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## Sensuous Cinema: The Body in Contemporary Maghrebi Film

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## Sensuous Cinema: The Body in Contemporary Maghrebi Film

### Abstract

This is a book review of Kaya Davies Hayon, *Sensuous Cinema: The Body in Contemporary Maghrebi Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

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### Author Notes

Shreya Parikh is a Dual PhD candidate in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and CERI-Sciences Po Paris. Her dissertation examines the racialization of and its contestation by Black Tunisians and Sub-Saharan African migrants in Tunisia. Her previous research has focused on religiosity among immigrant-origin Muslims in France.

Davies Hayon, Kaya. *Sensuous Cinema: The Body in Contemporary Maghrebi Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

Lilia, a middle-aged woman, enters the bedroom and gazes at herself in the mirror, suddenly making herself sensuous, a contrast to her widowed melancholy moments ago. This scene marks a shift in Lilia's relationship with her own body in the film *Satin Rouge (Red Satin, 2002)*; as the film progresses, Lilia is transformed into a belly dancer in the cabarets of Tunis, a scene that graces the cover of the book *Sensuous Cinema*. How does the body and the sensuous in films speak of the world it finds itself in – this question drives Kaya Davies Hayon's book into an exploration of contemporary Maghrebi film. Chapters in this book explore the embodiment of religion and religiosity in the bodies of film characters, making the work a part of the larger corpus of studies on religion and film.

The book examines the “role that corporeality plays in articulating identity and the emotions in films featuring people of Maghrebi heritage” (2). More specifically, the author looks at eleven fictional films (set in the Maghreb or France mostly) which focus on embodied subjectivities of their protagonists. These films are chosen because they position their characters' bodies as “vehicles through which they examined the sociopolitical realities of the present as well as those of the colonial past” (3).

The book is divided into an introductory chapter that sets the theoretical stage for the rest of the book; this is followed by four thematic chapters which address topics related to exile and displacement, dance and performance, embodiment of religion, and queer desires in the films. For each chapter, the author picks a series of films as case studies to explore the place of body, senses, and emotions in portrayal of heterosexual women and queer men characters.

The book draws primarily on theoretical conversations about corporeal phenomenology as well as feminism and Islamic theology. The author tells us that they borrow from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of centering the corporeal in phenomenology because of the importance of bodies in mediating our perceptions and experiences in the world as well as interactions with other bodies. A detailed critical literature review of the concept of corporeal phenomenology follows through the introductory chapter without a clear outline about how this concept will guide the analysis of the film-cases under study in the rest of the chapters. Instead of constraining the theoretical into a single chapter, having the concepts presented with and through the case studies would have made the work more lucid.

In Chapter 2, the author examines three films – Tony Gatlif's *Exils* (*Exiles*, 2004), Rabah Ameur Zaïmeche's *Bled Number One* (2006), and Mehdi Charef's *La Fille de Keltoum* (*The Daughter of Keltoum*, 2001) – through the lens of corporeal materiality of exile. The author argues that these films “construct their protagonists' bodies as privileged sites for the exploration of cultural identity and intercultural interactions” between Maghreb and France (54).

The exile is portrayed, as the author shows, through a sense of physical connection and alienation with the country of origin, like with Algeria in the case of Rallia in *La Fille de Keltoum*; these (sometimes contradictory) emotions also exist in relation to the adopted country and its people. According to the author, it is the bodies of characters, rather than the space in which these performances take place, that become sites of these tensed emotions, of the exile itself.

In Chapter 3, the author examines the depictions of moving bodies, especially belly dancing and trance, as means of negotiating gendered identities in three films - Raja Amari's *Satin Rouge*, Abdellatif Kechiche's *La Graine et le mulet* (*The Secret of the Grain*, 2007), and *Exils*. The author argues that all three films “position belly dancing or entranced women's bodies as sources of

subjectivity and female (sexual) empowerment” (59). The author sees bodily movement as a form of social resistance to gendered norms of the society; for example, the case of Lilia in *Satin Rouge*. For the author, the transformation of Lilia into a belly dancer speaks not only about her shift in her relationship with her body, but also of her breaking away from the social norms that impose (non) movement onto widow’s bodies, and of Tunisia’s own political and social tensions with liberty and control.

In Chapter 4, the author examines the relationship between body and religion in the cinema through three films that “foreground the impact of patriarchal religious discourses upon Maghrebi women’s lives and subjectivities” (91) - Yasmine Kassari’s *L’Enfant endormi* (*The Sleeping Child*, 2004), Aziz Salmi’s *Amours voilées* (*Veil of Love*, 2008) and Nouri Bouzid’s *Millefeuille* (*Hidden Beauties*, 2012). The author argues that these films “construct their protagonists as agentic subjects who resist patriarchal and religious attempts to control their bodies and desires” (91). At the same time, the author critiques these films as reinforcing the dominant negative imaginations of Islam as a patriarchal religion that oppresses women.

In Chapter 5, the author looks at the portrayal of queer male desires in three films - Abdellah Taïa’s *L’Armée du salut* (*Salvation Army*, 2013), Rémi Lange’s *Tarik el hob* (*The Road to Love*, 2001), and Amal Bedjaoui’s *Un fils* (*A Son*, 2003). She starts the chapter with a description of the treatment of queer desires in the Qur’an as well as the unequal state laws in the Maghreb pertaining to LGBTQ+ rights; this is followed by an analysis of the portrayal of homosexuality in the films. Given the restrictive views about queer desires that are present in most theological conversations in Islam, the author finds it surprising that the films do not engage with the “question of religion.” For them, “a problematic silence [...] threatens to strengthen the restrictive view that contemporary interpretations of Islam cannot be reconciled with homosexual desire” (154).

Here, I asked myself – in a book analyzing queer desires in Hollywood films, would we look into the theological conversations about queer desires in Christianity? Would we assume that religion governs the so-called Western societies in the same way that the author assumes Islam’s influence in societies in the Maghrebi region?

The book focuses on Maghrebi (and Maghrebi diaspora) cinema; yet, in the analysis of the films, the author conflates Arab region, MENA region, and Islam (it would have been more appropriate to stick to the term ‘Maghreb and its diaspora’). This imposition of categories of analysis is problematic because it assumes the region to be uniformly Arab, uniformly Muslim; this results in the society being examined as “Islamic,” as “religious.” In the words of Rogers Brubaker:

Identifying one’s object of analysis as ‘Muslims’...highlights religious affiliation and, at least implicitly, religiosity; it also marks the population of interest as different from the surrounding population in both religion and religiosity. This risks foregrounding religion (and religious difference) as a frame of reference at the expense of alternative and possibly more relevant frames of reference.<sup>1</sup>

Here, the author foregrounds religion at the expense of social and political structures that govern who gets to be sensuous and how.

This amalgam between the study of Maghreb and that of Islam is reflective of a bigger issue in the social and humanistic study of the MENA region in general; an assumption is made that all actions of those who originate in the region *must* be understood through the lens of Islam alone, for instance, by looking at what the Qur’an permits or doesn’t permit (reading Islamic theology), it is assumed that the a deeper understanding of social and political structures has been achieved (a faulty assumption).

For example, in Chapter 4, the author details conversations (many theological in nature) about whether belly dancing should be accepted as “Islamic” or not. It is assumed that the

theological response to this question is necessary in order to understand the society's views towards belly dancing and, by extension, the views of the film characters on belly dancing. While one could argue that this theological conversation does take place among certain individuals or groups in the Maghrebi society, this conversation doesn't influence (in an absolute sense) the views of those living in the society. I find it more pertinent to analyze the sensuality in the films in the context of patriarchal social structures and class-based inequalities in the region which share many similarities with those found in the rest of the world.

Given the focus on Maghrebi cinema, I was surprised by the limiting choice of films under study. This limit is a result of linguistic constraints of the author who confesses that, because she does not speak Arabic, the set of films she chose were ones that "are subtitled in either English or French, have been circulated at film festivals and are accessible on DVD or at research institutions in the UK, France or, in some cases, the Maghreb" (22). Language itself is a manifestation of the body, its sensuality; from my own experience of translating between various languages (including Arabic and French), much of this sensuality gets lost in translation, or becomes clumsy.

The strength of the book lies in the descriptions of scenes that the author picks to portray sensuality, an aspect that I kept wanting more of. The filmography and case descriptions from thematic chapters could be used in undergraduate courses on religion and film but would need to be read with careful consideration. The imposition of essentialized categories of analysis in some instances could reinforce stereotypical tropes about Islam if the survey is taken as a definitive account. Overall, the book will be of interest to those who wish to learn about the tensions that arise in portrayals of religiosity in films coming from Maghreb and its diaspora. It serves as an opening to a more comprehensive study of sensuality in Maghrebi cinema, including the corpus not available with French or English subtitles.

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Brubaker. 2013. "Categories of analysis and categories of practice: a note on the study of Muslims in European countries of immigration." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 36(1): 5.