

## Haptic Aesthetics, Gender and Migration in Yamina Benguigui's Film *Inch'allah Dimanche*

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### Abstract

Yamina Benguigui's film *Inshallah Dimanche* is set at the time of France's recruitment of male guest workers. Encouraged by the Family Reunification Act instituted in 1974, Zouina, her children and her mother-in-law are moving to France to join Zouima's husband. Caught between her abusive mother-in-law, and her racist French neighbor, Zouina's only refuge is Sunday's walk outside with her children. This article examines how the protagonist's experience with migration is mediated by the materiality of cinematic form as well as body aesthetics. Zouina is bodily affected by the experience of migration. Her haptic scars, as a result of her husband's abuse, and her physical fight with the French neighbor show how the experience of migration is imprinted on her body. Zouina's ventures to the outside make her more aware of gazes, sensory experiences and other elements of the visual that are in opposition to oppression. In analyzing the film and its haptic aesthetics, the paper draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari as well as the work of critic Laura Marks.

**Keywords:** migration, cinema, Benguigui, France, aesthetics

Yamina Benguigui is a French film director of Algerian origin. She received acclaim for her documentaries *Femmes d'Islam* (1994) and *Mémoires d'Immigrés* (1997), which made her a leading advocate for immigrants' and Muslim women's rights in France. Her film *Inch'Allah Dimanche* signals a break from earlier films on North African immigration to France, since it centers on women's migrant experience. Zouina is an Algerian woman in the 1970s, who embarks on a journey to France in order to reunite with her husband Ahmed, an Algerian guest worker. Instead of experiencing the joy of family reunification, her husband forbids her from leaving the house and her mother-in-law pressures her to conform to a traditional lifestyle. Aicha, who rules the house like a dictator, often scolds Zouina, commands her to be quiet, and subjects her to constant surveillance. Zouina's only escapes from this reality occur on Sundays when she is able to venture to the outside world with her children. In 1974, France instituted the Family Reunification Act that allowed Maghrebian male guest workers to bring their families to France, thus granting them permanent residency status.. This decree was suspended in 1977, but the conseil d'état re-instated it in 1978.<sup>1</sup> The Reunification Act is often considered a generous policy but in fact it was a way to compensate for the permanent closure of labor immigration,

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Cohen, « Regroupement familial : l'exception algérienne (1962-1976) » cairn.info, Plein droit, 2012

which also took effect in the same year due to the economic decline spurred by the global oil crisis.

The film can be read using new developments of film theories of transnational cinema. In his essay "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema" American critic Andrew Higson argues that any account of national cinema must take into consideration the increasingly transnational dimensions of cinematic production. The communities imagined by cinematic means tend to be transnational rather than national. American critic Hamid Naficy argues that transnational cinema enables us to interpret films as authorial films and "as sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and translational struggles over meanings and identities" (qt in Higson, 2002, 121).

The emergence of French-Algerian women's cinema in the last three decades needs to be situated within this theoretical framework. Made by Algerian women directors in France, this kind of cinema is part of a wider movement that is "driven by its sensitivity to the production and consumption of films in conditions of transnationality, liminality, multiculturalism, multifocality, syncretism" (Naficy, 1996, 121). American critic Laura Marks has characterized such kind of cinema as an intercultural cinema that draws upon different experimental techniques to represent the experience of people living between different cultures in a state of exile and displacement (Marks 2000, 1).

In addition to highlighting the intercultural aspects of Benguigui's film, this article analyzes the protagonist's experience with immigration and exile using theories of haptic aesthetics ("cinema of the senses"). The article foregrounds the materiality of the film medium through the evocation of images of the body as well as techniques that foreground the visual and sound manifestations of the experience of immigration. The film offers illustrations of how haptic forms and techniques offer the potential of rethinking the immigration experience of the protagonist. Haptic aesthetics emphasize extreme close-ups, variations in sound and over-exposure. Such kind of cinema often uses close-ups, so that the spectator has to put his/her senses at work to experience what is happening in the film.

Haptic aesthetics is based on Gilles Deleuze and Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) on haptic media. Laura Marks, who has based her theory on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, has pointed out that film addresses the senses of the viewer since its visual codes cannot constitute smell, touch, and taste. She further argues that intercultural films evoke memories "through an appeal to nonvisual knowledge, embodied knowledge and experiences of the senses" (Marks, 2000, 2). Marks also draws on Deleuze and Guattari's theories of "smooth space" and "striated space." While striated space refers solely to an optical mode that is based on vision, smooth space is haptic, intimate and tactile. It is thus a space that allows transformation (Marks, 2000, xiv). Marks argues that works by media artists from non-European cultures are haptic, thus undermining the masculinist and Eurocentric aspect of film theory in its narrow concern with vision and perspective (Marks, 2002, 2-3). While novelists and poets can depict sensations and feelings in vivid detail, film as a form of visual media can only express sensations, thoughts and feelings through the sensory experience of sound and the body. According to Anahid Kassabian, "Haptics then are closely related to erotics, to the

dissolution of boundaries, to the erosion of self-other distinction” (Kassabian, 2013, xvii). He adds that for Marks, haptics signals “a shift from positioning and identification toward a more dynamic relationship between us and the things with which we interact” (xvii).

The question is: What are the meanings that are associated with Zouina’s haptic experiences in different situations and locations? *Inch’Allah dimanche* focuses on the protagonist’s body as the locus of her identity and shows how the positioning of her body changes in accordance with her immigration experience. The film also uses sound and music in a way that has a multi-sensory appeal but is at times overwhelming to the senses. In different scenes, the film uses music as a non-verbal means to shed light on Zouina’s moods and feelings. The opening shot of the film shows Zouina accompanied by her children and mother-in-law as she is about to embark on her journey to France to reunite with Ahmed. The tearful screams and hugs she shares with her grieving mother are symbolic of the pain of separation. In this scene the filmmaker uses close-ups in order to highlight the messages being shared between mother and daughter through touch and feelings. The screams of Zouina’s mother in this scene are powerful and intense. The maternal shrieks help the audience to get the full spectrum of raw emotions that would not have been conveyed solely through the visual. In his essay “Audition: Making Sense of/in the Cinema,” Craig Sinclair argues that the Eurocentric aspect of film criticism inscribes “a visual bias.” For film critics such as Mary Ann Doane “to see means to understand in the cinema, reinforcing the belief that audience members are principally viewers (not listeners)” (Sinclair, 2002, 17). Sinclair argues that the acoustic is more important than the visual in film: “Sound is important precisely because it gives the cinema volume in every sense, providing the sensations of depth and perspective that a flat screen cannot convey. An audience can grasp the meanings of visuals more quickly than the meanings of sounds because visuals cannot be as complex. They lack the multidimensionality of the acoustic realm” (17). In *Inch’Allah Dimanche*, scenes that depict a French woman popping the ball, Ahmed beating Zouina, or Zouina banging at the door of the Bouira family, all shape the viewer’s experience of the film primarily through sound.

Thus sound, which connects the viewer to the screen on a personal level, is a more sophisticated way of setting a scene of a film than visual codes: “The soundscapes, not the landscape, are the more important half of the audiovisual couple. A picture may paint a thousand words, but when it is ‘accompanied’ by sound, it is the sound that tells the experiencer how to paint them” (27). *Inch’Allah Dimanche* illustrates what Sinclair characterizes as “the gendered space of sound,” highlighted by the dominance of women’s screams in the movie. The filmmaker uses the departure scene, which is dominated by women’s voices, to elicit the female scream from her grieving mother, as well as Zouina’s own screaming. Occasional comments by the women surrounding her, asking the mother to “let her go” are also audible throughout the departure scene. The mother’s audible lamentations stir up in the audience feelings of grief and dread. As the family boards the ship, Zouina’s mother continues to cry loudly. In her reading of the film, Maryse Fauvel has commented on the scene of the harbor “where enormous bars

separate Zouina from her mother, as though the mother were a prisoner and condemned to a life's term" (Fauvel, 2004, 149).

The static shot of Zouina's and her mother's screams are interrupted by the mother-in-law's insults, asking her to move and calling her "hmara" (donkey). Zouina is being pulled into two directions, as her mother-in-law screams at her from inside the boat, threatening to leave with the children. When the off-screen disembodied voice of the customs agent asks about the identity of Zouina and her children, the mother-in-law answers that "they are my son's children" and "she is my son's wife," rendering Zouina invisible. In her reading of the film, Angelica Fenner does a Freudian analysis of Zouina's mother's screams as "the visual source of the already intimately familiar voice" for the infant child "in tandem with the development of its tactile and olfactory senses." She argues that the mother's distant screams signal "not only physical separation but also a relativized proximity, for — as in the cinema — vision is predicated on a certain ideal distance from the object...the ability to see the source of sound is a function of separation and distance, hearing but not seeing" (Fenner, 2007, 97). According to Fenner, this disembodied maternal voice is deliberately used in the film to undermine the ethnographic gaze of French representations of North African immigrants in French cinema, which tend to favor the French male's point of view and repress the mother's voice. Fenner argues that the film instead uses the mother's voice "to articulate the gendered dynamics of loss and longing that attend migration" (Fenner, 2007, 98). When Zouina returns back to her mother, an officer escorts her away onto the boat. As she gets on board, Aïcha angrily shouts, "Shame on you. Don't you fear God?," an early sign of the emotional abuse she will inflict upon her throughout the film. In this scene, the bright lighting directs the viewer's attention to Zouina's traumatic experience. The departure scene takes place in the late afternoon. Still, the lighting is significantly bright. This type of lighting is typically used in dream-like sequences, and might symbolize the out-of-body experience Zouina feels, as she is separating from her mother. As she enters the darkness of the boat, leaving behind the bright light of the harbor, her eyes are slowly adjusting to a new lighting level, signifying the new reality she is about to enter.

The departure scene is followed by an interlude featuring Algerian music. It becomes apparent that this kind of music represents the internalized sad mood of Zouina. Music is used as a substitute for her voice-over, as if suggesting that her feelings and sensations upon separation from her mother, cannot be described in words. The film uses sound to create an engaged experience for the viewer. Craig Sinclair explains how sound is often used as a supplementary element to deepen the understanding of film. Sound can expand the viewers' imagination and their engagement with the film.

In a later scene, and while in France, Zouina is shown to be experiencing some kind of nervous breakdown, while reminiscing about her mother. In the same scene, the film plays Algerian music. As she begins to dance, wrapping her floral scarf around her body, there is a flashback of the harbor scene where her mother was screaming. Zouina's dancing quickens the tempo of the music and her dancing offers a tactile translation of the rhythms: "I have a secret that only I know/I am hiding a sadness an eternal love/ an eternal love an eternal love/My eye is crying my heart is broken/To my country I am

going back to see my friends and family.” By making Zouina’s floral scarf a visible signifier in this dance scene, and a continuous presence throughout the film, the filmmaker creates a haptic-visual connection between Zouina’s sensations and the floral scarf. The words and the music reflect the sensations that constitute Zouina’s haptic act through her dancing. The art of dancing, intimate and tactile, forces the audience to focus on Zouina’s pain and experience with her body and manipulates the viewer to feel the same pain. Zouina’s haptic dance brings her back to the same point of her departure, to the same scene of her mother’s screams, thus allowing her to cope.

Throughout the film, the protagonist’s gendered body operates in different environments, and her haptic encounters in each position impart powerful meanings about her identifications. The film shows how Zouina is physically affected by the experience of immigration. Faced with a nervous husband who is apprehensive about her arrival, a controlling mother-in-law who watches her every move, as well as Mrs. Donze, a hostile French neighbor whose constant gazing renders her as an object of disgust and fear, Zouina becomes conscious of her own body and its relationship with others. Despite the hostility she faces from her husband, mother-in-law and the French neighbor, Zouina is able to scheme, or fight her way out of any unpleasant situation. One way Zouina wins over her adversaries and regains agency is through her haptic qualities. When provoked by her French neighbor who destroys her children’s ball, Zouina is ready to fight her neighbor with considerable vigor. There is a quick transition from the children’s joyful playing to the sound of the bright colored ball that they kick into the flower bed and then absolute fear and chaos as they watch the neighbor puncturing the ball. Zouina responds by angrily charging through Mrs. Donze’s garden and attacking her. As Zouina strikes, she throws off her own dress and scarf, exposing her hair and her shoulders, ready for the fight and pouncing on the neighbor. Hence her understanding of the need to position her body in a way that appears physically dominant, thus claiming her space in French society. The dominant and fit body of Zouina is contrasted with the arched body of her neighbor thus affirming her physical superiority over her adversary. Zouina is also presented as a younger and more vital heroine. Her physical assault of her neighbor is viewed by her husband as a rejection of his attempt at domestication, and a threat against the conventional gender norms and representational politics that have characterized their patriarchal relationship. When Ahmed and the police arrive at their house, the only complaint Aïcha has is that Zouina has lifted her skirt up in front of all of their neighbors. The setting is packed with different layers of chaotic sounds. The filmmaker creates such layers of screams and voices from the simple act of Zouina’s children’s kicking the ball, which led to a whole chain of reaction and layers of voices: sounds of the broken ceramic chicken head, voices of angry neighbors, screams of an angry mother, voices of the police and of an angry mother-in-law and husband, who is embarrassed by Zouina’s transgressions. The different screams and sounds enhance the spacial and atmospheric sensations of this scene.

The next scene, in which Ahmed subjects Zouina to physical abuse, establishes the film as a medium of the senses. In a shaking camera sequence, the viewer has to rely on the sounds of the beating to fully comprehend the violence happening off screen. The

shakiness and shifting of the camera mimics Ahmad's swinging Zouina's body and beating her. Benguigui's reasoning for the shaky camera is to direct the audience's attention to the muted sound of the violence, and to Zouina's cries. By keeping the violence off screen, the audience imagines this scene solely based on sounds. Zouina's screams and haptic scars, as a result of the abuse, not only highlight a sense of physical loss but also show how the experience of immigration is imprinted on her body. Zouina is punished for exercising control over her own body and for defending herself and her children from the hostile neighbor. Ahmed's sexism shows that he is far removed from the ever-evolving nature of gender politics in France. The film roots him in the distant traditional past rather than the modernizing present. He remains unchanged at a time when French feminism has great influence on a young generation of French men and women. This is represented in the film by the character of Nichole Briat, a young neighbor who wants to teach Zouina about women's emancipation and feminist movements by lending her books about feminism. In the same scene when Zouina complains that her husband Ahmed might take a second wife, Nicole teaches her how to use make-up and invites her to join women's groups. Nicole also makes a vague reference to Simone de Beauvoir's book *the second sex* when she states: "I have to bring you the book of that woman. What is it called? The word sex is in the title. This woman says we have to manage our sexuality. Your body belongs to you." Nicole brings Zouina several lipsticks, facial powder, as well as a perfume, and asks her to take control of her own body. Critics have, however, criticized Nicole's superficial understanding of Zouina's cultural context. She seems surprised at Zouina's mention of polygamy, simply exclaiming "like Africans?" thus demonstrating her ignorance of the multiplicity of African women's contexts and putting them in one basket. Critic Maryse Fauvel argues that Nicole does not seem to understand French feminism either, since she "makes a brief allusion to Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe/The Second Sex* from which she has only retained the word 'sex' and the phrase 'my body belongs to me,' thus reducing Beauvoir's text to a call for sexual freedom" (151). Anna Kobylski also alleges that such feminism is a version of French imperialism:

Benguigui's specific artistic choices in the portrayal of Arab and French culture in the film reflects the cultural imperialism of the French Republic and its attitude towards immigrants.... In forcing 'franco-conformity'...upon women, a devaluation of the non-franco aspect of identity occurs, which is a form of oppression. Franco-conformity takes the form of oppression in the denial of the freedom of expression of identity (Kobylski, 2014, 162)

By invoking French feminism within the context of Muslim migration to France, the film foreshadows current debates surrounding Muslim women such as the headscarf debate. It also highlights the current tensions as well as alliances between Muslim feminists and mainstream French feminists. Regardless of Nicole's intentions, Zouina seems to be more concerned about asserting her autonomy and less interested in the ideological version of French feminism. Her use of the make-up that Nicole offers her acts as a visual and haptic sign of her femininity. When her mother-in-law finds out about the make-up, Zouina is

forced to throw it away. Nevertheless, her rediscovered sensuality serves as a tipping point in the film.

The filmmaker also uses the radio as a haptic medium in the film. Zouina finds escape in the medium of the radio, as she follows the Minnie Gregoire Show where women call in with questions about sexuality, relationships and romance. Zouina's listening to the radio is interrupted by her mother-in-law's surveillance, thus turning Zouina's emotional joy into sadness. Aicha accuses her daughter-in-law of being a bad housewife who does not know how to peel vegetables and a bad mother who lets her kids draw instead of helping them with homework. In one scene Aicha tells her grandchildren an Algerian folktale of an ogress who devours children. Benguigui's inclusion of the folktale is intentional since Aicha is herself an ogress with blood on her own hands. Her hands decorated with henna designs are a haptic signifier, since they might signal her guilt of Zouina's suffering. The black dye is symbolic of the dirt she is throwing at Zouina, accusing her of being loose and immoral. It is also symbolic of how she muddies and spoils anything she touches. When Aicha tells her French neighbor Madame Manant about her harsh youth as a laborer for the French, the henna takes on another meaning. Due to hard labor, she might have used henna as a moisturizer for her rough hands. Aicha raises both hands to the camera while motioning during her speech. She also touches her palms three times as she recounts being beaten by the French with a cane. The viewer is thus able to imagine both the sound and the feeling of pain inflicted by the cane on Aicha's flesh.

Aicha's cruelty towards Zouina makes it difficult for the audience to empathize with her, even when she reveals that she did suffer at the hands of the French colonizer. The initial impression the viewer has of her might have changed somewhat after finding out she has been subjected to hard labor and beatings, but even so, her suffering is more of a lesson in history than the prompt for an emotional response. Her misfortune becomes not tragic but a simple circularity of history: she was oppressed by the colonizer and she is now oppressing Zouina. Zouina is now in the same situation in which the colonizer had placed her mother-in-law: fearful, controlled and abused. Her listening to the radio, however, constitutes a kind of mobility even though it does not involve a moving body. Describing her listening to the radio as a sensorial experience makes it possible to understand her act of listening along a haptic dimension.

In a later scene, Zouina is shown wandering through a field with her children. She is hoping that she will find someone who will direct her to Malika Bouira's house, an Algerian woman with whom she wants to spend the Eid holiday. In this scene, the viewer listens to the sound of plants as Zouina wanders through the field. The next scene cuts to Zouina smelling a plant. As she smiles, a joyful song begins to play. Laura Marks suggests ways that "cinema can draw on the power of smell while preserving its particularity. Smell is already a movie, in the sense that it is a perception that generates a mental narrative for the perceiver...Smell is a powerful thread of connection to histories...when we smell we are able to re-create this sense of past in our own bodies" (Marks, 2002, 114). Through the sounds and visuals of this scene, the film suggests that Zouina is now free for the first time since she moved to France. Smelling the plant and the uplifting music

signify hope for Zouina and her future in France. In different subsequent scenes, the sensuality of Zouina imparts strong meanings as she gains agency through her haptic experiences and connections (as well as differentiation) with other French female characters who share her youth and vitality. In addition to Nicole, she now aligns herself with Mrs. Manant, whom she meets when, by chance, she ends up at a cemetery after getting lost in the open field with her children. Mrs. Manant is the widow of a French soldier who was killed during the Algerian anti-colonial war eleven years earlier. She explains that her husband's body was never found and thus remained "somewhere over there in Algeria - in the mountains of Kabylia." It is ironic that Zouina is rejected by her fellow Algerians like her mother-in-law but embraced by women like Mrs. Manant who have connections to the colonial past. Zouina's self-identifications as a Muslim immigrant in France are however complicated. While she longs for Algeria, her strongest female accomplices as well as enemies prove their compatibility or lack of compatibility with her through the degree of their youth, vitality and openness.

Thanks to Mrs. Manant, Zouina is now able to find Malika, an Algerian woman she spent months looking for so that she could spend the Eid holiday with her. Malika first welcomes Zouina to her house but later finds out that Zouina came to her house without the knowledge of her husband. She is also shocked by Zouina's hints at the love stories she listens to in French radio. When Malika forces Zouina out of her house, the latter's cries become symbolic again of the traumas of immigration. Zouina turns around and begins to knock loudly on the door, screaming at her fellow Algerian to let her stay. During this scene, there is no music other than the sounds Zouina is making through her screams and her banging. The door separating Zouina and Malika is also symbolic of the separation Zouina is experiencing from her mother and Algeria. As a protest against her friend's rejection out of adherence to brutal patriarchal rules, Zouina breaks a window with her fist, shattering its glass, thus breaking boundaries and standing up to patriarchy. Zouina's body injury enhances our visualization of the female body that is vulnerable to patriarchal rules, and that is now bleeding in the name of liberation. The film forces us to think not only about Zouina's wound but also about its materiality and haptic visuality (Marks 2000). As the scene ends, somber music begins to play, drowning the viewer in Zouina's pain and sadness. Zouina takes off her headscarf to wrap her bleeding wound, thus exposing herself to the public gaze. While the incidence might have resulted in both bodily as well as psychological harm, it instead seems to have brought Zouina a sense of inner peace. She appears calm as she rides the bus to her home, thus prioritizing mobility over patriarchal hierarchy.

The final scene highlights mobility as an aesthetic and narrative element in contrast to the static setting of Malika's domestic space. The camera fluidly follows Zouina on her bus trip. Viewed in the context of the film's mobility/hierarchy dichotomy, the camera foreshadows Zouina's mobility as a narrative force. At the final stop, Zouina exchanges gazes with the French driver, as he pulls the bus into a stop, as if thanking him for allowing her such mobility. The exchange of gazes is stylistically underlined, signaling an urge to move beyond not only the patriarchal rules that constrain her, but also spacial and temporal ones. As Zouina steps out of the bus, her husband, her mother-in-law, who



is standing with the sheep to be sacrificed during the Eid holiday, as well as her French neighbors are all waiting for her. Aicha chastises Zouina for being late and calls her "idiot," but Ahmed intervenes and asks his mother to leave his wife alone, and the neighbors force Aicha and the sheep inside the house. The film ends with a scene in which Zouina demands more freedom from her husband, stating her intention to take the children to school in the future and asserting her agency. Ahmed yields to her demands and asks his mother to give up her traditional authority. In her comments about the ending of the film, Mary McCullough argues that "the irony of this scene reminds us of the beginning of the film when the mother-in-law pushes Zouina onto the boat, calling her a donkey. At the end of the film it is the mother-in-law who is shoved into the house with the sheep" (McCullough, 91, 2015).

*Inch'Allah Dimanche* is a liberation narrative in which Zouina has to regain her mobility and reclaim her freedom through the touch of others in order to become an independent woman who is in control of her destiny. But for her to achieve that status, others have to make sacrifices too, especially her mother-in-law who has to give up her authority and the neighbor who has to "undergo a painful process of re-acculturation to a new French polity wherein those with the discrete identity of 'French' must accommodate new immigrants with the discrete identity of 'French-Algerian'" (Meeran, 2007, online article). The film highlights transnational and intercultural alliances and new constructions of French identity as multicultural and transnational.

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