physical security, Aïda never ceases fighting. Her two youngest children are placed in foster care. The revolution doesn't change much for her, apart from temporarily distracting the authorities from her small illegal activities. Once again, a woman takes center stage—a worthy protagonist, who refuses to give up and allows herself to be carried away by the fervor of a people by whom she had always been excluded.

Most Tunisian women documentary filmmakers chose to take up the challenge of social reorganization and attempt to create innovative images of a new Tunisian society. Others maintained a critical distance and continued questioning the political agenda.

By shooting these movies in the heat of a thrilling actuality, the filmmakers become “archaeologists of the present” (Ben Ouanès 2012, 93), to use Kamel Ben Ouanès' phrase. They reposition the question, which “is not about being (who am I?) nor about having (what do I own?) but about belonging to a national entity” (Ben Ouanès 2012, 99), which we defined as “tunisianité.” To remain at the forefront of events, in most of the cases I have detailed here, women filmmakers started filming before obtaining funding. Some of them, like Sonia Chamkhi's *Women Activists*, Selma Baccar's *Refugees of Both Sides*, or Kalthoum Bornaz's *Fadbel Moussa, Strength and Determination*, were funded by their directors' own resources. Such self-reliance was made possible by the democratization of digital technology in the early 2000s. Women, rather than accepting loss of control over their work, self-produced and continued to question the world they were living in. The revolution thus allowed, as phrased by Olivier Barlet, to “draw from the creativity of the work, which didn't appear on its own during the revolution: it existed already underground” (Barlet 2012, 271). Women took up the image and used it as a weapon, introducing alternative images of their societies.

Political Stakes in the Patrimonial Documentary Movie: Views on Popular Culture against Standardization and Radicalization in Society

Habib Bourguiba's views on Tunisian society have always been clear. While he led the struggle for independence and then ruled the country from 1956 to 1987, his commitment to secularism, advancements in women's rights, and the Westernization of Tunisian culture and values formed the basis for his creation of a new nation-state until Ben Ali's rise to power. However, as has been highlighted, filmmakers were critical of the state for some time before Bourguiba's dismissal. In the aforementioned movies, they denounced the gap between the official discourse and reality, including challenging projections of an ideal society internationally. With the advent of Ben Ali and the reinforcement of police control, freedom of speech was

even more threatened. Nevertheless, opening up to Europe still appeared to be the main political line. It was a new relation to the “tunisianité” as an expression of national identity, developed during the 2011 revolution, that exposed more clearly the limits of Ben Ali’s party line in films. Testifying to the omnipresence of these critics against the state in national cinema, Denise Brahimi (2009, 51) suggests reading *Le Désenchantement national* (National Disenchantment, 1982) by Tunisian philosopher Hélé Béji to explain this Tunisian peculiarity—the disappointment by the promises of a post-independence nation-state, which remained on paper and was never fully and democratically carried out.

It is important to set this politically charged expression via cinematographic images in a broader context, and to examine the political aspects of heritage films made by women. Sonia Chamkhi, herself interested in Tunisian patrimony in her cinema, wrote that Tunisian women filmmakers took an interest “from the 1970s . . . in questions arising from social and cultural anthropology—most notably about patrimony and craft” (Chamkhi 2012, 29). This interest is also part of a political agenda. Such filmmakers stage and utilize Tunisian customs as a form of cultural resistance to a government that is encouraging Western influence.

Ways of life and traditions were highlighted from the very first movies by Tunisian women: Sophie Ferchiou’s *Chechia* (*Cbéchia*, 1967), presented the history and manufacturing processes of national headwear in Tunisia. This movie accompanied a study that Ferchiou published as part of her research work named *Technics and Society*, published in 1971. The following year, Ferchiou took an interest in the nomad’s feast of Zarda—*Zarda: A Nomadic Tribe’s Feastday* (1972); wedding celebrations in the central region of El-Sabria—*Wedding in Sabria* (*al-Zafaf fi Sabria*, 1974); and the potter’s village of Guallalla on the island of Djerba—*Guallalla: A Potter’s Village in Tunisia* (1975). During the following decade, Selma Baccar made *The Land of Tarayoun* (*Fi bilad al-Tarayoun/Au pays de Tarayoun*, 1986), a documentary film about the craft of weaving the traditional Tunisian dress (*tarayoun*). In the 1980s Baccar also created a series of TV reports titled *Tunisian Craftsmen*. She took a particular interest in glass painting and pottery techniques in the Sahel. In 1988, Fatma Skandrani made a very personal documentary movie on her perception of Tunis’ old town, titled *Medina . . . My Memory* (*al-Madina . . . dhakirati/Médina . . . ma mémoire*), then created during the 1990s several films about traditional Tunisian patrimony and artistry: *Tunisian Painters* (*Les peintres tunisiens*, 1995) and *Tunis’ Medina: Traditional Housing in Africa* (*Tunis la medina: habitat traditionnel en Afrique*, 1996).

Beyond their folkloric appearance, the subject matter of these movies allowed for the affirmation of a historically strong Tunisian culture. The political aspects were sometimes more obvious. Some of Kalthoum

Bornaz's documentary movies aimed to counter a political decision: *Three Characters in Search of Theater* (*Trois personnages en quête d'un théâtre*, 1988) was, for example, made to counter a project to destroy the municipal theater of Tunis, a big structure built in the early twentieth century by the Bey's family architect under the protectorate. In this film where fiction and reenactment are combined, the filmmaker paid tribute to the most renowned theater in Tunisia, and to all the stars it had presented. This movie made such an impact that the building was preserved; the heritage had been saved thanks to its appearance in a film.

When shooting *El Medfoun Forest* (*Ghabat al-madfun/La forêt d'El-Medfoun*, 1998), Bornaz aimed for a similar goal: to showcase a natural landscape that president Ben Ali wanted to destroy in order to build tourist resorts. The project was halted as a result of economic recession and the 2011 revolution.⁷ There was also a form of political activism at stake in *Wedding Nights in Tunis* (*Nuits de noce à Tunis*, 1996). Although religious fundamentalism was gaining ground in society, Bornaz decided to aim her camera at dancers practicing their art in spite of the extremist condemnations. Following the rhythm of the voice of Bornaz talking about her Tunis, this movie depicts a dancer who travels by night from wedding to wedding to enliven the celebrations. The film has a tone of nostalgia as it laments the disappearance of rich traditions. Against the urban elitism of Tunis' cultural circles, Chamkhi endeavored to present another image of the margins of society, capturing the way of life of Douz's Bedouins in *Douz, the Sahara's Gate* (*Douz, bab al-sabra'/Douz, la porte du Sahara*, 2003), featuring the camel drivers and their expertise. She later took an interest in popular music with *Mezoued Art* (*Fann al-mizwad/L'Art du Mezoued*, 2010), depicting music played on traditional instruments across the country during weddings or popular celebrations, but rarely studied. Chamkhi aimed to give these largely overlooked musicians a platform, in contrast to the influence of Western music in Tunisia at the time. Through these patrimonial movies, another history of Tunisia appears, one that goes back to the foundations of Tunisian culture, its traditions, its art, and its crafts. Tunisian women documentarians refused from the very first day to follow a political discourse that did not offer concrete answers and opportunities to people in their everyday lives. They struggled against the odds to film and spread their conception of "tunisianités" as citizens, speaking more to a local than to an international audience and attempting to rekindle aspects of Tunisian society that have been lost.

Conclusion

Tunisian women, as this chapter has shown, have been making eminently political films—both documentary and fictional—since the 1970s. This has been credited by some analysts to the advent of personal status laws

under Bourguiba. Yet the examples cited here demonstrate the deeply subversive nature of such works, which challenge the patriarchal system to its core, and even in some cases put the filmmaker in precarious positions vis-à-vis state and society.

Although the 2011 uprising provided a window of opportunity for societal challenge, the political nature of films made by Tunisian women long before this, in which the filmmakers themselves often speak through voice-overs to personally challenge normative contexts, show how provocative the medium of women's documentary filmmaking has been in Tunisia for decades. Notable examples, such as Sophie Ferchiou's *The Mistresses of Agriculture*, Nadia El Fani's *Secularism Inshallah*, Sonia Chamkhi's *Women Activists*, and Hinde Boujemaa's *It Was Better Tomorrow*, illustrate the ways in which Tunisian women have used their own voices in documentary filmmaking to denounce inequalities in society.

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