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A new era of Maghrebi-French cinema: Two perspectives

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From Tunis to Casablanca and further afield in the diaspora, Maghrebi-French filmmakers have articulated the historical transformations of their societies, including their changing place in the world. All the major events and historical moments that have shaped the Maghreb have been put on camera, with original and critical portrayals detailing the social, political, and economic transformations. Different generations of filmmakers from the Maghreb and its worldwide diaspora have screened the pressing issues that have preoccupied their people over the last few decades.

Since the early 2000s there has also been a fortified scholarly interest for this cinematic landscape. However, both theoretical and methodological approaches often foreground filmmakers living outside of the Maghreb, mainly in France, and with what has been dubbed *cinéma beur* – the word ‘beur’ being a slang derivative of ‘arabe’, originally used as self-designation and critically contested today. Carrie Tarr’s *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) and Cornelia Ruhe’s *Cinéma beur: Analysen zu einem neuen Genre des französischen Films* (Konstanz: UVK, 2006) are only two of many examples addressing the topic. Will Higbee continues along the path of the *cinéma beur* concept in his latest monograph, titled *Post-Beur Cinema: North African émigré and Maghrebi-French Filmmaking in France since 2000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). However, he broadens the meaning and definition considerably, exploring how the filmmakers have screened the historical and social transformations of the Maghreb and considering the present-day legacy of cinematic reconfigurations of this historical reality in France. His work fits within his wider research interests of contemporary French cinema, cinemas of the Maghreb, immigrant, postcolonial, diasporic, and transnational cinemas.

These have fueled a three-year international research project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council on Transnational Moroccan Cinema, which began in 2015.

Higbee's monograph was published in the series Traditions in World Cinema edited by Linda Badley and R. Barton Palmer. The author claims the following shift in his introduction:

[t]here has been a notable move away from perceiving Maghrebi-French and North African émigré filmmaking in France as solely the product of an immigrant cinema produced on the margins of the industry that only speaks to the minority ethnic communities from which it emerges. (p. 3)

In order to combine breadth of material with original critical examination of the inevitably heterogeneous cinematic landscape in the Maghreb and its diaspora, the book offers a multiplicity of intertwined themes. Higbee problematises the challenge to compile a meaningful film corpus. He critiques 'the excessive, even obsessive, impulse to categorise their [maghrebi-french filmmakers] films' (p. 21), and pleads for a more diverse understanding of film and filmmaking beyond the cultural origin of the filmmakers and dichotomies between host and homeland. This is particularly interesting in light of recent developments in Diaspora Studies, in particular the growing literature on *postdiaspora*. Following Michel Laguerre in his most recent monograph *The Postdiaspora Condition: Crossborder Social Protection, Transnational Schooling, and Extraterritorial Human Security* (London: Palgrave MacMillian, 2017), the term 'postdiaspora' encompasses 'the situation of individuals who live in a polity other than that into which they or their parents were born – their hostland – but possess full citizenship rights in their ancestral country – their homeland – similar or identical to those enjoyed by its intramural population' (p. 20). This allows them to participate simultaneously in the affairs of both hostland and homeland.

France is particularly open to this form of transnational citizenship. As Higbee underlines:

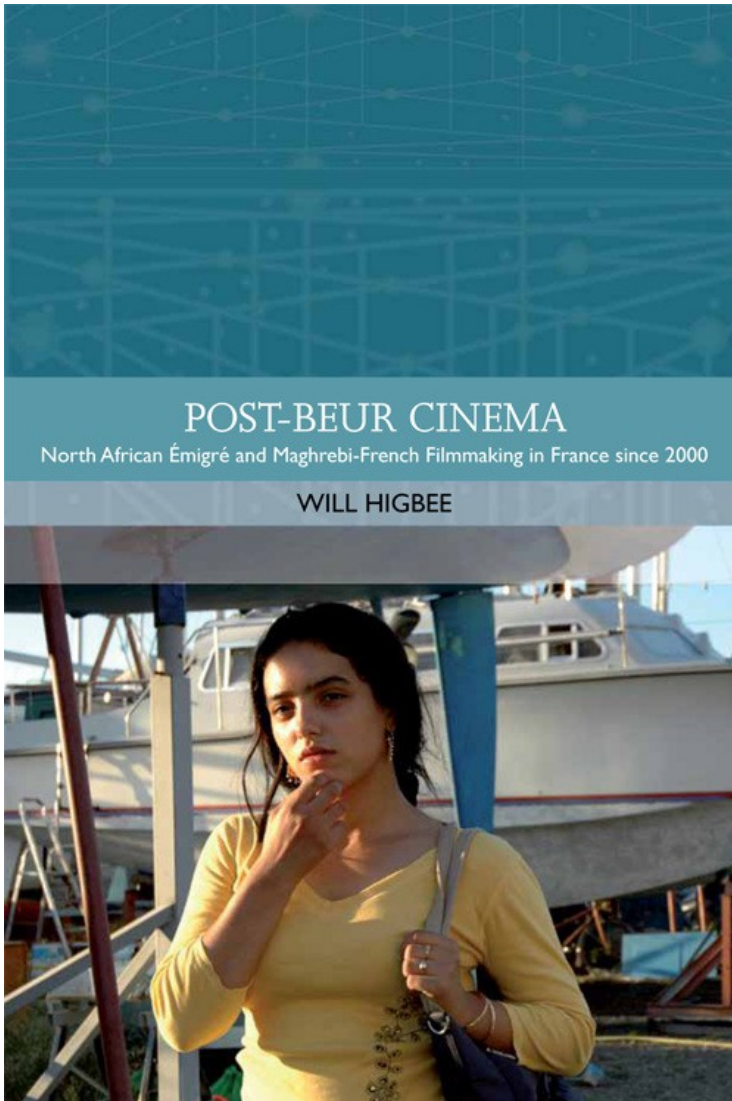
Post-Beur is intended to reflect the fact that to understand the cinemas of the North African diasporas in France, we need to move beyond simply locking such films and filmmakers into the category of Beur Cinema as either a temporal, socio-economic or ethnic marker – or indeed of reading these films solely through the postcolonial optic or diasporic lens that the term *beur* might also imply. It also emphasises the fact that the cinema of the North African diaspora in France consists of French filmmakers of North African origin at the same time as it does of Maghrebi émigré

filmmakers and that while these filmmakers may well have shared experiences, cultural references and thematic concerns in their work, we must also understand the significant difference that exist between them. (p. 24)

In the second chapter, *The (Maghrebi-)French Connection: Diaspora goes Mainstream*, he points at a phenomenon also seen in German-Turkish and British-Indian filmmaking of the last decade: a shift to a more mainstream kind of production, distribution, and reception of diasporic filmmaking. He traces that back to certain popular actors, genre mash-ups, and the French film industry which, in his opinion, is 'the arena in which the modes and methods of representation employed by the dominant norm to win and shape consent [...] can be most exposed to scrutiny and before the biggest possible audience' (p. 59).

In his third chapter Higbee takes a historical stance and deals with what he calls the Colonial Fracture and the Counter-Heritage Film, analysing films which deal with the colonial past from a Maghrebi-French perspective. Rightly, he states that this is not simply about the 'subaltern' voicing his/her own perspective; rather it is about a cinema becoming increasingly multivocal and complex: 'given the ongoing and interrelated nature of the multiple histories of colonial history and, more specifically, the Algerian war for independence, it becomes almost impossible to speak of simply "replacing" one history with another, or offering a historical narrative of events that is exclusively "French" or "Algerian"' (p. 64).

His fourth chapter is dedicated entirely to Spaces and Difference in the Films of Abdellatif Kechiche, whereas his two last chapters – *Home, Displacement and the Myth of Return: Journey Narratives in the 2000s* and *Screening Islam: Cinematic Representations of the Muslim Community in France in the 2000s* – give intriguing insights on new cinematic topics and aesthetics in Maghrebi-French films. Higbee claims a shift from cinematic spaces like the *banlieu* to the spaces of journeys exemplified by the road movie. These new configurations of space aim to offer 'an understanding of how a Maghrebi-French identity is negotiated and accepted (or not) from both within and outside the West' (p. 152). Most importantly, he sees the absence of representations of Islam as 'a refusal to be ghettoised from the outset as little more than ethnic-minority or Muslim filmmakers' (p. 180).



This assessment is all the more pertinent since in critical terms cinema has responded to historical change and triggered deep transformations in the Maghrebi cinema's modes of production and politics of representation. The crucial role of the displacement of the Maghreb countries' populations including their filmmakers as well as the rise and evolution of transnational aesthetics on screens contribute to the articulation of the historical and social transformations of the Maghreb from a hitherto understudied perspective.

Other approaches to this particular topic focus on aspects of gender, like Florence Martin's *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) and Stephanie Van de Peer's *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), as well as on the history and formation of national cinema landscapes, like Jamal Bahmad's *Casablanca Belongs to Us: Globalisation, Everyday Life and Postcolonial Subjectivity in Moroccan Cinema since the 1990s* (Stirling: University of Stirling, 2014) and Robert Lang's *New Tunisian Cinema: Allegories of Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Viktoria Domberg's first monograph, *Das (franko-)algerische Kino. Eine filmgeschichtliche Studie aus transnationaler Perspektive* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2016), is a novel and comprehensive contribution to the scarce German-speaking research landscape on Maghrebi cinema.[1] It deals exclusively with Algerian cinema and connects with Guy Austin's *Algerian National Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) but remains a significant step in research made in the German-speaking context on Algerian cinema.

Das (franko-)algerische Kino is the third volume in the series *Méditerranée: Littératures – Cultures/Mittelmeer: Literaturen – Kulturen* edited by Elisabeth Arend and Elke Richter.[2] The choice of this regional focus in contrast to the broader realm of 'world cinema', which Higbee's monograph falls into, is worth noticing. From an Area Studies perspective, this classification is an interesting move, simultaneously dividing and unifying the region of the Mediterranean Sea – a region which has gained political interest in recent years because of the European refugee crisis and, consequently, has found renewed interest amongst Cultural Studies scholars. This contested space in which different cultures meet, mix, and fight creates new images and imaginaries inscribed not in the least in films; departure, return, journey, encounter, nature, geography, and much more is at stake in this region. Promoting the regional over the national positions Algerian cinema not in reference to its (French) diaspora but, rather, to a region that in itself is a fluid concept. Film scholar Patricia Caillé emphasises this idea in her article "'Cinemas of the Maghreb': Reflections on the transnational and polycentric dimensions of regional cinema'. She states that 'regions are very much part of the way we think about films' (p. 242) and problematises how a specific set of films is constructed, promoted, and valorised as 'cinemas of the Maghreb' via a consideration of the people, the institutions, and the interactions that are involved in different geographical and institutional contexts.



As stated by Domberg, Algerian cinema accompanies the nation's history since the war of independence. It reflects the developments and issues of modern Algeria and its close but conflicting relationship to France. The book deals with the cinematic portrayal of major historical events in the region, from the emergence of a national cinema (*Nationale Konstruktionen: Erzählungen des Freiheitskampfes im *cinéma moudjahid**) through new socio-historical perspectives (*Das Kino im Umbruch: Neuperspektivierung von Gesellschaft und Geschichte*), the Algerian civil war (*Filmischer Widerstand: Das*

Kino im Kontext des Bürgerkriegs), and the cinematic depiction of the Algerian diaspora in France (Geschichte und Identität transnational und fragmentiert). In the analyses of a considerable corpus, it further reflects on the representation of minorities and subaltern social groups such as women in Algerian cinema and its patriarchal social systems. From the increasingly prominent role of women in Maghrebi filmmaking,[3] the book articulates the significance of difference, subalternity, and self-representation to the cinematic reconfigurations of historical and social change in Algeria. The decoding of these films as forms of resistance is well argued. Linking history, identity, and cinema together also makes this book a valuable contribution for understanding the contemporary Algerian cinema landscape.

The political and economic transformations that the Maghreb underwent during the last decades necessarily influenced the process of social change and the cinemas depicting it. Post-Beur cinema and Algerian cinema are but only two examples of this gradual change. Other important cinemas fostering this transformation, like Moroccan and Tunisian cinemas, as well as Hollywood relocating its movie production to those countries, also the aesthetic and narrative media practices of (amateur) video activism, are related topics worth further investigation. Recent films like Nour Eddine Lakhmari's *Casanegra* (Morocco, 2008) and Leyla Bouzid's *As I Open My Eyes* (Tunisia, 2015) are testimonials of a cinema preoccupied less and less with the French post-colonial legacy. Instead, they predominantly concern domestic issues of a young urban generation. Stuart Hall reminds us that identities, extending to cinematic identities, are a constant *process of becoming*. Both Will Higbee's *Post-Beur Cinema: North African émigré and Maghrebi-French Filmmaking in France since 2000* and Viktoria Domberg's *Das (franko-)algerische Kino. Eine filmgeschichtliche Studie aus transnationaler Perspektive* offer intriguing insights to the research field, posing questions about how to perceive ethnic and religious diversity in order to write *with* the cinemas of the Maghreb, rather than *about* such cinemas.

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Notes

- [1] See also Viktoria Metschel's ongoing dissertation project on Algerian cinema: *Archive mobilisieren. Algerische Figurationen im Kino der Dekolonialisierung* (University of Vienna). 16 November 2017 (<https://mobilecultures.univie.ac.at/team/doktorandinnen/viktoria-metschl/>).
- [2] The other two volumes are: *Ich-Entwürfe im hybriden Raum – Das 'Algerische Quartett' von Assia Djebar* by Elke Richter, and *Mittelmeerdiskurse in Literatur und Film – La Méditerranée: représentations littéraires et cinématographiques* edited by Elisabeth Arend, Elke Richter, and Christiane Solte-Gresser.
- [3] For further reading see also: Abdel-Fadil & Van Eyne 2016; Armes 2007; Bouzid Discacciati 2000; Caillé 2013.