

The Cinematic Gaze as Social Activism:

Yamina Benguigui from Documentary to Fiction

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The critical doxa on postcolonial filmmaking agrees that, for the past two decades, female directors in France have been using cinema to reflect on issues of transnational identity and to subvert cultural stereotypes relating to gender and race. In an article titled “*Le Colonial Féminin*”, Catherine Portuges (1996) notes that “French women filmmakers are calling into question France’s ambivalent relationship to its colonial past in cinematic projects that focalize first-person, introspective autobiographical narratives” (p. 81). Additionally, in her own work on Maghrebi-French women’s films, Carrie Tarr (2003) observes that, since the mid 1980s, female directors have been raising important questions about immigrant women’s identities, particularly “in relation to the patriarchal values of the Algerian immigrant family” (p. 325).

The cinematic work of Franco-Algerian author and film director Yamina Benguigui is particularly relevant in this context: born in France of Algerian immigrant parents, Benguigui uses partly autobiographic documentary and fiction to destabilize the Western/French cultural perception that sees Maghrebi immigrants as an amorphous and voiceless mass. From her earlier ground-breaking testimony on the difficult integration of Islamic women living in France (“*Le voile et la République*” in *Femmes d’Islam*, 1994),¹ to her more recent investigation of wide-spread discriminatory practices towards *Beur*² job-seekers today (*Le plafond de verre*, 2005), Benguigui’s cinematic endeavors have highlighted the ongoing challenges that North-African individuals face in constructing a postcolonial identity within the normative socio-cultural framework of the French *métropole*.³ This filmmaker’s seminal work as director and producer of both documentary and fiction has raised awareness of *Beur* identity in France since her work in television and cinema in the early 1990s. In 1990, Benguigui produced a series of multiethnic cultural programs for the television channel France 3; in 1991 she joined Philippe Dupuis-Mendel, of Bandits film productions, with whom she agreed that cinema can break stereotypes and change people’s minds. Her thought-provoking filmography covers many different aspects of the above multi-faceted question, with a special emphasis on women’s issues. As she states in an interview that follows the last of the three documentary episodes in *Femmes d’Islam*, “c’est par [les femmes] que le changement arrivera” (i.e. change will come through women).⁴

While a comprehensive overview of this topic would greatly illustrate Benguigui’s social engagement through cinema, the present discussion will be limited to the close

1. “*Le voile et la République*” is the first part of a trilogy that makes up the documentary *Femmes d’Islam*.

2. The term *Beur* commonly defines the descendants of North-African immigrants residing in France today.

3. I use the adjectives Maghrebi and North-African interchangeably to identify individuals coming from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.

4. The interview is contained within the DVD *Femmes d’Islam*. The documentaries cited here are not subtitled. All translations of quotations from *Femmes d’Islam* and *Mémoires d’immigrés* are mine.

examination of two particularly exemplary films, the three-part documentary *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin* (1997), and the fiction *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (2001). Both share a close thematic link and employ similar subject-centered cinematic techniques to underscore the immigrant's subjectivity. *Mémoires d'immigrés* effectively denounces the dehumanizing nature of the government-sponsored post-World War II immigration laws which brought Maghrebi men, particularly Algerians, to France as cheap labor starting in the 1950s. This documentary extends its critique of French politics to include a poignant reflection on the appalling physical and psychological living conditions of the women and children who came to join those male laborers following the Family Reunification Laws of 1974. Such laws, which allowed the wives and children of Maghrebi immigrant men to come to France as permanent residents, proved to be especially detrimental to women who were reunited with husbands they barely knew, in a country that was culturally and linguistically foreign to them.

Benguigui's social commitment to exploring immigrant identity politics with a strong feminist component is also exemplified in *Inch'Allah Dimanche*. The film draws particular attention to the role of Arabic/Muslim women as they shift from their own rigidly static culture into the fluid cultural French space requiring adaptability to a fast-changing and emancipated Western episteme. By means of the emotional, cinematic narrative of an Algerian woman who (unwillingly) joins her working husband in the North of France, Benguigui portrays the difficult undertaking of embodying a feminine identity across two cultures. This powerful work of fiction is centered on the essential question of the voice of female immigrants who must learn how to, both figuratively and realistically, speak a new Western language, without renouncing their own non-Western language and culture.

Through the application of literary critic Edward Said's theories on postcolonial identities, my analysis will demonstrate how Benguigui's aforementioned films question and dispute the French/Orientalistic perspective that deems non-Westerners as dangerous "others". This discussion will also consider the film's cinematic gaze as a tool of social and cultural change. Benguigui chooses cinema, a visually direct art form, to present a polyphonic picture of immigration in France today, as well as to foreground the making of immigrant women's hybrid identity. Her camera relies mostly on close-ups of faces to restore the individuality and the dignity lost in the immigrant's transition from home-land to falsely-promised land. This technique allows the filmmaker to engage the audience in a dialectic discourse with the immigrant voices presented on screen, thus directing attention to the polysemic nature of the migrant body's subject formation.

The object status of the North-African immigrant within mainstream French culture is the direct consequence of a historical and political discourse aimed at maintaining the status-quo long after the narrowly defined colonial experience ended: the Westerner will continue to dominate the non-Westerner because the latter is inferior and can easily be molded into (any) shape. Edward Said (1979) defines this attitude as Orientalism, which can succinctly be explained as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). Said observes that such Western cultural hegemony inevitably leads to "the idea of a European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said, 1979, p. 3). In *Mémoires d'immigrés*, Benguigui critiques the West/Orient hierarchical relation and proposes to shift such a

binary opposition from a condition of vertical domination to one of equal and peaceful co-habitation. Through the moving account of three inter-related groups of North-African immigrants, fathers, mothers, and their children, the film exposes the failure of the West (and specifically of the French government) to address questions of integration of the Maghrebi, Muslim individual within French culture and society.

As a social testimonial, *Mémoires d'immigrés* recreates memories of a common past for people eradicated from their homeland and brought to France to rebuild the economy of a country devastated by World War II. In order to foreground the fundamental indifference of French government officials towards the needs of the new migrant populations, Benguigui presents the immigrant subject, man or woman, as a person who is finally free to speak for him/herself after years of oppression and repression. The documentary constructs an apparently simple narrative which, as critic and scholar Kenneth Harrow (2005) notes, "is provided by a series of talking heads" (p. 102). The camera focuses almost exclusively on the face of the speakers, with an occasional extreme close-up of the eyes or the hands. The latter is a semantically charged detail since African workers, deemed culturally and intellectually inferior, were consistently relegated to manual labor. The touching account of one Tunisian man who was recruited to work in the auto industry, to which he devoted his entire life, confirms the reification of the immigrant body considered not a human being but a machine in the fast-moving mechanisms of modern economic production. As the interviewee recalls, the hierarchical order regulating the distribution of labor was based on the inviolable principle that "*la chaîne était destinée pour les Africains et les Maghrébins*" (i.e. assembly line work was destined for African and Maghrebi workers). The immigrant's object status is reinforced by the words of a former government official in charge of recruiting fit and young men in Morocco. As he confesses, his responsibility was to determine if those who had been selected constituted "*un produit de valeur*" (i.e. a worthy product); he also candidly states that recruitment of male labor was easier in the countryside where a poor, uneducated crowd displayed "*une plus grande maniabilité*" (i.e. greater manageability), thus suggesting that, once in France, these men could more easily be manipulated into submission.

Benguigui inserts several brief interviews with former French government representatives to challenge the orientalist view on the immigration phenomenon. Most (if not all) French authorities are filmed sitting behind an official-looking desk and appear reluctant to take any responsibility for the failure of the laws they created and promoted. Their physical and emotional distance leads the spectator to side with the oppressed. Additionally, the open admission of one government executive stating that recruiting practices in Algeria remained unchanged even after the country had fought and obtained its independence in 1962, suggests that France did not truly intend to renounce its imperialistic policy of domination despite the fact that it no longer held any official power over its former colony. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994) argues that "imperialism means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (p. 9). Indeed, the term goes beyond its strictly historical connotation relating to the colonial experience of exploitation of the West over the Orient. Said (1994) explains that while, in our times, direct domination of other cultures and territories has, for the most part, ended, "[imperialism] lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general

cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices” (p. 9).

The imperialistic presence of French administrators and their power to exert direct control over immigrant bodies are consistently evoked in the documentary through the accounts of the inhumane living conditions of Maghrebi workers. The spectator follows the camera’s eye as it moves through what remains today of the old *cités de transit* (i.e. temporary housing) now reduced to a few dilapidated buildings with crumbling walls and boarded up windows. Yet, these barracks with no electricity or running water, which housed up to ten people in a single room, were considered the norm in a not so distant past of postcolonial exploitation. The sense of resignation and impotence widespread among the inhabitants of the barracks who repeat, in segments of period footage, “*on ne fait pas autrement*” (i.e. we cannot do otherwise), is accompanied by an inherent fear of local authorities who can intervene and expel them at any time if they create “problems” for others – hence the inevitable silence, best summed up by the popular motto related by the son of an Algerian worker: “*plus tu fermes ta bouche, moins tu risques d’avaler des mouches*” (i.e. the more you keep your mouth shut, the less you risk swallowing flies).

In the documentary, the goal of the interview segments is to reverse a deep-seated condition of silence by displaying a free flow of language and creating a powerful personal narrative. In order to let the speakers relate more effectively the intimate experience of the pain and ostracization associated with years spent in isolation and fear, Benguigui effaces her own presence from the screen. As Mark Ingram and Florence Martin (2003) rightly observe, while it is clear that a dialogical exchange is taking place in the film, “the systematic erasure of Benguigui’s voice from the soundtrack is a device to authenticate the documentary” (p. 113).

By providing a realistic portrayal of the face of immigration in France “then” and “now”, Benguigui’s documentary style engenders on visual and aural planes a dialectic narrative between past and present. The skillful juxtapositions of old and new interviews, combined with black and white photos of the immigrant person(s), is underscored by a selection of musical pieces in Arabic to create, as the filmmaker herself explains at the end of the three episodes, “*une mémoire musicale*” (i.e. a musical memory) for immigrants from the three areas of the Maghreb. The role of music as a tie to the past and the land of origin is especially meaningful to women as wives and mothers often live in solitude while their husbands work and their children go to school. For them, as Benguigui herself states, listening to popular songs such as “*Ah qu’elles sont jolies les filles de mon pays*” (i.e. the girls from my country are so beautiful) was not only a way to nostalgically bond with an abandoned personal past. It also provided immigrant women with the means to create a sisterhood among themselves in the present, as they worked to overcome their silence, defining their feminine voice in a new and foreign land.

The project that Benguigui undertakes with *Mémoires d’immigrés* celebrates the immigrant’s cross-cultural identity by giving men and women the power of speech, formerly denied by colonial and postcolonial repressive practices. The second section of the documentary, dedicated to mothers, initiates the conversation about the female immigrant’s voice. Such a conversation develops and evolves a few years later in the fictional work *Inch’Allah Dimanche*. This film portrays the painful exile and

triumphant evolution of an Algerian woman (Zouina) forced to be reunited with a husband (Ahmed) who has been working in France for the past ten years and whom she barely knows. Zouina is accompanied on her migratory journey by her three young children and by her tyrannical mother-in-law, Aïcha. Both mother and son enforce strict patriarchal rules, demanding that Zouina never leave the house and attend to their every need (cooking, cleaning, making the ritual coffee), much like a servant who is required to passively obey the orders given by an unchallengeable authoritative voice. To accentuate Zouina's personal development, the camera remains predominantly centered on the protagonist's body with, as in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, frequent close-ups of the face. Consequently, the character's wide range of emotions (from despair, to fear, to hopefulness) comes forth as she gains progressive awareness of her identity and relinquishes her silent state.

Through the representation of an Algerian woman's struggle to produce a feminine language outside the strict laws of the patriarchal order in which her subjectivity is inscribed, *Inch'Allah Dimanche* portrays the difficult process of emancipation common to all female immigrants who choose to rise above their condition of subordination to both male and (post)colonial power. As critic and theorist Gayatri Spivak (1998) explains, "if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (p. 287). Silence and fear are an intrinsic part of the subaltern self in an economy of oppression which requires individuals to submit to authority without questioning its motives. In this context, women's agency becomes an especially arduous task since, as Spivak (1998) adds, "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears... into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (p. 306). Undeniably, the process which Zouina undertakes to assert her female subjectivity across two cultures and two traditions is both physically and psychologically painful. In the first part of the film, the protagonist who is subjected to repressive practices carried out by the two authority figures within the family unity (Ahmed and Aïcha), appears unable to speak and rebel despite the fact that, on several occasions, she is the victim of both physical and verbal abuse perpetrated by her husband and her mother-in-law respectively. During the course of the film, Ahmed strikes Zouina on three separate occasions: for getting into a physical fight with the next-door neighbor, for buying a vacuum-cleaner from a deceitful salesman, and for hiding make-up in the house. Aïcha, repeatedly curses Zouina in Arabic for not cleaning vegetables fast enough ("Damn you, mad woman, the devil sent you") or for not properly performing other duties around the home. Zouina never replies.

The spectator's awareness of Zouina's silences is heightened by the presence of two verbal and articulate types of Western femininity, embodied by the Algerian family's female neighbors. On one side resides the xenophobic, middle-aged Mme Donze, who lives in constant fear of the "strangers" next door; on the other side is Nicole Briat, an open-minded, young divorcée who is not afraid to befriend Zouina or enter the "foreign" space of her house. Mme Donze exemplifies conformity to rules and traditional French values. By developing a cinematic narrative aimed at normalizing the "other", Benguigui constructs Mme Donze's character as the personification of the orientalist perspective which sees non-Westerners as a threat to stability. When this angry neighbor verbally attacks Zouina for wanting to boil coffee outside, or

violently rips apart the soccer ball that the children accidentally throw in her yard, she appears as the “evil” one and the oppressor in the eye of the spectator. Her self-directed question at the beginning of the coffee incident, “*qu’est-ce qu’elle fait avec son chaudron?*” (i.e. what is she doing with her cauldron?) expresses fears and suspicion of the other, whom she implicitly labels as a witch.

In actuality, however, it is Mme Donze whom the audience inevitably views as a witch-like character. Furthermore, Mme Donze’s obsessive-compulsive desire to keep her geometrically landscaped lawn perfectly manicured and to win first prize in the local flower and garden contest, is representative of an imperialistic French view of order which does not allow the “other” to dispute a strict set of unchangeable laws. For this reason, Mme Donze fears that Zouina will begin growing wild mint, a plant which will expand uncontrollably and invade her “territory”. The neighbor’s preoccupation is clearly representative of a much deeper fear extending beyond the competition for best garden: it is an expression of the westerner’s anxiety of “difference”: foreign bodies, if not controlled, will spread and take over.

Mme Donze’s prejudiced behavior is counterbalanced by Nicole’s openness towards a coeval Zouina with whom she forms an instant bond. Nicole’s openly feminist views concerning women’s rights inspire Zouina to take the first steps towards independence.⁵ Having learned from the children that there is another Algerian family in town, the Bouiras, the protagonist defies the cultural interdiction which prevents her from leaving the house and secretly sets out to search for them. As the film title suggests, Zouina’s quest for her fellow Algerians can only happen on a Sunday, the day in which her husband and mother-in-law leave her home alone with the children while they go to the country in search of a sheep to slaughter. *Dimanche* (i.e. Sunday) represents the day of freedom for this domestically enslaved wife, a day in which she can temporarily leave the coercive system to which she is subjected and explore the world outside. Furthermore, the title blends the Arabic (*Inch’Allah*) and the French (*Dimanche*) thus emphasizing the immigrant’s cultural hybridism. A sharp contrast between the house as an oppressively closed space and the small French town as an open yet forbidden land of freedom, effectively reinforces the dualism of the title and the cultural conflict of the female protagonist who strives to liberate herself from a personal and collective history of patriarchal domination.

For this woman, virtually alone in an unknown foreign town, defying patriarchy is a frightening yet necessary step to take. Upon Zouina’s hurried return home from her first clandestine escape, Benguigui’s skillful use of the camera conveys the sense of pure terror characterizing both her and the children as they remove mud from their shoes before the head(s) of the family return from the country. The cinematic gaze, predominantly static and detail-oriented throughout the film, suddenly moves frantically to mimic Zouina’s overwhelming anxiety while she works to conceal her open act of transgression against her husband and her mother-in-law. Despite the constant fear of being caught and severely punished, Zouina’s progressively daring quest for independence as a female agent continues, as exemplified in her repeated Sunday escapes from home. Yet, her refusal to obey her husband’s rule of domestic confinement does not imply a rejection of her past and personal history, as demonstrated by her deep yearning to celebrate the upcoming Muslim holiday (*’eid*) with the Bouira family.

5. Nicole openly discusses freedom and sexuality with Zouina and tells her: “*ton corps t’appartient ... mon corps m’appartient, c’est moi qui décide*” (i.e. your body belongs to you ... my body belongs to me, it is I who decides).

For Zouina, observing this important religious festivity represents an invaluable opportunity to remain connected with the traditions of her homeland while at the same time continuing to adapt to her new country and its customs. Contrarily to any expectation, however, the visit to the Bouiras marks an anticlimactic moment in the film and a heartbreaking disappointment for the protagonist. After several failed attempts to locate the Bouira residence, Zouina is finally able to find the family with the help of a caring and sympathetic acquaintance, Mme Manant. As she soon discovers during her visit, the other Algerian wife, Malika Bouira, has remained submissive to a strict patriarchal code of behavior. Despite having been in France for fifteen years, she continues to speak mostly in Arabic and to subscribe to a traditional anti-feminist ideology which includes complete obedience to the husband and the traditional belief in arranged marriages for teenage daughters.⁶ Shocked and offended at the realization that Zouina has come to visit her alone and without her husband's permission, she is overcome with fear of becoming her accomplice in what she considers to be an unacceptable act of insubordination: for this reason, she hurriedly throws her out of the house and locks the door. Despite Zouina's tearful plea to be let in, pronounced in Arabic in a desperate attempt to connect with the woman behind the closed door, a thick wall and a closed window (which Zouina breaks with her fist) denote symbolic, liminal spaces dividing two models of Arab femininity, past and future.

While Malika is unable to overturn her submissive status, Zouina opts to liberate herself and her children from both patriarchal and postcolonial oppression. Ultimately, the impossibility of establishing a sisterly bond with Malika is not a failure for the protagonist. As critic Maryse Fauvel (2004) argues, "Zouina constructs her identity not through the gaze of other women, nor as the 'other.' On the contrary, their gaze and their rejection of what she does become creative moments and challenges. She succeeds in creating a community that subverts traditional identity markers: stereotypical notions of class, sex, and nationality" (p. 154). Poignantly, her success is captured in the final image of the film: a close-up of Zouina's face shows her smiling and victoriously returning home with a new awareness. With a shocked Franco-Algerian group of people (her husband, mother-in-law, neighbors, Mme Manant) awaiting her arrival in front of her house, she utters the first outspoken assertion of her will: looking at Ahmed in the eye but speaking directly to her children, she promises, "*demain, c'est moi je vous emmène à l'école [sic]*" (i.e. tomorrow, I will be the one taking you to school).

After Zouina produces a strong verbal statement of her female agency, the camera's gaze gradually fades out on her newly found optimism. Despite the numerous examples of patriarchal oppression of women in the film, Benguigui's work ultimately offers a hopeful representation of the immigrant female subject as she evolves into a more emancipated, trans-cultural model of femininity. Benguigui explains in an interview with Michèle Halberstadt that Zouina's story of female empowerment is a tribute to the immigrant woman's struggle to rise from a status of silent object to one of speaking subject. As she recalls, the film was inspired by her mother and by the women of her generation: "The memories of my mother and all the testimonials made me tell the story of these women, who had been pioneers. They had been forced to endure an exile they hadn't chosen. It's for economic reasons that they find themselves in this strange world, surrounded by the greatest indifference. Who remembers them at that time? What did their faces look like?" (Hillaier, 2005,

6. Throughout their encounter, Zouina speaks mainly in French while Malika responds almost exclusively in Arabic.

pp. 290–291). In order to give a face to these women, Benguigui uses a highly individualized cinematic gaze to create a memorable identity. A subject-centered use of the camera is therefore instrumental in portraying the formation of Zouina’s female subjectivity: her act of self-assertion at the end of the film is a victory for all the women who rose above the same silencing and oppression.

In my analysis of two particularly relevant films on immigration by Yamina Benguigui, I have demonstrated that the director denounces the orientalist political, social, and economic discourse defining non-Westerners as inherently inferior, labeling them as bodies to be permanently inscribed into an economy of passive obedience to authority. And while integration has made remarkable progress in France today, much still remains to be done before immigrants and their children are granted equal rights. Cinema, as a visual and aural narrative, contributes to alert consciousnesses and raise public awareness of important questions of immigration and postcolonial identity. As Benguigui acknowledges in an interview with Yves Alion, through the semiotics of cinema “*le particulier devient vite universel*” (i.e. the particular quickly becomes universal) (Alion, 2001, p. 136). The struggles of the individuals represented through both her documentary and her fiction are those of any human being who must overcome subjugation. The camera, in this context, becomes a privileged tool for promoting tolerance, social change, and women’s rights to Western as well as to non-Western audiences.

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