

# Visions of Struggle in Women's Filmmaking in the Mediterranean

EDITED BY FLAVIA LAVIOSA

FOREWORD BY LAURA MULVEY



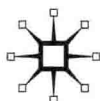
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*Edited by  
Flavia Laviosa*

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Laura Mulvey*



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*Visions of Struggle in Women's Filmmaking in the Mediterranean*

edited by Flavia Laviosa; Foreword by Laura Mulvey

*For my parents  
Volumnia and Giuseppe*

## *Series Editor's Foreword*

The *New York Times* (August 23, 2009) just declared “the oppression of women worldwide” to be the “human rights cause of our time,” claiming that women’s liberation would “solve many of the world’s problems!” Some years ago, then U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Anan announced that the status of women was the key indicator of the “development” of a nation. These pronouncements supposedly recognize the global crises in women’s lives, but they also reflect a history of women’s struggles and feminist movements around the globe. The Comparative Feminist Studies (CFS) series is designed to foreground writing, organizing, and reflection on feminist trajectories across the historical and cultural borders of nation-states. It takes up fundamental analytic and political issues involved in the cross-cultural production of knowledge about women and feminism, examining the politics of scholarship and knowledge in relation to feminist organizing and social justice movements. Drawing on feminist thinking in a number of fields, the CFS series targets innovative, comparative feminist scholarship, pedagogical and curricular strategies, and community organizing and political education. It explores a comparative feminist praxis that addresses some of the most urgent questions facing progressive critical thinkers and activists today. *Visions of Struggle in Women’s Filmmaking in the Mediterranean* is an excellent example of such comparative feminist praxis. It is located at the intersection of feminist film and visual studies, and struggles for human rights and social justice in countries of the southern European Union, south-western Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East—a post-cold war economic and political landscape of the Mediterranean. *Visions of Struggle in Women’s Filmmaking in the Mediterranean* is a unique collection in geopolitical and comparative terms.

Over the past many decades, feminists across the globe have had varying degrees of success at addressing fundamental issues of oppression and liberation. In our search for gender justice in the early twenty-first century, however, we inherit a number of the challenges our mothers and grandmothers faced. But there are also new challenges to face as we attempt to make sense of a world indelibly marked by the failure of postcolonial (and advanced) capitalist and communist nation-states to provide for the social, economic, spiritual, and psychic

needs of the majority of the world's population. In the year 2009, globalization has come to represent the interests of corporations and the free market rather than self-determination and freedom from political, cultural, and economic domination for all the world's peoples. The project of the U.S. Empire building, alongside the dominance of corporate capitalism, kills, disenfranchises, and impoverishes women everywhere. Militarization, environmental degradation, heterosexist state practices, religious fundamentalisms, sustained migrations of peoples across the borders of nations and geopolitical regions, environmental crises, and the exploitation of women's labor by capital all pose profound challenges for feminists at this time. Recovering and remembering insurgent histories and seeking new understandings of political subjectivities and citizenship have never been so important at a time marked by social amnesia, global consumer culture, and the world-wide mobilization of fascist notions of "national security." The year 2009 also heralds changes in the political landscapes of many nations, with Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States and numerous female heads of state around the world, including Ellen Johnson of Liberia, Michelle Bachelet Jeria of Chile, Mary McAleese of Ireland, Sheikh Hasina Wajed of Bangladesh, and Angela Merkel of Germany. However, whether these political shifts in governance at the top actually lead to deep and transformative changes in the economic, social, and cultural marginalization faced by communities around the globe and whether the contours of gendered and racialized citizenship change remain to be seen.

These are some of the very challenges the CFS series is designed to address. The series takes as its fundamental premise the need for feminist engagement with global as well as local ideological, historical, economic, and political processes, and the urgency of transnational dialogue in building an ethical culture capable of withstanding and transforming the commodified and exploitative practices of global governance structures, culture, and economics. Individual volumes in the CFS series provide systemic and challenging interventions into the (still) largely Euro-Western feminist studies knowledge base, while simultaneously highlighting the work that can and needs to be done to envision and enact cross-cultural, multiracial, feminist solidarity.

*Visions of Struggle in Women's Filmmaking in the Mediterranean* extends, complicates, and pushes the range of scholarship in the CFS series to another level. The volume focuses on an examination of films by women filmmakers in the particular geographical areas that constitute the Mediterranean, creating a dialogue between these cultures and nations about fundamental issues of women's human rights.



Drawing on a range of feminist critiques of violence, and the consequences of masculinist cultures and practices in the lives of women, the book maps a cartography of “the hybrid expressions of modernity” (Introduction, 3) manifested in women’s lives. In addition, the films analyzed foreground the political militancy that accompanies struggles for women’s liberation, and highlight the significance of a “collective space” as Laura Mulvey suggests in her foreword. Individual chapters examine films by women filmmakers from Israel, Turkey, Jordan, Palestine, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Syria, The Balkans, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

*Visions of Struggle in Women’s Filmmaking in the Mediterranean* showcases the kind of scholarship that can create the ground for cross-racial /cross-national dialogue among and between feminist scholars and activists in regional as well as global contexts. The book will be of interest to a wide range of feminist scholars, activists, and cultural critics. It embodies the comparative praxis and vision of transnational knowledge production that is a hallmark of the CFS series.

CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY

## *Foreword*

This fascinating collection of chapters analyzes films made by women brought together by their geographical location: the Mediterranean. Even at first glance, this point of departure arouses curiosity as to how the widely different social and historical nations and communities grouped around the sea might or might not be using film to trace themes that connect the arbitrariness of geography with wider questions confronting women in the early twenty-first century. On closer examination, however, the unifying geographical space provides more than an actual topography, a first organizing principle; space widens out of the literal, and resonates across multiple layers of reference from the social to the metaphoric, from the lived and the everyday to the screen space of the cinema. The chapters in this work, taken together, draw from the films discussed as a “lesson” in the poetics of space and its particular importance for women both politically and in the imagination. The chapters not only are around a central sea but also set in motion a journey that has a historical dimension attached to it: in a central and recurring figure, the concept of collective space returns, whether that of a nonurban community of women or through the public space of modernity. However, the journeys that crisscross the geographical space of the Mediterranean, those of particular directors, those of the chapters’ ‘authors who may or may not belong to the nation whose cinema they analyze, and those of the fictional or documentary protagonists, all draw attention to a spatial flexibility, a plurality of thought and the potential offered by cultural exchange. On the one hand, these journeys evoke the antiquity of the Mediterranean, always known as a sea that enabled exchanges of populations, ideas, trade, cultures, and so on. On the other hand, the book is itself a record of the journeys it traces and thus makes its own absolutely contemporary contribution to the specific phenomenon of the Mediterranean’s historical geography. As an implicit direction, a layer, as it were, of aspiration hovering within the book’s topographical complexities is the conceptual space of “nomadism,” one of the oldest forms of human economic and social organization and one that has recently emerged as a figure for a decentralized space for communication and imagination, located in new forms of media and suggesting new possibilities of liberation and the reconfiguration of human relations.

It is not, unfortunately, possible within this foreword to draw out the richness of the topics and themes covered by the films included here or, indeed, the value of the individual chapters themselves. I would, however, like to make a few comments on some of the ways in which space recurs across the book and in some of the films discussed. Over and over again, the “home” emerges to epitomize the way in which a highly evocative space may simultaneously be literal and conceptual, real and lived while also deeply invested with ideology, myth, and politics. The collection begins with Yosefa Loshitzky’s trenchant critique of two Israeli films (by Yulie Cohen-Gerstel), the only ones in the book that reproduce the ideology of the “home” to reinforce an aggressive myth of “homeland.” Her poignant and perceptive analysis establishes, at the very beginning, the power of spatial imagery and its political and psychoanalytic implications. Approaching “the home” from a very different perspective, Florence Martin, discussing films made in the Maghreb, introduces and adapts Freud’s idea of the “*Heimlich*” and the “*Unheimlich*” to demonstrate the way that the domestic space easily shifts away from the female sphere to house a dangerous and oppressive patriarchal power. The “familiar” is violently “defamiliarized” and many of the films discussed in the book as a whole follow their female protagonists’ escape from this claustrophobic and constraining space into a female collectivity. This shift is vividly evoked in Yamina Bachir-Chouikh’s *Rachida* in which the village women create a protective space for the young woman’s traumatized body with their brightly colored scarves. With this image, the director uses the cinema and its language to create a metaphor for an alternative public sphere away from the private and oppressive space of the home. The home is, of course, also the privileged site of “the private” in which domestic violence is inflicted on women by their husbands. Mónica Cantero analyses the way that the ideology of the home, privacy, and violence is located within a legacy of fascism in Iciar Bollain’s *Take My Eyes*, and the films of Roberta Torre show a similar syndrome flourishing in the macho world of the Mafia. Once again, in *Take My Eyes*, escape is offered by the collective solidarity of women and through the protagonist’s involvement with the public culture of her home town and its history. This critical opposition between the private and the public spheres, the woman in relation to her family in tension with her public role, both political and cultural, is the subject of both the Greek films analyzed by Maria Paradeisi. The two directors dramatize the dual spaces, materialized in *A Song Is Not Enough* by the political space of activism and prison as well as the cultural space of the theatre and professional self-realization, and suggest that analyzing these

contradictions, narratively and cinematically, might allow women to challenge and transcend their opposition. From a very different but fascinating perspective, the protagonist of Yeşim Ustaoglu's *Waiting for the Clouds* is able to overcome her isolation and recover her repressed ethnic identity through the care and solidarity of other peasant women of the Black Sea region in their strange, surreal annual migration to the mountains. The protagonist's journey takes the film out of a mythology of a unified nation-state into "transnational" or even "post-national" spaces that address the injustice involved in lost histories, but, in bringing these stories to the surface, they suggest the possibilities of more flexible, plural identities that transcend traditional boundaries.

In her contribution, the book's editor, Flavia Laviosa, discusses films that take on the difficult and painful topic of "honor killings." These ritual violations of women's, particularly young women's, human rights emerge out of a "familiar" space that includes but also extends beyond the space of the individual home to the wider networks of tribal societies and their customs and traditions. Within this spatial configuration, women function literally as property, to be exchanged between male groups, between father and husband, and the value of a woman's life is not only reduced to a basic sexual value, calculated by male relatives, but one may be bartered for the other. Women's powerlessness within this topography gives rise to the image, frequently referred to in the stories traced by these films, of "escape" and "running away." Young girls who have managed to achieve a level of education outside their traditional space are often the ones who rebel against its rules, and those threatened by its vengeance often try to find refuge within the alternative sphere of national and law. However, the chapter emphasizes the weakness of these alternatives as defenders of women's rights. In a paradoxical twist, male "ownership" of women's sexuality and its equation with the "honor" of the tribal or family group has a strange resonance with the Mediterranean cinema generated at its furthest cultural and social distance. In her discussion of the "extreme" cinema made by certain French women directors, Carrie Tarr points out that the violence that characterizes these films might be seen as a reaction against a society and economy in which the female body is relentlessly commodified and circulated as an erotic object of exchange. Allegories of female empowerment (*Baise-moi*), and satires of a sex-driven world (*Trouble Everyday* and *Anatomy of Hell*), these films depict marginal, fantasy spaces of retreat into violence and the abject. Here too, the female body circulates as a signifier of sexuality, but the films' cultural perspective is charged with the postmodern rather than the premodern, and self-referential narratives, questioning the adequacy of images to

represent a social real, inhabit a parallel world in which the female body struggles to assert itself, literally in the case of *In My Skin*, through masochistic mutilation.

In her chapter on Karin Jurschick's film *The Peacekeepers and the Women*, Marguerite Waller analyses the porous nature of boundaries in Eastern Europe across which young women are "trafficked," literally bought and sold, as the space of the black market overwhelms its legal alternatives. The topography of this "non-space," occupied by international peacekeeping forces, ultimately echoes and mimics that of the Bush-era neoliberal economics and its flourishing market in policing and security.

Rasha Salti's chapter on the Syrian filmmaker Hala Alabdallah brings the collection to a full geographical circle while also raising two specific topographical issues. More, perhaps than any of the other films discussed, Alabdallah's cinema explores a poetic interior space, using the specificity of the film medium to reclaim a lost political experience and, most of all, to capture the invisible meshes of love, friendship, and emotion. Alabdallah also, however, brings back to the book the literal space of travel as she moves between semi-exile in Paris and the varied landscapes of her homeland.

The presence of Syrian cinema evokes the transnational nature of Arabic culture itself, stretching across the geographical space of the southern rim of the Mediterranean in a network of historic crisscrossings of influence and dialogue. These cultural links between the Middle East and the Maghreb also evoke the ghostly presence of France, as a colonizing power, of course, but also as a magnet for cinephilia, a source of training and finance for both North African and Middle Eastern filmmakers. Florence Martin's chapter specifically foregrounds the complexity of these cinematic cultural convolutions through the term the "wiles" of Maghrebi women's cinema, which works across on-screen and offscreen space, between acknowledged and implicit discourses. Ultimately this chapter points toward a topographical future from a borderless past. Her mastery of the virtual, global space of the computer enables the protagonist of Nadia El Fani's *Bedwin Hacker* to penetrate the official space of the television screen with her iconic emblem of the ancient symbol of nomadic society, the camel. As Martin points out, these images "no longer portray frustrated dreams of a fantasized elsewhere but recondition familiar spaces into new ones" blurring "the line hitherto drawn between the familiar/alien space for women [to] appropriate new spaces and finally invest old spaces with new values."

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This volume is the result of a two-year collaboration with the contributors who were rigorously committed to the project, and who appreciated the frequent reviews and numerous suggestions throughout the various stages of editorial revision. It has been a rewarding experience for me to work with such a remarkable group of women scholars from diverse cultures and different countries in the Mediterranean, Europe, and the United States, and I thank all of them for their extraordinary intellectual contributions to the book.

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This book stems from an international symposium held at Wellesley College, Massachusetts on November 2–3, 2007, entitled *Visions of Struggle: Women's Filmmaking in the Mediterranean* (full program available at [www.wellesley.edu/Italian/flaviosa/symposium.html](http://www.wellesley.edu/Italian/flaviosa/symposium.html)), and

organized by me. Gathering twelve women scholars and one filmmaker from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States to engage in women's issues in the context of contemporary cinema produced by women directors in Mediterranean countries, the symposium attracted and inspired the faculty, students, journalists, and film critics who attended the two-day meeting. This event was made possible thanks to the help of a dedicated group of about forty students from my Fall 2007 courses of Italian Studies 101 and Italian Studies 201, who volunteered and contributed to its success with their talents, skills, countless hours, boundless energy, and inspiring enthusiasm. Institutional financial support for the symposium and for the invited guest speakers was generously provided by the Wellesley College Committee on Lectures and Cultural Events; the Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Kathryn Wasserman Davis (Wellesley College Graduating Class of 1928) Fund for World Cultures and Leadership, and Amy Sommer (Wellesley College Graduating Class of 1987) Treves Memorial Fund; the Departments and Programs of Italian Studies, History, Jewish Studies, Writing, Art, Political Science, German, Newhouse Center, Middle Eastern Studies, French, Religion, Media Arts and Sciences, Cinema and Media Studies, Women's Studies, Peace and Justice, Theatre and Wellesley Summer Theatre Company, Africana Studies, Spanish, Sociology; and the Italian Student Society. The symposium was also cosponsored by the Boston Palestine Film Festival. I am indebted to my colleagues and administrators at Wellesley College for their very generous support in funding the symposium, which has now led to the publication of this book.

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**Áine O'Healy** is Professor of Italian and Director of the Humanities Program at Loyola Marymount University, United States. She is the author of a monograph on Cesare Pavese (G.K. Hall, 1988) and of numerous essays in edited collections including *Feminine Feminists: Cultural Practices in Italy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), *A History of Women's Writing in Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Federico Fellini: Contemporary Perspectives* (University of Toronto Press, 2002), *The Pleasure of Writing: Critical Essays on Dacia Maraini* (Purdue University Press, 2002), *The Cinema of Italy* (Wallflower, 2004), *Queer Italia: Same Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film* (Palgrave, 2004), and *Sinergie narrative in letteratura e film nell'Italia contemporanea* (Cesati, 2007). Her articles on contemporary Italian cinema and cultural studies have appeared in *Screen*, *Cinefocus*, *Spectator*, *International Journal of the Humanities*, *Annali d'Italianistica*, *Women's Studies Review*, *Italian Culture*, *Controcorrente*, *Italian Studies*, *Italica*, *The Italianist*; *CIS*, and other journals. Additionally, she is coeditor of *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* with Katarzyna Marciniak and Anikó Imre