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Miller, Alyssa

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Tunisian Cinema after the Arab Spring: Portrait of a Nation in Transition

Alyssa Miller 

In the closing scene of *The Last of Us* (2016), we see the torso of a young black man who stands naked before a clearing in the forest.¹ As he gazes out at a cascade of water tumbling down to a rocky pool below, the young man's image gradually fades away, absorbed into the landscape. Nothing about this scene, from the blackness of the protagonist to the coniferous forest, has any clear reference point in Tunisian national cinema.² Indeed, director Ala Eddine Slim has expressed distaste for being classified as a regional filmmaker, preferring that his work be seen as international, transcending borders.³

And yet, to the familiar eye, this film belongs unmistakably to Tunisia's postrevolutionary political transition, a time fraught with unpredictable shifts in national identity and the contours of the state. Slim is part of a new generation of Tunisian filmmakers who have won critical acclaim on the international festival circuit since the 2011 revolution. More than a burst of creative energy released by the demise of autocratic rule, their experimental aesthetic emerges, in part, from struggles within Tunisian filmmaking establishment that have shaped the conditions of production under political transition. In this essay, I track the intergenerational conflicts

that have prompted to the recent extroversion of young Tunisian filmmakers, who have set their sights beyond the nation for funding and recognition.

Tunisian national cinema dates from 1964, with the creation of a public production and distribution company called SATPEC (Société anonyme Tunisienne de production et d'expansion cinématographique). SATPEC was founded to establish state control over news production, rather than to promote national culture. Yet the state grew to value cinema as a form of propaganda in its own right, as well as a means for promoting Tunisia's image abroad as a tourist destination.⁴ During the period of SATPEC's monopoly over production in the 1960s and 1970s, Tunisian cinema focused primarily on anti-imperialist themes and social critique.

In the 1980s, Tunisia pivoted away from Soviet-style state production, thanks to the rise of private production companies that nurtured fresh, oppositional voices. This "golden age" of Tunisian cinema was driven by a cohort of talented *auteurs*, whose films explored the postcolonial condition through allegories of nation.⁵ Plotlines often followed the interior struggle of a central character, whose quest for liberation from patriarchal oppression leads them to confront a traumatic past. Nouri Bouzid is the most representative artistic figure of this era, both for his prolific directorial output and as screenwriter on some of its most memorable films, such as *Silences of the Palace* and *Halfaouine*. During a 1994 lecture on "Sources of Inspiration," Bouzid emphasized the primacy of character in his creative process: "the germ, the gene, the genetic heritage [of a film] is in the character. Everything that's to come is engendered by

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the character, because this is not a theoretical character but a total character who has roots which will beget needs.”⁶ This is a cinema of psychological depth, in which the character’s inner truths are revealed through interactions with the national milieu.

Celebrating tolerance and individual liberties as essential features of national culture, the “golden age” films adopted a critical stance toward Tunisia’s increasingly authoritarian state. However, their success brought significant institutional power to the private production companies. One of the primary ways in which the Tunisian state supports national cinema is by awarding grants and subsidies at various stages of film development.⁷ Public grants are disbursed to the production company — not to the director or screenwriter — giving producers budgetary control over recipient projects. By forming an exclusive syndicate and leveraging connections at the Ministry of Culture, experienced producers increasingly monopolized public filmmaking grants, leading to a crisis of creative stagnation by the year 2000. These establishment insiders blocked a rising generation of cinema professionals, trained at local audiovisual institutes, who used the greater accessibility of digital technology to embark on bold filmmaking projects — with or without the luxury of state-issued permits.

Unable to assemble the budget to produce expensive feature-length fiction films, these young directors built their reputations on short films and documentaries. The latter has emerged as a particularly dynamic and experimental genre in Tunisian cinema today. One of the most distinctive voices in Tunisian documentary film is Hamza Ouni; his films *El Gort* (2013) and *El Medstansi* (2020) are the

fruit of more than a decade-long collaboration with precarious youth in his hometown, Mhamdia.⁸ Training an unflinching lens on exploitative labor practices and crushed aspirations in a nation that devours its youth, Ouni captures a furious desire for life among ordinary working-class men. By crafting intimate portraits of marginal geographies and communities, Tunisian documentary film foregrounds subjects who are rarely included in official representations of the nation.⁹

Regrettably, the fall of President Ben Ali’s kleptocratic regime on January 14, 2011, failed to immediately ignite an analogous revolution in the cinema sector.¹⁰ Deeply critical of persistent cronyism in the national filmmaking establishment, some directors chose to forego public funding, in solidarity with excluded youth. Veteran filmmaker Jilani Saadi’s *Bidoun 2* (2014) constitutes a manifesto in this respect.¹¹ Produced without public support, using a GoPro camera and conspicuously minimal means, *Bidoun 2* provoked controversy in 2014 when it was the sole Tunisian feature-length fiction selected for competition at the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage. Outraged, establishment filmmakers staged their own “Parallel Festival” in protest. According to them, the celebration of gimmicky, low-budget movies (“films fauchés”) like *Bidoun 2* at Tunisia’s most prestigious film festival threatened to destroy the edifice of national cinema — along with its funding structures.¹² Without a national cinema, they warned, Tunisian filmmakers would be plunged into socioeconomic precarity, leaving them at the mercy of international investors and their aesthetic priorities.

Yet, from Saadi's point of view, Tunisian filmmakers were already beholden to the political vagaries and cronyism of public grantmaking committees. Instead of concealing this precarity, he sought to confront it at every level of production, by making experimental films that he describes as *bidoun*. In Arabic, *bidoun* is a preposition that means "without." As Saadi explained to me during an interview in March 2015, a *bidoun* film is made "without state authorization, without preparation, without anything except the camera, practically without budget, without state subsidies ... without stopping traffic, without actors, and everything." Transforming material constraint into a principle of aesthetic innovation, *Bidoun 2* incorporates improvisational elements, drawing on resources ready at hand.

Plot-wise, *Bidoun 2* is a road movie without destination, which follows the misadventures of 'Aida and 'Abdu, two young people adrift in the northern city of Bizerte. Visual and audio cues locate the action during Tunisia's democratic transition; yet, the narrative belies the linear logic suggested by ideologies of transition and is dominated instead by cycles of petty violence and revenge. Through its emphasis on affect, *Bidoun 2* breaks aesthetically with the psychological depth of Tunisia's cinematic past. An "unqualified intensity," affect differs from emotion because it has not yet been claimed by subjectivity nor assimilated as biographical experience.¹³ Whereas the "golden age" films tended to harness emotion in the service of national allegory, *Bidoun 2* intentionally minimizes narrative to leave space for sensations not easily bounded by conventional emotion. Certainly, 'Aida and 'Abdu experience hu-

miliation (*hogra*), exhilaration, regret, and despair, but their interiority is rarely exposed through a narrative device like dialogue. Instead, the film evokes feeling mainly through physical situations: movements, postures, composites and de-composites.

This rejection of psychologization to work through affective logic is pushed to an even greater extreme in the work of Ala Eddine Slim. In 2005, Slim co-founded Exit Productions, an independent production company that positioned itself at the center of debates over the future of Tunisian cinema. Beyond exclusion from public grants, emerging Tunisian filmmakers faced an acute distribution crisis, as a collapsing theater infrastructure was replaced by video clubs, offering the latest global blockbusters for download at a nominal price.¹⁴ In response to a Ben-Ali era initiative to reform the cinema and audiovisual sectors, young professionals founded the Collectif Indépendant d'Action pour le Cinéma en Tunisie. Meeting at the offices of Exit Productions, the Collectif composed a comprehensive reform proposal, which they submitted to the Ministry of Culture (who never responded).¹⁵ Undaunted, Exit Productions has imposed itself as an peerless force in Tunisian cinema, beginning with its first feature-length film, *Babylon* (2012). A documentary directed by Ala Eddine Slim, Ismaël, and Youssef Chebbi, *Babylon* chronicles the rise and fall of Choucha refugee camp in southeastern Tunisia, which hosted more than one million persons — primarily migrant workers — fleeing revolutionary violence in Libya in spring 2011.¹⁶ All trace of the Tunisian national context is decentered by life in the temporary metropolis, whose rhythms are governed by soldiers,

nongovernmental organizations, relief workers and international media coverage. While the migrant worker-refugees interact in a kaleidoscope of languages — including several Arabic dialects, English and Bengali — the film refuses recourse to subtitles, confronting audiences with varying moments of linguistic opacity. Removed from the specific life-worlds where each individual coheres as a particular form of life, the camera attends to the re-composition of social and material elements in the emergent assemblage of the camp.

Following the success of *Babylon* — which received no assistance from the Tunisian Ministry of Culture but won top prize at the 2012 Festival International du Cinéma Marseilles — Slim created a pair of feature-length fictions, *The Last of Us* (2016) and *Sortilège* (2019).¹⁷ Together, they meditate on flight from capture (both physical and symbolic), taking refuge in the forest as a realm of pure affect. Filmed during the apex of post-2011 migrant deaths on the Mediterranean Sea, *The Last of Us* imagines the fate of *un corps disparu* — one among thousands of bodies annually lost at sea.¹⁸ The film opens in the Tunisian south, where an unnamed sub-Saharan migrant is violently separated from his traveling companion. After hitchhiking to Tunis, he absconds with a fishing vessel and embarks alone on the Mediterranean crossing. There is now a poetic interlude, featuring white text against a black screen, that lyrically narrates his passage from one mode of human existence to another: *I vomited humankind. I related to the birds, plants and beasts. I was enchanted by the woodland. I relished the light and the water.* This sequence raises — but never resolves — the

possibility of the protagonist's death at sea. In lieu of Europe, he comes ashore in a mysterious wooded terrain. Absorbed in the hyper-reality of the landscape, the film observes his adaptation to a new human nature, one that demands minute attunement to the ecosystem to survive.

Sortilège unfolds in the same cinematic universe as *The Last of Us* and reprises many of its themes.¹⁹ A soldier, deployed with a counterterrorism unit in the southwest, is granted leave for Tunis following his mother's death. Cooking, smoking, absorbed in lassitude at the empty familial home, the military police eventually turn up to pursue him for desertion. Traveling furtively on the peri-urban margins of the city, the fugitive traverses a series of nocturnal scenes: construction sites, fires smoldering in the arid fields, street dogs nestled together beneath the shrubs. Later, the merciless culling of these same street dogs by municipal police becomes a sobering reminder that life on the wrong side of security imperatives is utterly bare. Once apprehended, the fugitive employs a ruse to break free from an armored police vehicle and escapes under gunfire. Naked and clutching a bleeding bullet wound in his lower back, the deserter cuts a line through a cemetery, beyond the farthest reaches of the city, before finally coming to rest in the forest's seclusion.

Like *Babylon*, this diptych of fiction films is set in the nation but decenters it, foregrounding Tunisia's participation in larger, transnational formations. As film critic Saad Chakali astutely observes, shooting in Jendouba governorate disorients the viewer from clichéd Tunisian landscapes — the Saharan dunes or white-clad Mediterranean city featured in tourism campaigns.²⁰ In contrast, the rug-

ged forests of the northwest appear alien to the cartography of North Africa. Fully half of each film is immersed in the forest, a milieu that totally reorganizes the human sensorium and bodily capacities. Whereas *The Last of Us* draws inspiration from irregular migration, the imaginary of *Sortilège* springs from contemporary counterterrorism campaigns on Tunisia's western frontier. The film can be read, in part, as an oblique inquiry into the militant as a form-of-life, abstracted from overdetermined security labels such as the "terrorist."

From the "golden age" of the 1980s and 1990s to the experimental expression of today, Tunisian cinema has shifted from psychological depth to surface. Tunisian cinema's "golden age" coincided with the consolidation of authoritarian rule; naturally, its films were preoccupied with the problematics of personal liberty. And yet the stability of authoritarianism was propitious for national cinema, its disciplinary structures lending coherence to a national identity caught up in dramas of resistance. Far from exiting the waiting room of history to embrace freedom in 2011, the notion of a unified national identity has dissolved in the face of emergent predicaments. In the postrevolutionary worlding of Tunisian cinema, transnational and local scales attain a new saliency, while the disaggregated nation is often reduced to its repressive apparatus. Staying scrupulously on the surface of things, Tunisian cinema today reflects a broader entanglement with the world.

ORCID

Alyssa Miller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2100-8517>

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Notes

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Alyssa Miller is a postdoctoral research fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg. Her research interrogates the celebrated “success” of Tunisia’s democratic transition by documenting ongoing struggles for dignified work and socioeconomic mobility in marginalized communities.