


Maghrebi women's cinema. Gender, body and politics as subversive axes¹

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Abstract. Films by women directors constitute a revolutionary stylistic discourse on the cultural scene in the Maghreb. With their subversive filmography, these filmmakers have explored political, religious, and sexual taboos while forging a new visual style for self-expression. The aim of this study is to make a thematic analysis of the filmography of Maghrebi women directors and to shed light on the subversive features that characterise this aesthetic project. Two methods are used for this analysis: a compilation case study covering the history of this cinema; and an analysis of three films by three young Maghrebi directors of the new generation: *Adam* by Maryam Touzani (Morocco); *As I Open My Eyes* by Leyla Bouzid (Tunisia); and *Papichaby* Mounia Meddour (Algeria). The findings reveal a significant evolution in Maghrebi women's cinema, culminating in a new approach to filmmaking that is highlighted in the works of young women filmmakers. Three key trends are clear: the centrality of women's issues; the transgression of gender, political and religious taboos; and an emphasis on the body and on female desire.

Keywords. women filmmakers; Maghreb; North African cinema; feminism; subversive filmmaking

ESP El cine de mujeres magrebíes. Género, cuerpo y política como ejes subversivos

Resumen. El cine de mujeres representa un discurso estético revolucionario en el panorama cultural en el Magreb. Con su filmografía subversiva las directoras han apuntado a los tabúes políticos, religiosos y sexuales y han forjado una nueva pauta visual desde la que las mujeres opinan y se expresan. El objetivo de este estudio es hacer un análisis temático de la filmografía de las directoras de cine magrebíes desde sus inicios y arrojar luz sobre los rasgos subversivos que caracteriza este proyecto estético. Se han empleado como metodologías el estudio monográfico de compilación que recoge la trayectoria histórica de este cine y un análisis fílmico de las obras de tres jóvenes directoras de la nueva generación: *Adam* de Myriam Touzani (Marruecos), *A peine j'ouvre les yeux* de Leila Bouzi (Túnez) y *Papicha* de Mounia Meddour (Argelia). Los resultados revelan una importante evolución del cine de mujeres que culmina con una renovación cinematográfica que queda remarcada en las obras de las jóvenes cineastas. Por otra parte, destacan tres principales tendencias: la centralidad de la cuestión de la mujer, la transgresión de los tabúes de género, política y religión y el énfasis sobre el cuerpo y el deseo femenino.

Palabras clave. mujeres cineastas; Magreb; cine norteafricano; feminismo; Cine subversive

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Methodology, 3. Maghrebi women's cinema: evolution and thematic trends, 4. New narrative trends, 5. Conclusions. References.

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1. Introduction

Since the appearance of the first films by Maghrebi women in the mid-1960s, female directors in the Maghreb have been forging a unique path, creating a corpus of films that has become sufficiently large to be made the object of academic research.

Although scholarly interest in films by women in each country of the Maghreb has increased considerably in the past few decades, giving rise to some important reference works on the subject (Bejaoui, 2021; Narais, 2021; Zerrouki 2018; Rouxel, 2016; Chamkhi, 2002; Gabous, 1989), there are still very few studies that offer a holistic view of the filmography of Maghrebi women directors from a comparative case study perspective.

Generally, the filmmaking tradition in each country of the Maghreb has been closely tied to the local context and sociopolitical circumstances. However, this has not prevented the development of certain features that can be said to characterise Maghrebi cinema, which Brahimi describes as “revealing aspects of an identity unique to Maghrebi filmmaking” (2016, 7).

A review of the literature on films by Maghrebi women reveals two basic types of research. The first involves studying the filmography of certain female filmmakers in the context of a broader study of Maghrebi cinema, such as *Cinémas du Maghreb* by Patricia Caille and Florence Martin (2012), *50 ans de cinémaghrébin* by Denis Brahimi (2009), *Cinémas du Maghreb. Cinémaction* by Michel Serceau, (2004), or *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* by Roy Armes (2004). These studies explore Maghrebi cinema as a whole from a historical or sociological perspective, including female filmmakers as part of the study corpus.

The second type of research focuses exclusively on films made by women, analysed from a gender perspective. Studies in this category can be further divided into two sub-categories: research on the lives and artistry of the filmmakers; and research on film discourse that explores specific themes and uses of cinematic language. Worthy of mention in the first sub-category are the studies by Patricia Caillé (2015; 2018) focusing on the artistic evolution of specific Maghrebi women filmmakers, highlighting the creativity and uniqueness of the films that have earned them international attention, which in recent years has led to opportunities for collaboration that have consolidated their careers and their filmographies. Stefanie Van de Peer (2012) analyses the careers of Maghrebi women documentary makers with an emphasis on the life experiences of the pioneers in this field. Specifically, she offers a comparative analysis of two pioneering documentary makers—Selma Baccar from Tunisia and Assia Djebar from Algeria—that identifies the similarities and differences between their respective oeuvres in terms of thematic interests and film aesthetics, drawing the conclusion that their earliest documentaries often had the objective of creating an archive to preserve the memory of their post-colonial nations. In the second sub-category, studies focusing on the film discourse of Maghrebi women directors have often taken a special interest in the question of representation. For example, a study by Florence Martin (2011) examines the intersections of nation and gender and the representation of the veil through an analysis of seven films made by Maghrebi women. In a later study (2018), the same author explores the evolution of the representation of sexuality as a manifestation of female rebellion. On the other hand, nationalism and identity are the main issues explored in a study by Touria Khannous (2004), who analyses two films by women directors from Tunisia and Morocco, highlighting their post-colonial approach and pointing out the narrative strategies they use to decolonise the gaze and position the woman as the subject of the discursive space.

Although the scholars mentioned above have made important contributions to our understanding of the work of Maghrebi women filmmakers, very few studies have offered a general perspective that covers the different historical stages of Maghrebi women's cinema. To address this gap in the research, this article presents an overview of the evolution of women's filmmaking in the region and an analysis of its thematic trends, with an emphasis on identifying characteristic features of the films by the new generation of Maghrebi women directors. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To contextualize the evolution of Maghrebi women's cinema, highlighting its main thematic interests during the different stages marked by the succession of three generations of filmmakers: the pioneers (1960-1979), the second generation (1980-2010), and the new generation (2011-2020);
2. To discern narrative trends in the filmographies of young Maghrebi women through an analysis of films by three filmmakers (from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) with the aim of identifying connections and disconnections with the previous generation;
3. To highlight the dissident, feminist nature of Maghrebi women's cinema and the discursive strategies these filmmakers adopt to challenge oppressive gendered politics.

2. Methodology

The method applied to this study is methodological triangulation, which refers to “the use of various techniques, data sources and theories in the analysis of a phenomenon from different perspectives” (Benavides & Gómez-Restrepo, 2005). The two research methodologies are a compilation case study and a narrative and thematic analysis.

The compilation case study approach makes it possible to chart the evolution of Maghrebi women's cinema through the compilation and analysis of data, stressing the filmmakers' situation in relation to their sociopolitical context and highlighting the main thematic interests of their filmographies. The period of study is from the birth of women's cinema in the 1960s up to the year 2020, focusing on Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria. The study corpus consists of 54 films by 39 directors (15 from Tunisia, 13 from Morocco and 11 from Algeria) and covers a range of different film types (33 feature films and shorts and 21 documentaries) [Table 1 near here].

Table 1. Films made by Maghrebi women directors.

Film	Filmmaker	Year	Film type	Country
<i>Chéchia</i>	Sophie Ferchiou	1966	Documentary	Tunisia
<i>L'éveil</i>	Selma Baccar	1986	Short film	
<i>Fatma 75</i>	Selma Baccar	1975	Fiction	
<i>La trace</i>	Nejia Ben Mabrouk	1982	Fiction	
<i>Les Silences du Palais</i>	MoufidaTlatli	1995	Fiction	
<i>Keswa, le fil perdu</i>	KalthoumBornaz	1997	Fiction	
<i>La Saison des hommes</i>	MoufidaTlatli	2000	Fiction	
<i>Satin Rouge</i>	Raja Amar	2002	Fiction	
<i>Fleur d'oubli</i>	Selma Baccar	2005	Fiction	
<i>ChtarMhaba</i> [The Other Half of the Sk]	KalthoumBornaz	2008	Documentary	
<i>Laïcité, Inch'Allah!</i>	Nadia El Fani	2011	Documentary	
<i>Tunisieannéézéro</i>	Feriel Ben Mahmoud	2011	Documentary	
<i>Ya Man Aach</i> [C'étaitmieuxdemain]	Hend Boujemaa	2012	Documentary	
<i>Mounadhilat</i> [Militants]	Sonia Chamkhi	2012	Documentary	
<i>A peinej'ouvre les yeux</i>	Leila Bouzid	2015	Fiction	
<i>Au-delà de l'ombre</i>	Nada Mezni	2017	Fiction	
<i>Aala kafîrit</i> [La Belle et la meute]	Kaouther Ben Hania	2017	Fiction	
<i>Noura tehlem</i> [Noura dreams]	Hind Boujemaa	2019	Fiction	
<i>Un Divan à Tunis</i>	ManeleLaabidi	2020	Fiction	
<i>El hombre que vendiósupiel</i>	Kaouther Ben Hania	2021	Fiction	Morocco
<i>Identité de femme</i>	Farida Benelyazid	1979	Documentary	
<i>Al-Jamra</i> [La braise]	Farida Bourquia,	1982	Fiction	
<i>Bab Al-Sama Maftuh</i> [Une porte sur le ciel]	Farida Benelyazid	1989	Fiction	
<i>KeïdEnsa</i> [Ruses de femmes]	Farida Benelyazid	1998	Fiction	
<i>Casa ya casa</i> [Casablanca Casablanca]	Farida Benelyazid	2002	Short film	
<i>Tanger, le rêve des bûleurs</i>	Leila Kilani	2002	Documentary	
<i>Les yeux secs</i>	Narjess Nejar	2003	Fiction	
<i>L'Enfant endormi</i>	Yasmina Kassiri	2005	Fiction	
<i>Tariq al Alyat</i> [Deux femmes sur la route]	Farida Bourquia	2007	Fiction	
<i>L'amante du Rif</i>	Narjess Nejar	2011	Fiction	
<i>Femme à la caméra</i>	Karima Zoubir	2012	Documentary	
<i>Rock the Casbah</i>	Laila Marrakchi	2013	Fiction	
<i>Frontieras</i>	Farida Benlyazid	2013	Documentary	
<i>Zaynab la rose d'Aghmat</i>	Farida Bourkiya	2014	Fiction	
<i>Aji-Bi, les femmes de l'horloge</i>	Raja Saddiki	2015	Fiction	
<i>Shakespeare A Casablanca</i>	Sonia Terrab	2016	Documentary	
<i>Sofia</i>	Meryem Benm'Barek,	2017	Fiction	
<i>Endigo</i>	Selma Bargach	2018	Fiction	
<i>Adam</i>	Mariam Touzani	2019	Fiction	
<i>Mères</i>	Myriam Bakir	2020	Documentary	
<i>L7sla</i> [L'impasse]	Sonia Terrab	2020	Documentary	

<i>La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua</i>	Assia Djebbar	1977	Documentary	Algeria
<i>Zerda ou les chants de l'oubli</i>	Assia Djebbar	1982	Documentary	
<i>Les démons de minuit</i>	ZeïnaKoudil	1993	Fiction	
<i>Rachida</i>	Amina Bachir	2002	Fiction	
<i>Lettre à ma soeur</i>	Habiba Jahnine	2006	Documentary	
<i>Barakat</i>	Djamila Sahraoui	2006	Fiction	
<i>Mollement, un samedi matin</i>	Sofia Djama	2011	Fiction	
<i>Yemma</i>	Djamila Sahraoui	2012	Documentary	
<i>Loubia Hamra</i> [Haricot rouge]	Narimane Mari	2013	Documentary	
<i>H'na Barra</i> [On est dehors]	Meriem Ben Achour	2014	Documentary	
<i>El fougoun</i> [Fragment de rêve]	Bahia Bencheikh	2018	Documentary	
<i>Le Roman algérien</i>	Katia Kameli	2019	Documentary	
<i>Papicha</i>	Mounia Meddour	2019	Fiction	

Source: prepared by author.

All of these films meet the following selection criteria established for the study:

- Films made by women from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria;
- Feature films and shorts made in the country of origin between 1960 and 2020;
- Fiction and documentary films;
- Films classified in the official audiovisual archives and repositories of any of the three countries.

Three different stages have been identified in the study period (1966-2020), associated with three generations of filmmakers:

1. The pioneers: the birth of women's cinema (1960-1979);
2. The second generation: the consolidation of a new movement (1980-2010);
3. The new wave: innovation and revolution on screen (2011-2020).

The narrative and thematic analysis method has been applied to films by three directors representative of the new generation: *A peine j'ouvre les yeux* [As I Open My Eyes] by Leyla Bouzid (2015, Tunisia); *Papicha* by Mounia Meddour (2019, Algeria) and *Adam* by Maryam Touzani (2020, Morocco). These films were selected not only because they have won numerous international awards and have sparked considerable debate in national and international forums but also because they offer representative perspectives on the social, cultural, and political realities of the Maghreb, as well as reflect the voices of female directors who confront and challenge stereotypes and limitations within their respective countries.

Firstly, *A peine j'ouvre les yeux* (2015), addresses themes such as youth, identity, and social transformations following the Arab Spring, providing insight into how young women experience and participate in these changes. Its fresh approach and personal perspective contribute an authentic and necessary view to understanding processes of modernization and resistance in Tunisia.

Secondly, *Adam* (2019) by Mariam Touzani, centers on the relationship between two women within a conservative social context, exploring themes of motherhood, solidarity, and the struggle for autonomy in restrictive environments in Morocco. The film is notable for its sensitivity and offers an intimate portrayal of female experiences in Morocco, thereby enriching analyses related to gender and society in the region.

Finally, *Papicha* (2019), depicts the resistance of a young fashion designer against repression and extremism, highlighting the fight for freedom and rights amid conflict and oppression. This film serves as a powerful example of how women can act as agents of change and resistance in hostile environments, providing a valuable perspective on recent Algerian history.

In addition to being works by young Maghrebi female directors, these films allow for the analysis of different countries, contexts, and issues, thereby enriching the study with diversity and depth. Selecting these films helps focus on the voices of women from the Maghreb, which are often underrepresented, and facilitates a better understanding of the region's particularities and challenges from a female, social, and cultural perspective.

The analytical categories referred to in this section are based on the feminist film theory and praxis of three authors: Barbara Zecchi, Laura Mulvey and Annette Kuhn. In her book *La pantallasexualizada* [The gendered screen] (2014) Zecchi, based on the concept of *gynocinema*, identifies five key themes for the development of a critical feminist reading of a film text: space, authorship, pleasure, the body, and violence. Two elements of her analysis of cinematic space have been adopted for this study: the construction of the female character in the "diegetic film space", and cinema as an opportunity that opens "a window on the outside world and the

public space" (2014, 51). In relation to the concept of *authorship*, this study focuses on the connections and disconnections between the filmmaking style of the pioneers working in the period of the dictatorships and that of the new generation of directors who have grown up in the context of the democratic transitions in the countries of the Maghreb after the revolutions of 2011.

This study also analyses aspects related to the construction of *alternative pleasure* from a feminist perspective, in contrast to male pleasure centred on gendered eroticism and voyeurism. This ties in with two other key issues: the representation of the female body in the context of the prevailing visual politics; and the discursive strategies used to de-normalise gender-based violence against women. From Laura Mulvey (1975), this study adopts the concept of *counter-cinema*, which the author defines in her landmark text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* as a political weapon, to test whether the filmographies of the new Maghrebi women filmmakers represent a break with the dominant cinematic codes and whether their discourse could be described as a critical political project in the broadest sense of the term. To this end, the analysis focuses on the filmmaking strategies they employ to construct female subjectivity and subvert the gender polarity established by mainstream cinematic discourse. On the other hand, the concepts of *anti-cinema* and *deconstructive cinema* developed by Annette Kuhn in her book *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1991) are adopted here to explore the extent to which the work of Maghrebi women filmmakers have been able to create a film language of their own that is capable of subverting the rigid visual codes prevailing in Maghrebi cultures.

While the theoretical perspective of this study draws upon the analytical postulates of the aforementioned authors, space constraints preclude a comprehensive reflection of these in the presentation of results.

3. Maghrebi women's cinema: evolution and thematic trends

Over the course of its history, women's filmmaking in the Maghreb has been shaped by the gender of the directors and by the sociopolitical events that have rocked the region, such as colonialism, dictatorships, terrorism and revolution. To provide an overview of Maghrebi women's cinema, it is useful to contextualise it in three historical periods marked by phases of inception, consolidation and renewal.

3.1 The pioneers: the birth of women's cinema in the Maghreb (1966-1979)

Maghrebi women first began making films in the late 1960s, roughly a decade after the official birth of cinema in post-colonial Maghreb. The pioneers were the Tunisians Sophie Ferchiou, the first Maghrebi woman to make a documentary with Chéchia (1966), and Selma Baccar, whose *L'éveil* (1968) was the first short film directed by a woman. The subjects explored in these films relate to the status of women in a country that since gaining independence in 1956 had become noted for its progressive policies in favour of women's rights. Baccar would also be responsible for the first feature film directed by a Maghrebi woman, *Fatma 75* (1975) (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. *Fatma 75*, Selma Baccar, 1975

This was followed by the film *La Noubia des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1977) by the Algerian writer and filmmaker Assia Djebar, which won the International Critics' Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1979. These were the only feature films directed by Maghrebi women in the 1970s, both made possible by state funding.

The national film production boards founded after independence in all three countries (Elena 1999; Gabous 1989) facilitated the creation of the first film essays directed by women. These pioneers formed an artistic

and intellectual elite trained at French and Belgian film schools, whose filmography reflects the influence of the French New Wave and Italian neorealism (Gabous1989).

In the early years of independence, the fledgling Maghrebi film industries directed their attention at supporting the nation-building projects of their respective countries. Various authors, including Rouxel (2016), Callé (2012), Brahimi (2009) and Elena (1999), have pointed out that the early political and social commitment of Maghrebi filmmaking distinguished it definitively from commercial cinema. Described by Brahimi as *cinéma d'émergence* [emergence cinema], "film production in the Maghreb essentially developed with a critical intent and a powerful expression of disillusionment, or even of discontent" (Brahimi 2009,76). Thus, armed with a critical camera, Maghrebi women filmmakers explored crucial issues such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, marginalisation, social taboos and colonial warfare. The period from the 1970s to the 1990s saw the birth and rise of a women's film movement with different rhythms and inclinations specific to the context of each country.

The situation of women was the main focus adopted by these directors to explore political and social issues. In her film *Keswa, le fil perdu* [Keswa, The Lost Thread] (1997), Kalthoum Bornaz invites public discussion of the issue of conflicting identities and the dilemma faced by post-colonial societies split between two cultures. One film that would mark a turning point in Tunisian film history is undoubtedly Moufida Tlatli's *Les Silences du Palais* [The Silences of the Palace] (1995), which explores the connection between colonial domination and gender oppression in Tunisian society with an exceptional aesthetic sensibility. This concern with social issues can also be found in the films of women directors in Morocco in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly two pioneering filmmakers: Farida Bourquia, who has made several documentaries and one fiction feature film, *al-Jamra* [The Ember] (1982); and Farida Benlyazid, who has an even more extensive filmography to her credit. Benlyazid's films *Identité de femme* (1979), *Bab Al-Sama Maftuh* [A Door to the Sky] (1989) and *KeïdEnsa* [Women's Wiles] (1998) all focus on the emancipation of Moroccan women and the struggle against archaic traditions, but they also display a concern with the intercultural question and "the conflict of identity in Moroccan Muslim women understood as a tension between the French colonial and Arab Muslim cultures" (Torres Calzada 2012, p. 1059).

While female directors in Tunisia and Morocco managed to make their films despite financial difficulties and political authoritarianism, in Algeria very few women apart from Assia Djebar took on the challenge of filmmaking. Since 1962, the Algerian film sector has been controlled by the government agency known as the Office national pour le commerce et l'industrie cinématographique, whose purpose is to produce films that promote a nationalist historical and political discourse (Caillé, 2010, p.268). The decade of the Algerian Civil War paralysed the film industry due to the persecution of artists and intellectuals. The only film made by a woman during this time, *Les démons de minuit* (1993) of Hafsa Zinai Koudil, generated significant controversy and threats from Islamist groups in Algeria. The film was inspired by a real case that occurred in 1990, where a woman was brutally assaulted for refusing to wear the veil, which provoked a violent response from conservative sectors. The filmmaker stated that she made the film 'in a state of terror' due to the threats and pressures she faced during the shooting (Bedarida, 1995).

3.2 The second generation and the consolidation of Maghrebi women's cinema

During the 2000s, Maghrebi women's cinema entered a stage of consolidation. With the Algerian Civil War over, a new era for female directors began in the country. Women took up the camera once again and would begin making films focusing on the terrorism that marked the "Black Decade" of the 1990s. These films highlight the violence that had a particularly traumatic impact on Algerian women. Habiba Djahnine's *Lettre à ma soeur* [Letter to My Sister] (2006) and Djamilia Sahraoui's *Barakat* (2006) stir up the painful memories of a tormented populace caught between state-sponsored violence and extremist terror. This distressing view of Algerian society can be found in Yamina Bachir's film *Rachida* (2002), which above all underscores the suffering of women who were the targets of assaults and killings. For the filmmaker Amel Blidi, telling the story of the violence is artistically and psychologically necessary to heal the traumas: "We grew up in the 1990s, we lived through this civil war, which was devastating on every level. Algeria wanted to turn the page really quickly, but the consequences are still there. When we want to break the silence, words fail us, so we turn to the language of images. The driving force of this new cinema is fury and hope" (Strauss, 2017).

In Tunisia, the political repression of the dictatorship constrained filmmaking activity, undermining the initial creative boom that had made the country a leader in the Maghreb in terms of film production by women in the 1980s and 1990s. The pioneering directors consolidated their careers with new feature films that were acclaimed at international festivals: *La Saison des hommes* [The Season of Men] (2000) by Moufida Tlatli, *Fleur d'oubli* [Flower of Oblivion] (2005) by Salma Baccar and *L'autre moitié du ciel* [The Other Half of the Sky] (2008) by Kalthoum Bornaz. Faithful to their favourite themes, their films serve as a visual testimony against the patriarchy. These directors "strive to express the dysfunction of a highly conformist society that is slyly more repressive than it appears at first glance, with often harmful and sometimes fatal results for the individuals who fall outside the norm," explains Brahimi (2009, p. 11). In Morocco, the creation of the Festival International du Film de Femme de Salé in 2004 gave a boost to the creativity of women filmmakers. However, censorship of political, sexual and religious topics limited their freedom. The new revelations of the decade would be Narjiss Nejjar, who explores the female condition in *Les yeux secs* [Cry No More] (2003), and Yasmine Kassari and Leïla Kilani, who examine the issue of immigration in *L'Enfant endormi* [The Sleeping Child] (2005) and *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs* [Tangier, the Burner's Dream] (2002), respectively.

3.3 Revolution on screen and the new wave

The new context of freedom of expression in the wake of the Arab Spring (2011) has given a new boost to women's cinema in the region (Forster, 2019). A new generation of women directors began to come into its own, using the camera to tell stories about the turmoil on the streets and the political and social upheaval that has characterised the post-revolutionary period. This new generation grew up in a context in which visual language and the audiovisual market underwent a massive transformation thanks to the development of new technologies. These young filmmakers have introduced changes to the narrative aesthetic, innovations to cinematic language, and new topics that their predecessors were unable to address in the years of the dictatorships, such as politics and religion. However, they have also maintained a clear continuity in terms of themes related to the status of women.

In the first years of the revolutions, young women filmmakers embraced the documentary format, which, according to Rouxel, "is a privileged form of this new cinema, this new exalted word, and the one that has been used the most to translate, archive and document the Revolution" (2016, p. 12). The adoption of this format may likewise be attributed to underlying economic considerations. The difficulty in securing funding for film projects in the Maghreb is more pronounced for female filmmakers, which has led many directors to produce works requiring fewer resources, such as documentaries or short films, which constitute the majority of their output. Motivated by the need to chronicle the events that were unfolding, these filmmakers used their cameras to capture images of historic moments for the construction of a collective memory. In Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, the topics of such documentaries have focused on two main issues: the political revolution and the feminist struggle during the transition (Ghabra, 2018).

The first documentary made in the first year of the Tunisian Revolution, Nadia el Fani's *Laïcité, Inch'Allah!* [Neither Allah, Nor Master!] (2011), provoked a media storm by sparking a controversial public debate over secularism. The documentary *Ya Man Aach* [It Was Better Tomorrow] (2012), Hinde Boujemaa's first film, charts the events of the revolution through the story of a woman living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Other female directors who took an interest in the plight of women during the democratic transition include Sonia Chamkhi, whose documentary *Mounadhilat* [Militantes] (2012) tells of the mobilisation of female candidates in the elections for Tunisia's Constituent Assembly. In 2017, the documentary *Au-delà de l'ombre* [**Upon the Shadow**] by the young filmmaker Nada Mezni, which deals with homosexuality in Tunisian society, caused a sensation when it won the Tanit de bronze for best documentary at the Carthage Film Festival in Tunis.

In Algeria, the new generation of women filmmakers also turned to the documentary format to chronicle recent events in the country and to continue investigating the memory of the "Black Decade". The documentary *El Fegoun* [Fragments] (2018) by Bahia Bencheikh tells of the public protests using real footage and interviews with civic activists. In a similar vein, Katia Kameli reconstructs the history of Algeria in *Le Roman algérien* [The Algerian Novel] (2019), showing the connection between the social uprisings of 2011 and the more recent protests in 2019, while the filmmaker Meriem Ben Achour explores issues related to the status of women in *H'na Barra* [On est dehors] (2014). In contrast to the Tunisian and Algerian contexts, Morocco's authoritarian government continues to repress any form of criticism of the political system. Moroccan documentaries have thus avoided addressing the political events of the last decade, while nevertheless focusing on social issues such as the status of women, in films such as *Femme à la caméra* [Camera/Woman] (2012) by Karima Zoubir; *Mères* [Mothers] (2020) by Myriam Bakir and *7sla* [The Dead End] (2020) by Sonia Terrab.

In the case of fiction, the handover to the new generation is evident in all the films made in this period. In Tunisia, the main topics of the seven fiction films produced over this time relate to the status of women, violence, youth and taboos in a society in political transition and in search of healing from the aftermath of a long dictatorship. These include *À la Hallet Inî* [As I Open My Eyes] (2015) by Leyla Bouzid and *Aala kaf ifrit* [Beauty and the Dogs] (2017) by Kaouther Ben Hania.

Algerian production in this decade has been less prolific. With five feature films, women filmmakers have adopted innovative perspectives on some of the issues explored by their predecessors, such as the memory of the "Black Decade" in the films *Yemma* (2012) by Djamila Sahraoui and *Papicha* (2019) by Mounia Meddour, or violence against women and sexual abuse in Sofia Djama's *Mollement, un samedi matin* [Limply, One Saturday Morning] (2011).

With ten feature films to their credit in the last decade, Moroccan women filmmakers have been the most productive. The policy of government support and international co-productions have benefited women's cinema. However, censorship of political topics has left its mark on this filmography, which has been unable to reflect the realities on the street the way Tunisian and Algerian films have. A number of the films made deal with Moroccan history, such as Farida Bourkiya's *Zaynab la rose d'Aghmat* (2014), or are pure fiction, such as *Indigo* (2018) by Selma Bargach.

Beyond the particularities of each local context, the new generation of Maghrebian female directors share common traits. All their works are authored by women and have been both written and directed by them. This is attributable to the academic training in cinema they have received both within and outside their countries, as well as their professional experiences in the audiovisual sector (). The difficulty in securing funding for film projects in the Maghreb is more pronounced for female filmmakers, which has led many directors to produce works requiring fewer resources, such as documentaries or short films, which constitute the majority of their output. Despite being over half a century old, cinema in the Maghreb still lacks a fully developed industry and remains dependent on state support and foreign production companies ().

3.4 Thematic trends in Maghrebi women's cinema

The results of the thematic analysis reveal that issues related to women's emancipation and the feminist struggle, the body and sexuality, rebellion against tradition, sexual discrimination and gender-based violence are the most common themes in the films included in the study corpus [Table 2 near here].

Table 2. Frequency of topics addressed in films.

Topic	Frequency
Emancipation and feminist struggle	28
Body and sexuality	27
Rebellion against traditions	27
Gender discrimination	25
Gender-based violence	21
Tradition	18
Fundamentalism and terrorism	9
National struggle, nationalism and memory	7
Revolutions	7
Immigration and social exclusion	6
Conflict between secularism and religion	5
Sexual diversity and the LGBTI movement	1

Source: prepared by author.

These topics reflect the concern of these directors with the status of women and their commitment as filmmakers to condemning social, religious and political oppression in their countries.

The evolution of the topics addressed in the films reflects a process of constant renewal throughout the study period [Table 3 near here]. The new topics introduced in each historical stage reflect the maturing process of Maghrebi women's cinema, as well as the new concerns associated with the sociopolitical context of each period. In this respect, two trends are particularly noteworthy: 1) the existence of a thematic constancy in the filmography of Maghrebi women directors in relation to the "emancipation of women and the feminist struggle" and "the body and sexuality", to the point of becoming identifying features of this filmography; and 2) the progressive inclusion of different topics that reflect the new concerns of each period, such as the issues of fundamentalism, revolution, and the secular debate. Although the struggle of the LGBTQ community is explored in only one film in the entire study corpus, the documentary that addresses this issue in Tunisia constitutes a milestone in the history of Maghrebi cinema that has broken the silence on one of the region's biggest social taboos.

Table 3. Evolution of the topics addressed by Maghrebi women filmmakers.

Period	Generation	Topics	New topics
1960-1979	The pioneers: The birth of women's cinema	Emancipation and feminist struggle Tradition and modernity National struggle, nationalism and collective memory	
1980-2010	The second generation: The consolidation of a new movement	-Emancipation and feminist struggle - Tradition and modernity - National struggle, nationalism and collective memory	- Body and sexuality - Gender-based violence - Integralism and terrorism - Rebellion against traditions - Gender discrimination
2011-2020	The new wave: Innovation and revolution on the screen	-Emancipation and feminist struggle - Body and sexuality	- Social revolutions - Immigration and single mothers - Conflict between secularism and religion - Sexual diversity and the LGBTI movement

Source: prepared by author.

A country-based analysis of the frequency of the topics addressed reveals both similarities that highlight the sociological commonalities between these nations and divergences that underscore the specific sociopolitical circumstances of each country [Table 4 near here]. In Tunisia and Morocco, the questions of

the body, sexuality, rebellion against tradition and the feminist struggle are the most frequently addressed topics, while in Algeria the focus has been on gender-based violence, sexual discrimination and the feminist struggle. Among the topics that reflect the specific circumstances of each country, the issue of revolution has been addressed mostly by Tunisian filmmakers, which is perhaps unsurprising given that Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring. Political and social democratisation has given female directors the freedom to explore issues that were previously forbidden, such as the dictatorship, secularism and sexual diversity. On the other hand, issues related to religious fundamentalism and terrorism have been explored most by Algerian filmmakers who endured the hardships of the “Black Decade” in their country. And the issues of immigration and the plight of single mothers have been explored most by Moroccan directors, who have promoted public debate on two of the biggest concerns in their country in recent years.

Table 4. Frequency of topics by country.

Topics	Tunisia	Morocco	Algeria
Tradition	6	5	7
Emancipation and feminist struggle	11	8	9
Discrimination	9	7	9
National struggle, nationalism and collective memory	1	4	3
Rebellion against traditions	12	9	6
Conflict between secularism and religion	3	0	1
Social revolutions	6	0	1
Sexual diversity and the LGBTI movement	1	0	0
Violence	9	3	9
Immigration and single mothers	0	5	1
Body and sexuality	12	8	7
Fundamentalism and terrorism	3	0	6

Source: prepared by author.

4. New narrative trends

With the aim of identifying characteristic features of the films of the new generation of Maghrebi women directors, an analysis was conducted on the first films of three young filmmakers: *As I open my eyes* (2015) [A peine j'ouvre les yeux] by Leyla Bouzid from Tunisia; *Adam* (2019) by Maryam Touzani from Morocco; and *Papicha* (2019) by Mounia Meddour from Algeria. These films are representative of the creative impulse of the new generation, and all three reflect a commitment to the value of equality, a concern with political and social issues and a critical and subversive approach. The analysis of these three films reveals three key trends: the centrality of women's issues; the transgression of gender, political and religious taboos; and an emphasis on the body and on female sexuality.

4.1. The woman as protagonist

In all three films, women occupy a central position both as protagonists and as subjects of the story. In the Tunisian film *As I Open my Eyes* (fig. 2) the emotional tension between Hayet and her young daughter, Farah, is interwoven with the events unfolding in a country on the brink of political collapse on the eve of the revolution in 2010. This tension between mother and daughter evokes the confrontation between two generations of women who rebel against the political repression in their country in different ways. Between the mother's stifling protective impulse and the daughter's reckless rebellion, Bouzid portrays the atmosphere of repression and rigid political control under the dictatorship. The film is thus a story of the political crisis told from the perspective of two women, intertwining two struggles against the patriarchal dictatorship and positing a necessary connection between the democratisation of the country and the emancipation of women.



Figure 2. *As I Open my Eyes*, 2015, Leyla Bouzid. (source. Press Kit)

This dual concern with politics and gender can also be found in the film *Papicha*, (fig.3) set in Algeria on the eve of civil war in the early 1990s. The main characters are all women whose stories unfold in the context of the rise of the religious extremism that would lead to an outbreak of terrorism during the country's "Black Decade". The film portrays the persecution of women in an atmosphere of terror that began to take root in Algeria at that time. Its protagonist, Nedjma, a young student with a flair for fashion, stands up against the fundamentalists who are harassing women into wearing the *chador*. After her sister is murdered by a terrorist, a traumatised Nedjma will pursue her dream of organising a fashion show to celebrate the *haik*, a traditional Algerian garment for women. The *haik* thus becomes a symbol of resistance against the fundamentalist threat and its project to impose the black *chador*, imported from the Middle East, as the standard dress for Algerian women. In the end, the fashion show is disrupted by a brutal terrorist attack that signals the beginning of Algeria's tragic "Black Decade". In the same way that the Tunisian film addresses the memory of the dictatorship, the Algerian film reactivates the memory of the decade of terrorism to tell the wounds that remain open in Algerian society.



Figure 3. *Papicha*. 2019, Mounia Meddour.

The storyline of the Moroccan film *Adam* (Fig. 4) interrogates the social memory embedded in the female body, while delving into the taboos of female sexuality outside marriage and the plight of single mothers in Morocco. The initial tension characterising the relationship between Abla, a pregnant single woman with nowhere to turn, and Warda, the widowed mother who takes the young woman into her home, ultimately develops into a deep bond of friendship and mutual support. The two women grow closer by talking about their sorrows and their desires. Little by little, they will find emancipation through the liberation of their own bodies from the repression of the traditions in which they feel imprisoned. The widowed mother and the single mother finally reclaim their own bodies when they understand that they must seize the reins of their lives and stand up against societal control. In all three films, women occupy a central place as the subjects who tell the story of their societies, and who fight for recognition and visibility in countries beset by political and social crises.

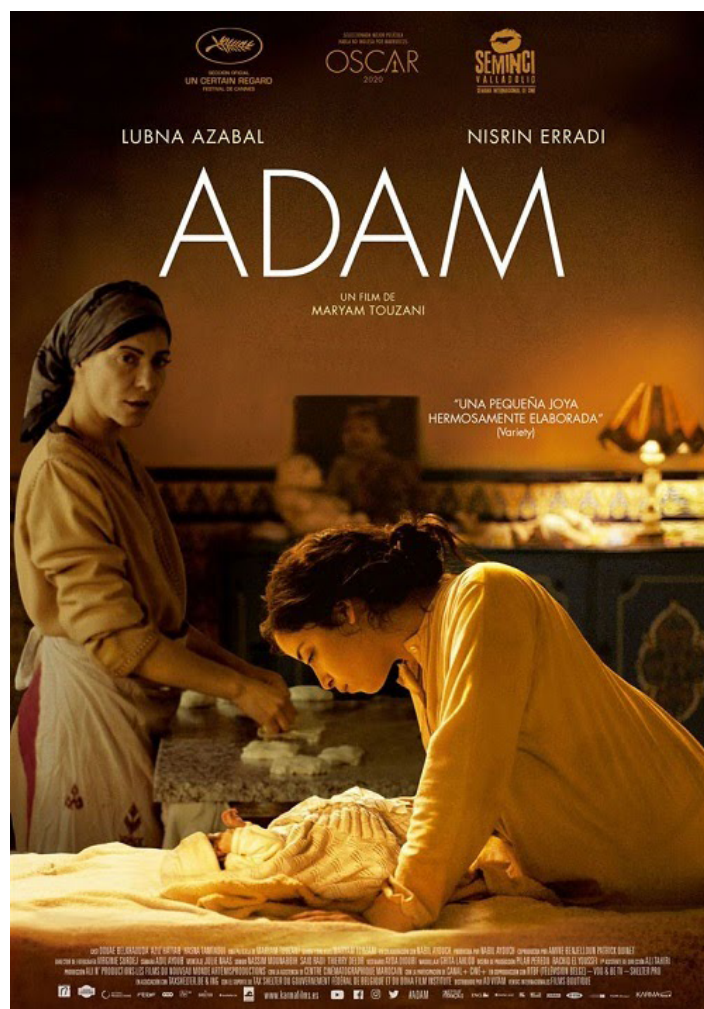


Figure 4. *Adam*, 2019, Maryam Touzani

4.2. Challenging social taboos

In *A peine j'ouvre les yeux*, Leyla Bouzid explores the taboo of politics under the Ben Ali dictatorship. The film portrays an asphyxiated society, reduced to silence by repression. The freedom to address this issue has only existed since the revolution in Tunisia. The director chose a young woman, Farah, to represent the insurgency against the regime. This 18-year-old protagonist not only symbolises the young people who led the Tunisian Revolution but also represents all women who have rebelled against gender politics in a rigid society. Through the character of Farah, the narrative exposes the problem of oppression as a structural issue affecting power relations within the political system as well as gender relations within the family and in society in general. In this sense, the film's contribution to the debate on political change after the Tunisian Revolution is highly relevant thanks to its feminist perspective. Its storyline presents a fragmented view of the political context precisely to expose the connections between the different micropowers of society and to show how the authoritarian power structure between the government and the governed is effectively reproduced in the relationships between men and women.

Meddour's *Papicha* addresses the taboo of religion by transporting us to Algeria in the 1990s, in a story that uses the rise of religious extremism prior to the outbreak of civil war as a backdrop. The film explores a collective trauma that has left indelible scars on the collective memory of Algerian society and especially on Algerian women, who were the prime target of the terrorist groups (fig. 5). With women in all of the main

roles, *Papicha* stresses the anguish of a whole generation of women, recounting the violence and abuse they suffered. The series of events chart how religious extremism seeped stealthily into the country's social fabric and began to transform the mentality of its people, their view of life and especially their view of women. In its young protagonist, Nedjma, so full of life and creativity, the film presents the option of resistance against the extremist project.



Figure 5. Nedjma fighting against gender violence, *Papicha*. 2019, Mounira Meddoure

The taboo of female sexuality is dealt with openly by the Moroccan director Maryam Touzani in her film *Adam*, which treats the issue of single motherhood with a narrative subtlety that exposes Moroccan society's rigid attitude towards the taboo of extramarital relations and the plight of single mothers. With just three female characters and a humble house located in the ancient city of Casablanca as a setting, Touzani portrays the utter solitude of the protagonist, Abla, a single pregnant woman who has no choice but to leave her village and her family for the duration of her pregnancy. The film underscores the harsh reality of single mothers and the rejection and social stigma they face. Touzani's camera captures the looks of disdain cast by both men and women on seeing Abla's pregnant belly when she is walking in the street, highlighting the spark of hatred in their gazes and the pariah status they impose upon her. The director offers an intimate, sympathetic story free of the social moralising that stigmatises single mothers. The subtlety of her approach invites viewers to break the silence and discuss a taboo that has become a serious social issue in Morocco, a country whose legal system punishes single women for engaging in sexual relations or seeking an abortion. Touzani's film gives a voice to these marginalised women who are discriminated against and condemned by both the legal system and society. The conflict between maternal desire and societal rejection of motherhood outside wedlock becomes an act of violence perpetrated by society on women's bodies. It is a violence that the protagonist tries to perpetrate against her own newborn child, first by rejecting him and then by trying to strangle him. With this scene, Touzani hints at the chain of violence created by anti-abortion legislation and laws that criminalise single mothers, who are often forced to kill their own babies in order to resolve the "problem".

4.3. Celebrating the body and female desire

The Tunisian film *A peine j'ouvre les yeux* employs a subversive strategy to explore the taboo of sexuality and women's bodies. The character of Farah represents the archetype of the free and active young woman: a singer in a protest group, playing concerts and enjoying a nightlife of music, drinking and dancing. She is thus a direct contradiction of the conservative view of what a young woman should be. In *Farah*, Bouzid offers viewers a character that is transgressive in every sense of the word, as the freedom she has been raised with clashes with the social conservatism and political repression of her country. Farah represents the powerful primal impulse of a freedom that she has quite naturally internalised, a freedom embraced by the new generation of Tunisian women who have claimed control over their own bodies, who are not ashamed of their sex and who assert their right to desire and sexual pleasure. The scene that most clearly conveys this message is that of the first sexual encounter between Farah and her boyfriend, Borhene, which surprises the viewer with the boldness of this young woman with an assertive attitude who playfully undresses her partner to "discover his sex", as she puts it (Fig. 6). This scene is highly symbolic because it depicts a woman who expresses her desire clearly, with none of the shy and passive attitude traditionally expected of women. It also breaks the taboo on the naked body and on sex, both in Arab society and in Arab cinema in general.



Figure 6. Farah the archetype of the free young woman, *As I Open My Eyes*.

When the camera focuses on the male body from the woman's point of view, the result is an inversion of the traditional relationship between gaze and image in mainstream cinema, which has established the woman's body as the object-image of visual pleasure (Mulvey 1988). In this scene, Bouzid subverts cinematic tradition by turning the female protagonist's gaze on a man's naked body into an act of authorship that expresses and asserts her right to desire. In this way, the director makes her film a narrative space for the full expression of this archetypal young revolutionary: a woman who is sure of herself, with the strength and will to stand up to political repression and oppressive social traditions.

The thematic structure of *Papicha* revolves around the social conflict over the bodies of women who seek to turn the *haik*, the garment traditionally worn by women in Algeria, into the unifying thread of the story and the symbol of resistance against the *chador* that the Islamic extremist groups want to force women to wear. The film depicts the symbolic and physical violence perpetrated on those women who refuse to submit to the demands of the extremists and cover themselves with the veil. In the case of the film *Adam*, Touzani presents two models for a woman's relationship with her body and sexuality. Warda, a widowed mother trapped in the memory of her late husband, has disconnected herself entirely from her body, which is bent down by a profound state of grief symbolised by the coarse dark dresses she wears and the ritual of motherly sacrifice they condemn her to (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Trapped bodies. *Adam*, 2019, Maryam Touzani.

With this motif, the film portrays the reality for thousands of widows who forget about their own bodies, neglecting them until they are reduced to a mere work instrument. It is a message alluding to the traditions that pressure widows into dedicating their lives to caring for their children. This denial of the body reflects Pam Cook's theory that female desire in women's cinema is often presented as a kind of symptom of a physical or psychological disease, with the result that "the woman's body ceases to be an erotic body and instead becomes an enigmatic body, a mystery that has to be investigated and interpreted by means of its symptoms" (Parrondo Coppel 2016, 16). On the other hand, with her pregnancy the character of Abba embodies the unrestrained, transgressive sexuality that has dire consequences for her life. Although the situations of the two women are completely different, their bodies are locked in the same social trap: one held

down by the memory of the past and the traditional expectation of sacrifice, and the other weighed down by a fetus whose right to exist is denied by society. Dispossessed and alienated, the protagonists' bodies house the traditions, norms and constraints of Moroccan society. The film thus reminds us that the subjugation of the woman is effectuated through the *training* of her body, in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Breaking this chain involves the ritual of freeing the body by claiming it back. The close friendship between the two protagonists provides them with a mutual support that allows each one to find her path towards liberation through the recovery of her own body.

5. Conclusions

The thematic and narrative analysis of female filmmaking in the Maghreb reveals an evolutionary process deeply shaped by the political, aesthetic, and feminist commitment of its authors. From the pioneers of the 1960s to the post-2011 new wave filmmakers, these directors have constructed a visual discourse that not only documents the history of their societies but also interrogates and subverts it.

Maghrebi women directors have succeeded in breaking the silence imposed by patriarchal, colonial, and authoritarian contexts, using cinema as a tool for denunciation, reflection, and emancipation. Their films challenge the taboos of gender, religion, and politics, placing the female body and desire at the center of the narrative, in clear opposition to traditional representations dominated by the male gaze.

The cinematic trajectory analyzed reveals three key contributions: the persistence of the female condition as a central theme, the progressive inclusion of previously censored issues such as religious fundamentalism, secularism, and sexual diversity, and the emergence of a new narrative aesthetic driven by the post-revolutionary generation. These filmmakers have not only diversified content but also renewed narrative forms by incorporating innovative and intimate visual languages in the Maghrebi context, offering a critical and rebellious perspective that redefines cinema as a space of resistance, transformation, and the creation of new female subjectivities.

In conclusion, we aim to underscore several key reflections regarding the cinema of Maghrebi female filmmakers:

1. The films bear a close connection to the life experiences of women in societies afflicted by gender inequality as well as a major cultural crisis. Gender emerges as the core of the films' concerns and storylines, which are interwoven with the experiences of the filmmakers—and through them, the experiences of all women. This female symbiosis turns these films into a space for personal and social catharsis that serves as a means of self-exploration and collective therapy.
2. On the social level, the contributions of these directors are essential to the configuration of the new cultural visual order in the Maghreb. The discourse of women's cinema has subverted the prevailing visual practices, undermining the hegemonic male gaze and vesting the female gaze with legitimacy. Self-representation has allowed women to construct their own discourse and create an opening in a cultural order accustomed to silencing, representing and speaking for them. Maghrebi women's cinema has provided a space for self-expression in which women can share their opinions, convey their emotions and communicate their desires without taboos. Florence Martin (2018) uses the notion of "transvergence" to describe the flexible and transgressive nature of Maghrebi women's films in terms of the topics they address, their aesthetics, their storylines and their modes of communication.
3. Maghrebi women filmmakers disrupt the visual codes of Muslim societies through a situationist approach that plays a vital role in political criticism in the broadest sense of the term. They have challenged visual practices in societies that impose strict control over women's visibility and over women's bodies. In their own way, these filmmakers have turned the camera into a device for liberating the word, the body and the gaze.

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