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Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary, by Stefanie Van De Peer. Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 238

Kaya Davies Hayon

Despite their rich history, Arab films, in particular those made by women, have not received the international attention they deserve. Arab women filmmakers have been under-examined in academic and popular spheres. However, in recent years, the advent of more transnational viewing practices, combined with the emergence of a new generation of highly successful Arab women directors, has started to shift the status quo. Contemporary fiction filmmakers like Nadine Labaki and Haafia Al-Mansour have been commercially successful outside of their own national and regional contexts. However, women documentarists from the Arab world remain largely unknown and their films continue to be the subject of very little academic or popular attention. Underpinned by significant archival work, Stefanie Van De Peer's fascinating and informative book, *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary*, goes a long way to redressing this imbalance by bringing the films of a number of pioneering women documentarists from the Arab world to light. It is a refreshing, timely and welcome contribution to the relatively small and disparate body of work on Arab women filmmakers, which includes important texts like Gönül Dönmez-Colin's *Women, Islam and Cinema* (2004), Rebecca Hillauer's *Encyclopaedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (2005), and Viola Shafik's *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (2007).

Negotiating Dissidence dialogues with the above books, but also charts new territory by foregrounding and analysing the work of seven well- and lesser-known women documentary filmmakers originating from the Mediterranean coast of the Arab world. It is structured geographically and chronologically, with individual chapters focusing on Egypt's Ateyyat El Abnoudy, Lebanon's Jocelyne Saab, Tunisia's Selma Baccar, Algeria's Assia Djebar, Palestine's Mai Masri, Morocco's Izza Génini and Syria's Hala Alabdallah Yaktoub. For Van De Peer, these women are pioneers, not because they were the first women to make (documentary) films in their countries, but because they represent "the most significant or most influential examples" (1), and because they have developed and negotiated dissident filmmaking styles in often hostile environments where censorship and conservative attitudes towards women and gender have dominated (2). Documentary has been the genre of choice for these women as relatively lightweight and inexpensive camera equipment has rendered financial support "less influential or even absent" (7), which has, in turn, "allowed for more freedom of expression" (7). For Van De Peer, this has made documentary a key genre for Arab women to articulate and negotiate a feminist dissidence to practices and structures that have limited the rights of women and children in the Arab context.

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It is rare for studies to look at filmmaking from across the Arab world, with most choosing to focus on a specific region (i.e. the Maghreb or the Mashrek), or on an individual national cinematic context.[1] However, as Van De Peer clearly shows here, the films and filmmakers she analyses are best understood through a transnational lens that recognises the interconnectedness of filmmakers from the Arab world, while also paying tribute to "a diversity as wide as the plurals of cinemas and Arabs implies" (4). Van De Peer's commitment to transnationalism, and to exploring the relationship between film cultures, is combined with a rich theoretical framework that draws on postcolonial feminism (by thinkers such as Chandra Mohanty), feminist (film) theory (Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan amongst others), phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and phenomenological film theory (by scholars like Laura Marks), as well as the work of documentary scholars on voice and the gaze (such as Stella Bruzzi, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and others). In particular, Van De Peer mobilises the concepts of intersubjectivity, sympathy and solidarity, arguing convincingly that the films she analyses create a reciprocal relationship between director, represented subject and spectator by encouraging us to "see" rather than just "look", and by inviting sympathy and solidarity with the other's position (11). The author is especially indebted to Laura Marks's work on enfolding and unfolding, which she enfolds into her own film analyses by showing how the filmmakers in her final corpus attempt to protect sensitive information and marginalised subjects by placing them in the folds of their films. For Van De Peer, this sensitive information "can be revealed and liberated, or unfolded through the act of 'listening' and 'seeing'" (25), if the spectator is willing to enter into an intersubjective relationship with the directors and the subjects of their films. She shows, for instance, how Izza Génini enfolds an interest in women's rights issues into documentaries that are ostensibly focused on Moroccan music and have been viewed as commentaries on the country's multicultural heritage; or how Joceylne Saab uses montage to "enfold delicate matters and peoples into discourse, while trusting the spectator to assist her in the unfolding act" (68).

Van De Peer is a sensitive reader whose film analyses are detailed, nuanced and always informed by an in-depth understanding of socio-political and historical contexts, as well as local film markets. In this sense, *Negotiating Dissidence* not only provides a historical overview of women's documentary-making practice in the Arab world, but also an introduction to the political, social and cultural histories of the region since the 1950s. Few scholars possess as encyclopaedic a knowledge of Arab women's documentary as Van De Peer. My one criticism of this rich and thoughtful book is that it lacks a concluding chapter, which would, in my opinion, have provided an opportunity to bring together the findings of the individual filmmaker chapters, and provide some comparative reflection on the different ways in which these women documentarists have negotiated dissident filming practices. As it stands, the lack of a concluding chapter gives the book a slightly fragmented feel and means that some of the connections between the strategies and approaches outlined in the individual filmmaker chapters remain somewhat under-examined.

That being said, it is without doubt that Van De Peer's analysis of these women's work brings new perspectives to bear on their films and on the filmic cultures from which they emerge. Her integration of history and philosophy is exciting as it mobilises an interdisciplinary perspective that is all too infrequently incorporated into studies of (contemporary) Arab cinemas. Aside from the work of theorists like Laura Marks, philosophical or theoretical readings of Arab films are unusual, partly because film studies scholars have tended to focus more on the historical, socio-political and cultural dimensions of filmmaking from the region. Here, Van De Peer manages to effectively combine historical and philosophical approaches, by embedding her readings in detailed archival and historical research, while simultaneously

showing her reader how and why a philosophical reading might broaden their understanding, not just of Arab film, but also of its mobilisation of concepts like (inter)subjectivity, sympathy and solidarity. Van De Peer's book can therefore be seen to respond to calls by scholars like David Martin-Jones for the discipline of film studies to begin to "[engage] with a world of philosophies via a world of cinemas" (8). That is, in effect, what Van De Peer does here by bringing history, philosophy and film analysis into a productive dialogue that demonstrates how Arab women's documentary cinema is not only embedded in local and global contexts, but also deepens our awareness of what Martin-Jones has termed a "complexly-interrelated world of philosophies that inform […] cinematic articulations" and that are themselves oftentimes informed by film (17).

In sum, *Negotiating Dissidence* provides an exciting and original overview of the filmic output of some of the pioneering women of Arab documentary. Van De Peer's commitment to showcasing the work of these women and to celebrating their feminist politics of intersubjectivity, sympathy and solidarity provides a highly valuable contribution to work in the field of Arab cinema, feminist film studies, documentary film studies and film-philosophy, and will be of interest to scholars working across these areas and beyond. At the same time, *Negotiating Dissidence* will be valuable for students seeking to gain an introduction to Arab history and culture broadly, and to key Arab women documentarists specifically. This meticulously researched book demonstrates the author's genuine sense of solidarity with her chosen filmmakers and reveals a curatorial commitment to extending the visibility of their work both within and beyond the Arab world.

Note

[1] Consider, for instance, Florence Martin's *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema*, which focuses on the filmic production of women from the Francophone Maghreb, or Viola Shafik's *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation* and Valérie K. Orlando's *Screening Morocco: Contemporary Depictions in Film of a Changing Society,* which look, in part, at Arab women in specific national contexts.

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