CHAPTER 2

The Franco-Maghrebi Movies: from the Margin to the Mainstream

To understand the evolution of Franco-Maghrebi movies from the margins of French culture to the mainstream (and a record of significant entries in the French box office), one has to look back at the cultural context of their development and the choice of genres that they made within contemporary French culture.

Similar to the evolution of literature, the Franco-Maghrebi cinema viewed its being in the 1980s as a result of the Socialist government's cultural incentives at the time. As a consequence of the demands of the young Beurs during their popular protest and social march for social equality and against racial

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1 By Franco-Maghrebi movies, I refer to all films produced by Franco-Maghrebi filmmakers (who were raised in France or who studied/launched their careers in France) and financed partially or fully by French governmental institutions or by the private sector. Their films are first released in France to a French/Francophone audience before being promoted internationally. They can (but do not necessarily) touch on a Franco-Maghrebi subject and the relationship between minority groups and the French nation. There is also another category of movies that needs to be mentioned and which I do not include in my research. They are films that focus on Franco-Maghrebi characters, but are not always produced by Franco-Maghrebi filmmakers, e.g., Le noir te (vous) va si bien (Jacques Bral, 2012), L’Italien (Olivier Baroux, 2010) or La Désintégration (Philippe Faucon, 2011). In my opinion, these constitute a body apart from the Franco-Maghrebi productions and need to be discussed separately (or by a direct comparison with Franco-Maghrebi films from the same period).

2 According to Higbee, in his recent analysis of official French box-office records over the last fifteen years, at least nine Franco-Maghrebi films attracted more than a million spectators. These movies showed the fame of either the moviemakers or the actors who played the main roles and acquired star status in France. This enormous success established these actors in mainstream French productions in their release years. Among these films, we can identify Le Raïd (Bensalah, 2001) 1,456,267 viewers (Rochdy Zem, the star); Chouchou (Allouache, 2003) 3,876,372 spectators (Gad Elmaleh, the star); Indigènes (Bouchareb, 2006) 3,069,888 entries at the box office (Debbouze, Naceri, Zem, Bouajila, stars), and Neuilly, sa mère! (La Ferrière, 2009) 2,526,475 viewers (Bensalah as writer and producer). For a complete list of these movies and their audience successes, see Will Higbee (2013), pp. 26–60.

3 The most evident form of financing for the first Franco-Maghrebi productions was the “l’avance sur recettes.” The public funding was initiated by the CNC (Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée/National Center for Cinema and Animated Image). The Ministry of Cultural Affairs fund was created in the 1960s to help emerging artists in France produce their first feature-length projects. The maximum amount a film could get from the fund was the equivalent of €450,000.
discrimination in 1983, commonly known as the Beur March (*la marche des Beurs*), François Mitterand’s government provided nonrefundable public funds for the new artists. The monetary advantage allowed aspiring filmmakers of diverse ethnic communities, especially Beurs, to produce their first films. The movies were independent experimental productions done by *amateur* filmmakers with a low budget and the help of their friends and family. Those inconveniences did not diminish the artistic productions’ importance in marking the beginning of a new cinematic alternative in France: the Beur cinema. Mostly social realist dramas, the movies were based on the life experience of the young filmmakers and their families in the French housing projects. They addressed social, political, and cultural challenges the immigrants and their descendants, as well as other people living in the outskirts of big French cities, faced in French society such as poverty, discrimination, racism, or unemployment. (Tarr 2005) The adaptation of Mehdi Charef’s novel to the cinema by the writer-filmmaker himself in 1985, *Le thé au Harem d’Archimède* (Mehdi Charef, 1985) is considered the prime reference in the field. Four other films were produced more or less at the same time without acquiring the same success as Charef’s works: *Thé à la menthe* (Abdelkrim Bahloul, 1984) and *Bâton Rouge* (Rachid Bouchareb, 1985). Charef’s story plot depicts the solidarity between young characters like Pat (a French Jew) and Madjid (a Maghrebi) through their daily struggle in the *banlieues*. They represent a “lost generation” switching between a French identity imposed by the French society and the cultural or ethnic identity acquired in their communitarian life. Other characters such as Hamou in *Thé à la menthe* and the trio Karim, Abdenour, and Mozart in *Bâton Rouge* live a humble life in the outskirts of Paris while dreaming of social and financial success that never comes. The Beur movies of the 1980s offer no hope of change in the young people’s destiny, which seems to have been forecast by the filmmakers’ experience. The characters are constructed as being “incarcerated” in the confinements of the French *banlieues*, which offered no expanding perspectives to the young generation of immigrant origin in France.

This hopelessness was revisited by the new generation of filmmakers of Maghrebi origin in the 1990s including Malik Chibane, Karim Dridri, Merzak Allouache, Mahmoud Zameri, Adellatif Kechiche, Mehdi Charef, and Rachid Bouchareb. Charef and Bouchareb reviewed their positions, however, and

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4 It must be acknowledged that there were some shorts produced before that moment, like Farida Belghoul’s *C’est madame la France que tu préfères?* (1981) and *Le Départ du père* (1983), Aïssa Djabi’s *La Vago* (1983), or the works of the militant group Mohammad Collective such as *Le Garage*, *Zone immigrée*, *La Mort de Kader*. Those first movies contributed to the visibility of the second generation in the cultural scene (Mohamed 1981, Bosséno 1983).