Review Of "Screens And Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema" By F. Martin

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Florence Martin’s recent book, *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women’s Cinema* (2011), offers an insightful and novel alternative to the usual postcolonial feminist approaches to Maghrebi women’s film studies. Rather than providing the reader with an encyclopedic summary, or a historical accounting of the topic, Martin’s work argues for a transnational feminist reading of Maghrebi cinema that speaks to the fluid interplay between various cultural systems, narrative structures, and aesthetic forms across borders and among diverse cultural audiences. In line with Will Higbee’s theorization of “cinema of transvergence” and Hamid Naficy’s concept of “accented cinema,” Martin’s book aims to examine the fertile dynamics that traverse women filmmakers’ practices in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Her
work explores the complex interface between national and transnational, local and
global, in a region where filmmakers are bicultural, bi- or tri-lingual, and where
their films are financed and viewed both domestically and abroad. Borrowing the
notions of “transvergence” and “accented cinema” (which usually refer to migrant
or diasporic cinema from directors of both genders), Martin’s work posits a broader
reading, where Maghrebi women’s films are seen as part of a larger cultural and
gendered “interdiscursivity,” instead of a quest for a specific national or gendered
identity.

Each chapter analyzes a single movie to highlight a particular facet of the
notion of transvergence that Martin is exploring. These chapters, in turn, are orga-
nized into three main sections that “retrace the cinematic pattern of delivery” (210).
The first section, “Transnational Feminist Storytellers,” examines the innovative
narrative structures deployed in Assia Djebar’s The Nuba of the Women of Mount
Chenoua (Algeria, 1978) and Farida Benlyazid’s Door to the Sky (Morocco, 1988). In
the middle section, “Transvergent Screens,” Martin focuses on the performative
aspect of the tales in Bachir Chouikh’s Rachida (Algeria, 2002), Raja Amari’s Red
Satin (Tunisia, 2002), and Nadia El Fani’s Bedwin Hacker (Tunisia, 2002). Finally, the
third section, “From Dunyasad to Transvergent Audiences,” turns toward the con-
struction of simultaneous modes of reception on both sides of the Mediterranean
through Yasmine Kassari’s The Sleeping Child (Morocco, 2004) and Selma Baccar’s
Flower of Oblivion (Tunisia, 2006). This structure allows Martin to explore a diverse
body of works and to provide a balanced perspective of the region’s women’s cin-
ematic output, although no mention is made of major filmmaker Moufida Tlatli
and productions from the 1990s are absent.

While the entire book will provide a valuable resource to colleagues teach-
ing these films, the chapters on El Fani’s Bedwin Hacker and Kassari’s The Sleeping
Child should be of particular interest. In her analyses of both movies, Martin
offers a complex analysis of embedded screens, for example, in Bedwin Hacker,
Martin notes that the multiplication of TV and computer sets stresses a “globally
shared cyber-vision” that simultaneously reveals and disrupts authoritarian dis-
course (131). In The Sleeping Child, on-screen videotaped images of harragas (illegal
migrants) translate the physical and cultural boundaries that separate them from
their wives. Martin shows those images as not just divisive, though, but also as a
source of liberation: freed from the desiring gaze, women become the viewers of
their disembodied husbands, inverting “the stereotypical politics of the gaze” (181).

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