

*Inch'Allah Dimanche vs. Lila dit Ça*  
**Transnational Feminism Counters the Streamlining of Accented Cinema**  
by Zinaid Meeran

One of the major developments in contemporary film theory has been approaches which investigate the formal and substantive properties of cinemas of the developing world and of transnational minorities in the West. Theories of Third Cinema proliferated during the seventies and eighties, adopting the term coined by Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their 1969 article “Hacia un Tercer Cinema” (Willman, 5). By the nineties, globalization, transnational migration, and the accretion of significant bodies of work by Western filmmakers of postcolonial and post-Soviet bloc origins saw parallel theoretical developments in film studies. This new field drew extensively on the work of Third Cinema theorists, reformulating their perspectives and innovating theory specific to the particular aesthetic and thematic concerns of transnational minority filmmakers. The terms “accented filmmakers” and “accented cinema”, coined by Hamid Naficy, prove useful in describing this development in contemporary film theory (Nacify, 10).

Theories of accented cinema circumscribe the field by employing four major defining characteristics: ethnic identification of the filmmakers, production method, formal/aesthetic features and thematic concerns. However, in recent years accented cinema has attracted the attention of mainstream film distributors and occasionally producers, disrupting the independent and co-operative production methods. This has precipitated a significant mainstreaming of the defining characteristics of accented cinema. Feature films such as *Lila dit Ça* (Ziad Dhoueri, 2004) bear the superficial marks of accented cinema but display the troubling results of this streamlining: commercial production methods, conventional film form and politically regressive themes. However, the work of other accented filmmakers, such as feminist filmmaker Yamina Benguigui’s *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (2001) have, despite a shift to more conventional production values, maintained the aesthetic and thematic characteristics of accented cinema.

Accented cinema is normally produced by filmmakers who are exiles, diasporic subjects, immigrants, or the children of immigrants who have relocated from the developing world to the West.<sup>1</sup> Accented filmmakers therefore occupy a cultural space which is both multicultural and transnational. As Robert Stam shows, multiculturalism is both an expression of historical fact and a social project, the latter emphasizing multiculturalism as a discourse concerned with “the existence of mutually impacting cultures both within and beyond the single nation state” (Stam, 188). Accented cinema then, does not simply reflect the cultural hybridity of the transnational filmmaker, but actively engages with the discourses of multiculturalism and transnationalism.

As such accented cinema addresses the tension which transnational subjects experience in relation to both their original and extant cultures. The transnational subject occupies an interstitial culture and interrogates prevalent contradictions through both the form and themes of accented cinema. Naficy shows that this interrogation involves a border consciousness, opposed to binaristic identity formation (Nacify, 31). The form of

accented cinema reflects this border consciousness through a multifocal, multilingual, fragmented, asynchronous aesthetic involving multiple subjectivities (Nacify, 31). However, Nacify's identification of "ethnic" and "self-made affiliations" (Nacify, 15), involving a conciliatory vs contestatory relationship to the culture of origination as the two discrete poles of this border consciousness is itself binaristic.

The conflict can be more accurately reformulated as a search for identity within a polymorphous field of traditional, secular, religious, cultural, gender, sexual, Western, post-colonial and ethnic affiliations. This polymorphous subject formation is particularly evident in the work of those accented filmmakers who were either born in the West or immigrated there, rather than political exiles and economic refugees, whose diasporic affiliation to their country of origin tends to produce the formation of more discrete or binaristic identities. Though convincing, Nacify's theoretical approach to transnational cinema does not adequately address gender and sexuality, nor give sufficient attention to subject-formation in accented cinema which lies beyond binaristic notions of identity.

In interrogating the gender and sexual identity of the transnational subject, multicultural feminists, such as Ella Shohat, tend to address this theoretical absence. Along with other multicultural feminists such as Inderpal Grewal and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ella Shohat critiques the universalizing and homogenizing claims of second-wave Western feminism as well as the discrete, binaristic identities of Third World and black feminism. Mohanty shows that the assumption of discrete identities must be challenged as the individual subject is the product of an interpretation of personal histories (Mohanty, 86).

Multicultural feminism, flowing from this theoretical synthesis, aims to avoid the essentialism and transhistoricism of western feminist theory while recuperating the political agency which can exist within poststructuralist thought. Ella Shohat draws attention to the permeable intersectionality of the various axes of social stratification in the transnational age we exist in (Shohat, 1). This could be imagined as an ever-shifting, morphing web of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, national affiliation and religion. The subject then is a polymorphous agglomeration of affiliations in constant motion along this web. One of the major cultural consequences of transnational capital is movement - of people, ideologies, cultural artifacts and affiliations. The result is a cultural hybridity which must be approached as a perpetual and multivariate shapeshifter.

As feminist theorist Judith Butler observes, poststructuralist theory has been central to this reformulation of feminist thought. Much of poststructuralist theory has been subject to leftist critiques for being formalist and consequently standing aloof from political action. However, Butler observes that the work of critical theorists such as Homi Bhaba and Gayatri Spivak has been instrumental in reformulating poststructuralist thought, inflecting it with political purpose through a synthesis with cultural, critical and postcolonial theory (Butler, x).

The theoretical shift from universalizing notions of feminism to one informed by poststructuralism reflects the shift from a political preoccupation with revolution to

counter-hegemonic resistance (Shohat, 15). Accented feminist film, such as *Inch'Allah Dimanche* reflects this with a shift from macro-narratives concerned with reinforcing notions of minority feminist community and discrete gender identities to one concerned with ironic, self-reflexive, deconstructionist narratives engaged in multivariate resistances.

Ella Shohat's theory of polymorphous subject-formation synthesized with Naficy's theory of accented cinema proves a more effective paradigm for examining trends in transnational minority cinema. *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, although classically linear in temporal structure, and displaying high production values, exemplifies the progressive aesthetic and discursive concerns of accented cinema. *Lila dit Ça*, though displaying atemporality, an expressionistic style, epistery, voiceover narration, community politics and other aspects typical of accented cinema, constitutes a backlash against the discourses of multiculturalism, multicultural feminism and transnationalism.

Directed by feminist French-Algerian filmmaker Yamina Benguigui, *Inch'Allah Dimanche* involves the admission to France, in 1974, of the families of North African guestworkers. Youina (Fejria Djeliba) copes with her husband Ahmed (Zinedine Soualem), unexpectedly resentful of her arrival, her ferocious and abusive mother-in-law Aicha (Rabia Modedem), and a country which is willing to accept her into the domestic labor force but not into the national polity or society. Youina's only reprieve from domestic abuse and harassment is Sunday, when her husband and mother-in-law are both away from the house and she makes furtive expeditions to the outside world.

*Lila dit Ça* is the story, told in flashback, of the sexually charged flirtation between teenagers Chimo (Mohammed Khouas) and Lila (Vahina Giocante) set in a working class suburb, or banlieue, of Paris. Chimo is French North African, from a working class community who demand fealty to the ethnic group. His mother (Carmen Lebbos) and thuggish friends Mouloud (Karim Ben Haddou), Bakary (Lotfi Chakhri) and Grand Jo (Hamid Dkhissi) all disapprove of his growing relationship with Lila. Chimo's mother rails against Lila's haraam (sacrilegious) dress sense and flirtatious behavior, while the street hoods resent that Lila pursues Chimo but scorns them. Chimo's brutish friends, led by Mouloud, rape Lila in an orgy of hatred against her, womanhood, and marginalization by the white French mainstream.

Naficy shows that accented cinema generally subverts narrative structures in order to formally express cultural conflicts, dislocation and interstitial existence (Naficy, 28). The non-linear temporality of the accented film highlights the fractured cultural, physical and social space occupied by the transnational subject. *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, however, is a linear narrative, a form not typical of accented cinema. Though it is generally true that linear narratives often serve to normalize hegemonic social conventions, this film employs the linear narrative to subvert them. The spectator is forced to experience the drudgery of four weeks of Youiana's life, experiencing the linearity of the narrative as an expression of the protracted nature of her struggles. The spectator comes to anticipate the reprieve brought by each Sunday, just as Youina does. The linearity of the text, in this case, serves to underscore the thematic concern of this text, the unceasing quotidian nature of the repression of French-North African women within the family and

mainstream society. Though the linearity of *Inch'Allah Dimanche* is a divergence from the accented cinema aesthetic its temporal form does meet the objectives of accented cinema.

*Lila dit Ça*, however, employs a non-linear narrative. Chimo narrates the film in flashback, reflecting on his past relationship with Lila while he writes an autobiographical short story about the experience. Non-linear narrative as stylistic expression is quite typical of the accented cinema style. However, non-linearity does not, in this film, serve the same subversive aesthetic or cultural objectives as it does in most accented cinema. In this film, non-linearity does not widen the semiotic possibilities of the narrative, or foreground the interstitial and fractured cultural space occupied by the minority transnational subject. In *Lila dit Ça* non-linearity does not serve discursive ends but rather expresses an implicitly apolitical psychological state - nostalgia. The flashback mechanism serves to delineate the text as personal psychology, rather than as discourse on the barriers to the sexual freedom of the transnational minority subject. This displacement of social discourse into the realm of personal melodrama is typical of conventional narrative cinema, rather than accented cinema.

*Inch'Allah Dimanche* employs many of the conventions of the realist aesthetic, as opposed to a more expressionistic style. For Naficy, realism is antithetical to accented cinema. However, this is because Naficy equates realism with the invisible style of classical Hollywood cinema, a style used to belie ideological position (Naficy, 22). André Bazin, however, has shown that the realist aesthetic involves a signification process reliant on the long take, multiple overlaid actions, sounds or dialogue within the shot, deep focus, and the minimal use of montage (Bazin, 34). None of these are forms associated with the invisible style of classical Hollywood cinema. On the contrary, these are forms associated with subversive cinemas, including Third Cinema and accented cinema. Naficy then, uses the term 'realism' to describe the montage-dominated, invisible style of Hollywood cinema, rather than the semiotically open realist style.

For Bazin and others, realist formal devices highlight the ambiguous nature of reality (Bazin, 37). Realism allows multiple interpretations of an image. Realists argue that montage, particularly as it is employed in mainstream cinemas, predetermines meaning for the spectator and works against semiotic openness, a motivating principle in realism (Bazin, 37). Montage, instead, predetermines and controls signification, characteristics of hegemonic cinemas, such as Hollywood and mainstream French cinema.

*Inch'Allah Dimanche*, by employing realist forms, including long takes, deep focus, multiple actions within the frame and minimal montage, highlights reality as indeterminate, ambiguous and unstable. As such this film mobilizes realist film form to mount a challenge to both hegemonic cinemas and the ideological frameworks which support them. Long takes allow the multiple actions of Youina's domestic experience to vie for the spectator's attention. This formal device allows the spectator to choose where to focus attention, facilitating semiotic openness, but also allowing the spectator to appreciate the multi-sitedness and ambiguity of the female transnational subject's domestic space.

*Lila dit Ça*, however, exemplifies the invisible style critiqued by theorists of multicultural cinema. Signification in this text is controlled through deterministic camera angles, short takes and rapid montage. The conventional form of this film eschews semiotic openness. The film relies on the spectator's familiarity with the manipulative form of music videos, conventional melodrama and mainstream inner-city gang films to direct meaning. This type of semiotic control is not typical of transnational minority cinema, which tends to favor the ambiguity of the realist aesthetic.

Signification is also controlled through the manipulative and near-continuous score of *Lila dit Ça*.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of images and dialogue is signified upon by the evocativeness of the score. Additionally, though the film is set in a majority French-North African banlieue the score is entirely French ambient techno with none of the more stylistically innovative transnational minority music forms such as raï, or banlieue featuring. *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, however, allows ambiguous signification and semiotic openness through the minimal use of a film score.

Multivocality is inherent to the accented cinema aesthetic. Naficy shows that the use of multiple languages in critical juxtaposition highlights the interstitial space occupied by the accented subject (Naficy, 26). *Lila dit Ça* diverges from this characteristic of accented cinema through a striking reliance on standard French. There are only five instances of Arabic dialogue spoken throughout the film, not one of them being a complete sentence. This is implausible, especially in those scenes involving intergenerational communication. Furthermore, Chimo's friends are represented as petty criminals, yet speak standard French, and never the banlieue street dialect characteristic of French working class suburbs. The reliance on French elides the possibility of discursive engagement with the polymorphous identifications of the transnational minority subject. It would seem that robust engagement with the discourses of multiculturalism and transnationalism would entail the partial displacement of the hegemonic, historically colonial language by those languages marginalized within France, such as Arabic.

Language standardization also appeals to hegemonic production methods, where distributors and producers anticipate divergence from the hegemonic language as a threat to profitability. Naficy points out that contemporary French-North African or beur cinema is characterized by co-optation by the mainstream film industry (Naficy, 99). Hybridized music forms like North African raï music and banlieue and beur film have attracted mainstream finance and audiences, often blunting their critical edge (Naficy, 99).

Nevertheless, *Inch'Allah Dimanche* succeeds in maintaining an oppositional discourse. Arabic dominates the text. Arabic is recuperated as a legitimately French language, reconstructing the national culture of France as multicultural. Most significant, however, is Youina's near-silence.

The discursive implications of this silence are best investigated through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that the subaltern is rendered speechless through the subject-constitution of the indigenous elite and the object-formation of the colonial or

neo-colonial power (Spivak, 272). Youina is reduced to subaltern status as her identification is constrained on the one hand by the elite of her own community, as represented by her mother-in-law and husband, and by the former colonial power - mainstream France. Following Spivak, those who hold power within French-Algerian society claim legitimacy in the constitution of Youina's subjectivity. Youina's husband and mother-in-law claim the right to speak for her. On the other hand, mainstream French society engage in object-formation; they claim the right to speak about Youina. Hegemonic French and French-North African patriarchy legitimize each other in the silencing of the French-Algerian woman. Between this object-formation and subject-constitution the voice of the woman disappears, not into non-existence, but rather into a violent shuttling between subject and object status (Spivak, 272).

*Inch'Allah Dimanche* in emphasizing this silencing of the transnational minority woman, mounts a challenge to the placatory and authoritarian discourses of both the mainstream French polity and French North African elites. As Naficy shows, the critique of power centers in both the mainstream society and the marginalized culture is central to accented cinema (Naficy, 15). The silencing of the protagonist in *Inch'Allah Dimanche* inscribes this critique into the form of the film.

For Spivak the silencing of the subaltern does not exclude the possibility of agency and the finding of a voice (Spivak, 297). *Inch'Allah Dimanche* is particularly subversive in that Youina's voice is recovered not with the assistance of other French-North African women, but among sympathetic white French women. One of these is a neighbor, a young woman working at a cosmetics factory, Mademoiselle Briat (Mathilde Seigner), who aids Youina in the expression of her sexuality through bringing her make-up. Youina is also befriended by Melle Manant (Marie-France Pisier), the widow of a French army officer decorated for his role in the Algerian War. Youina's friendship with both these women is an example of alliances of disparate groups, which Ella Shohat advocates.

Shohat shows that since all theoretical subjects are located on a polymorphous web of affiliations what lies central to political action is identification with the multivariate affiliations of others, rather than with discrete identities. The effectiveness of this approach for social transformation is in its erosion of identity as the central concept of political action (Shohat, 9). Identity, a concept both theoretically problematic and strategically fractious is replaced by the notion of affiliations and identifications. This allows alliances across disparate groups, what Shohat calls "variegated coalitions", through a politics of intercommunity representation (Shohat, 9).

The discourse of *Inch'Allah Dimanche* addresses polymorphous affiliations and the variegated coalitions which these facilitate. Briat and Manant, in their friendship with Youina, subvert the notion of discrete, irreconcilable identities. This is particularly true of Manant, whose status as middle aged, upper middle class, and the widow of a war hero decorated for resisting the Algerian independence struggle may identify her as representative of the French establishment. However Manant is constructed as a polymorphous subject who shares affiliations with Youina rather than a discrete subject who must struggle to find points of identifications with her counterpart.

Briat's relationship with Youina also foregrounds multivariate affiliation in that the white French woman regards Youina as sharing French nationality with her. Briat does not have to go through a process of acculturation into accepting Youina as legitimately French. From the outset she regards Youina and herself as sharing identifications as French, as young women, as vital and (at least potentially) as celebrating their physical appearance.

The discursive implications of Youina's affiliations with Briat and Manant, are highlighted by the contrast of these friendships with the racist antagonism of the neighbors Madame and Monsieur Donze (France Darry and Roger Dumas). The Donze's do eventually accept Youina and her family as legitimate French nationals. However, this requires them 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'.

Similarly Youina's mother-in-law Aicha and husband Ahmed represent the discrete identities of French-Algerian masculinity and French Algerian femininity. This discourse of identity politics prevents the reconstruction of a multicultural, transnational French nationality. Most striking is the film's exploration of the inability of Youina's contemporaries, other young French-Algerian women to challenge the discourse of identity. Youina attempts to befriend Malika (Amina Annabi), a young Algerian woman who rejects. Malika is disturbed that Youina has approached her without the sanction or knowledge of her husband. She rejects Youina's overtures as they are too subversive of the gender identity of French North African women of their class milieu. The text exposes the non-viability of discrete identity as both a theoretical construct and a category of political action on either end of the political spectrum. Far from being an assimilationist text, however, *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, typical of transnational minority cinema, seeks to deconstruct notions of identity and assimilation, in favor of highlighting polymorphous identifications and the reconstruction of French nationalism as multicultural and transnational.

*Lila dit Ça*, however, is regressive in that it purports to be a transnational minority text but actually reinscribes discrete identities of gender, race and nationalism. Chimo and Lila represent rigid binaries where racial, gendered and national identities are immutable. In this discourse intercommunity alliances can only be negotiated through the preservation of identity. The text excludes the possibility of polymorphous affiliations and identifications. Chimo and Lila are constructed as avatars of French-North African masculinity and white French femininity; rather than as representatives of polymorphous fields of identification which have been inaccurately aggregated into discrete identities by the discourse of identity politics. Only once do we hear Lila's surname, which is Polish; and only once is there an allusion to her transnational affiliation, when it is mentioned that she has returned to Poland with her aunt for the summer. The text upholds a discourse which negotiates the legitimacy of transnational minorities within French society exclusively through the utilization of discrete identities. This discourse runs counter to the progressive potential of transnational minority cinema as it does not

deconstruct and challenge categories of nationalism, gender and race. Instead it upholds them and attempts to negotiate for power within the confines of these identities.

This regressive discourse is also evident in the construction of the heterosexual male gaze in *Lila dit Ça*. Laura Mulvey has shown that mainstream cinema constructs a male gaze through which the spectator may voyeuristically possess the female subjects (Mulvey, 63). The first scene portrays Chimo writing while his voiceover narration alludes to a lost love, Lila. The scene cuts to an extreme close-up of Lila, a young blonde woman, staring directly into the lens. Lila utters the words "Voudriez-vous voir mon chat?" ("Do you want to look at my pussy") directly into the camera. Considering that the shot of Lila has been constructed as Chimo's memory and his point of view it is clear that she is addressing him. However, extra-diegetically, Lila also directly addresses the spectator, transposing Chimo's subjectivity with that of the spectator. From the outset the spectator is constructed as heterosexual and male with Lila sexualized for a particularly fetishized gaze. The text emphasizes Lila's blonde, blue-eyed features, both formally and through the dialogue and voiceover narration. Lila shifts from being a character to a symbol of sexualized racial difference, in comparison to Chimo.

The collapse of Chimo's subjectivity with that of the spectator is reiterated throughout the text, with Chimo's point-of-view of Lila often followed by her direct address of the camera, and hence the spectator. The most striking incidence of this is one in which she invites Chimo to watch as she swings on a playground swing, sans underwear, flashing him and by implication the spectator.

The regressive quality of this gender representation is located not so much in the content but in the form, which constructs Lila's exhibitionist sexuality as existing to satisfy an explicitly heterosexual male gaze. Lila only addresses the camera directly to make sexual overtures to Chimo. When they argue or when Lila is in any mood other than sexual provocation, Chimo's point-of-view of her is followed by shots of her addressing him slightly to screen left or right, the traditional positioning of the shot-reverse-shot form. Here she does not address the camera directly. This serves to preserve the complete collapse of Chimo and spectator for those scenes where the mood is of sexual titillation. The spectator is kept at a distance from Lila during moments of intimacy or conflict, but manipulated into extreme proximity during moments of sexual titillation maintaining the relationship of Lila to spectator as detached and purely sexual. The aesthetic constructed is pornographic rather than erotic, an aesthetic increasingly prevalent in mainstream films, music videos, commercials and television programs.

Contemporary film theory has been enriched by theories of accented cinema, which investigate the cinemas of transnational minority subjects in the West. These cinemas are concerned with discourses of multiculturalism and transnationalism and tend to subvert mainstream film form as well as the thematic concerns of hegemonic cinemas. The interstitial cultural space of the transnational minority subject is represented and constructed through an aesthetic which is often self-reflexive, temporally and spatially fractured, multivocal, multilingual and semiotically open or ambivalent. This aesthetic is the formal expression of a discourse which, in its most subversive configuration,



challenges discrete identities of race, gender, nationalism, ethnicity and culture. Multicultural feminists have theorized the discursive and political viability of polymorphous, multivariate identifications over rigid or binaristic identities. This theoretical development is valuable in the enrichment of theories on transnational minority cinema. A synthesis of multicultural feminism's discursive position with established theories on accented cinema is valuable in investigating regressive trends in accented cinema. The recent intervention of mainstream film distributors and financiers into transnational minority cinemas has seen instances of co-optation of this subversive cultural form. This threatens the potential of transnational minority cinema to subvert mainstream film form and identity politics and its ability to open up engagement with multicultural and transnational discourses.

1. Hamid Naficy identifies two major origins of accented filmmakers: the first wave was the result of decolonization, wars of national liberation, and the USSR invasion of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia and arrived in the late fifties to mid seventies; the second followed from the late seventies and continued through the nineties, the result of globalization, Islamic militancy, the fragmentation of states and changes in Western immigration policy. *Accented Cinema* 10.

2. Composed by world-renowned musician and composer Nitin Sawhney.

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