Melancholic Masculinity in Nouri Bouzid's
Man of Ashes

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Abstract

The first movie of the Tunisian director Nouri Bouzid, *Man of Ashes*, is often treated as an early exploration of the taboo subject of homosexuality within Maghrebi cinema.[1] This reading is one possibility to explain the quests the movie confronts us with such as the question of why the protagonist Hachemi withdraws himself from the marriage with a young and beautiful girl, or why his best friend Farfat claims to be "not a man".[2] My reading of the film, however, offers a different answer to these questions which does not ground in a possible homosexuality of the protagonists but in the very concept of masculinity in the Arabian-Muslim culture. My approach is based on the theoretical construct of Judith Butler's "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification".[3] In her theory, Butler parts from Sigmund Freud's melancholy term and modifies the concept in order to criticize the societal norms which force each member of society into a heterosexual gender identity. The formation process of gender identity she describes shows some parallels to the experiences of growing up as a boy in Tunisian culture. Both are directed by rules and prohibitions and correlate with renunciation and dismissal. Just as Butler understands the acceptance of a socially conforming gender

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1 *Cf.* Vincenzo Patané, "Homosexualität im Nahen und Mittleren Osten und in Nordafrika", in Robert Aldrich, ed., *Gleich und anders: Eine globale Geschichte der Homosexualität*, trans. Benjamin Schwarz, Hamburg, Murmann, 2007, or Robert Lang and Maher Ben Moussa, "Choosing to Be 'Not a Man': Masculine Anxiety in Nouri Bouzid's Rih essed/Man of Ashes", in Peter Lehman, ed., *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*, New York, Routledge, 2001, or see the article of Manuel Billi in this book.

2 Quotation from Nouri Bouzid, *Man of Ashes* (original version with English subtitles, Tunisia, 1986).

3 Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification", in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997. The idea to combine masculinity with Butler's theory was introduced in the master course "Filmische Inszenierungen von Queer im post-kolonialen Kino (Maghreb, Lateinamerika)" conducted by Claudia Gronemann, University of Mannheim, which I attended in autumn 2011.

identity as a process of separating all socially prohibited parts or tendencies,[4] I will suggest that the Muslim patriarchal male identity in Tunisia is formed through the forced splitting-off of one's childhood. Following this thought, the formation of the male identity occurs not in dissociation from the feminine or homosexuality, as Butler claims,[5] but from childhood. The result is a melancholic incorporation of the prohibited which leads to the conclusion that the traditional male identity in the Maghrebi culture is a "melancholic masculinity". The reason for Hachemi's and Farfat's denial of the norm is their lacking ability or willingness to split off their childhood and deny any connection to their inner child in order to meet the social requirement of taking over a normative – and thus melancholic – male identity.

The Concept of Melancholy

The concept of melancholy Judith Butler works with was established by Sigmund Freud who describes melancholy as the consequence of the loss of a beloved object which the "I" is not allowed to mourn for because social norms or rules forbid it. He identifies the first emergence of melancholy in early childhood when the child is forced to dismiss his mother as a desirable object. This loss hurts so much that it is only bearable by preserving the lost object as a melancholic identification inside the self. By doing so, no final break up occurs with this object and the self can deny the loss: "If the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally, and that internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss."[6] Following Freud, this identification is an important way to form the psyche and is necessary to establish a "character".[7]

Butler's reading of melancholy is not that positive. She connects the process of melancholic identification with the formations of gender identity. To her, gender identity is the direct result of the norms and prohibitions in heterosexual societies, such as the prohibition of homosexuality.[8] She claims that homosexuality is suppressed even before it arises and as a consequence is incorporated as a melancholic identification. The individual identifies himself with the lost possibility of same-sex love and converts homosexuality into a

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4   *Cf. ibid.*
5   *Cf. ibid.*, pp. 135, 137.
6   *Ibid.*, p. 134.
7   *Ibid.*, p. 133.
8   *Cf. ibid.*, p. 135.