

ROBERT LANG. *New Tunisian Cinema: Allegories of Resistance*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014. 448 pages, preface, acknowledgments, illustrations, notes, bibliography, filmography, glossary, index. Paper US\$35.00 ISBN 978-0-231-16507-5.

Robert Lang's new book, *New Tunisian Cinema: Allegories of Resistance*, starts with a rather provocative statement: "Tunisian cinema is often described as the most daring of all Arab cinemas" (ix). While this assertion might sound a bit exaggerated—considering the vibrancy of Algerian, Egyptian, and even Moroccan cinemas—the nine chapters of this book propose convincing arguments thanks to the solid contextualizing and analysis of selected acclaimed films.

Lang focuses his study on eight well-known films produced in a 20-year span from 1986 to 2006. This period, we have to remember, was dominated by the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. It is precisely in this context that these filmmakers showed their engagement by making films that were, as the subtitle of the book suggests, allegories of resistance to Ben Ali's iron fist. These directors challenged various aspects of the state and offered alternative perspectives. Their cinema became, as Lang states, a "form of pedagogy and . . . a unique site of cultural politics that tries to influence the debate about national identity" (x). The films analyzed, Lang warns, are neither comprehensive in their selection nor representative of any movement. They are simply the cinema created in an era characterized by Ben Ali's dictatorship.

The preface and the introductory chapter provide a well-grounded historical, social, and political background spanning the five decades from Habib Bourguiba's political rise in the mid-1950s to 2006. Building on this foundation, the subsequent chapters are each devoted to a film. The discussions incorporate information from critical schools. Each chapter is packed with detail, making the readings on these key films not just clear but stimulating as well.

In his analysis of Nouri Bouzid's *Man of Ashes* (1986) in chapter 2, Robert Lang explains how the director questions the entire neo-patriarchal tradition, with its devastating effects on the individual who seeks to be free of familial and societal constraints. Chapter 3 continues on the topic of neo-patriarchal dominance with the study of Férid Boughédir's *Halfaouine* (1990). Lang draws an interesting parallel between the dominance of the father at home and that of the police in the public sphere. In chapter 4, Lang reads Nouri Bouzid's *Bezness* (1992) as an allegorical representation of Tunisians in the context of a globalized world. Chapter 5 takes on Moufida

Tlatli's masterpiece, *The Silences of the Palace* (1994), which is set during the last moments of the French occupation of Tunisia and the early years of independence in the 1960s. Using Albert Memmi's theoretical work, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (first published in English in 1965), Lang explains how the domination of women in the beylical palace was not that different from the domination of Tunisians by the French colonizers. Chapter 6 presents a study of *Essaïda* (1997) by Mohamed Zran. This film, Lang argues, takes up the theme of social class found in Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace*. The author breaks down the story piece by piece to explain how the widening rift between rich and poor came about in postcolonial Tunisia. Nadia El Fani's *Bedwin Hacker* (2002) is the subject of chapter 7. This film deals with the media revolution (Internet and satellite television) and its impact on modern Tunisian society. The film is an allegory; openness to the world through technology is juxtaposed to the state's obsession with censorship. In chapter 8, Lang illustrates how Moncef Dhoub, the filmmaker of *The TV Is Coming* (2006), attempts to construct a "usable past" that best fits the needs of the time. Chapter 9 is a lucid analysis of more recent Tunisian society with pertinent examples from Nouri Bouzid's *Making Of* (2006). In the context of a post-Ben Ali Tunisia, Robert Lang walks us through the burning topics of Islam, political Islam, democracy, diversity, and identity. In sum, all the issues that have been serious concerns to Tunisians in recent years and are at the root of the Arab Spring that evicted Ben Ali.

Robert Lang skillfully shows how filmmakers of the new Tunisian cinema have attempted to reinterpret Tunisia's long history and, in their own ways, to redefine Tunisian collective consciousness. All in all, this is a great book and a must-read for all students and scholars in disciplines such as film studies, history, cultural studies, sociology, and North African studies. ✂

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2015.17](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2015.17)

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KHALED MATTAWA. *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014. xvii + 197 pages, acknowledgements, notes on translation and transliteration, references, index. Cloth US\$24.95 ISBN 978-0-8156-3361-7.

This relatively small book deals with not only one of the greatest modern Arab poets but also one of the potentially most problematic issues of his poetry, namely, the issue of contingency. From the beginning of his poetic