

Spring 2012

# I Can Show You the World: Surveillance and Introspection in Tunisian Medinas.

Rachel Hagler  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hagler, Rachel, "I Can Show You the World: Surveillance and Introspection in Tunisian Medinas." (2012). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 1271.

[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/1271](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1271)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

## I CAN SHOW YOU THE WORLD: SURVEILLANCE AND INTROSPECTION IN TUNISIAN MEDINAS

Dear Reader:

This project was inspired by a series of encounters that I had when travelling with my significant other around Tunis, Sousse, and Kairouan. After being directed to the overlook of the tourist bureau in Kairouan as an introduction to our adventure, happening upon the (well-signed) Panoramic Café in Sousse, appropriated from a turret installed in the city's ancient fortifications, and subsequently being taken up to view the panorama atop the Berber carpet cooperative in Tunis souk, we began to see a pattern. After visiting Yasmine Hammamet, an overlook in its own right, this pattern transformed from a quirk to a tragically amusing social commentary. The following are but a few reasons that the panorama and the simulacrum provide the opportunity for Tunisians to see themselves through a foreign lens as well as the chance to explore some of the specific issues in Tunisia's post-colonial and transitional society:

1. The panorama provides a literal concretization of the figurative above-below dynamic that describes the police/government and the people, the colonial and the colonized, and in the unique case of Tunisia, the Arab (Oriental) and the Berber, while the simulacrum acts this out in archetypical terms
2. The panorama and simulacrum are nexuses of an economy of superiority, built on the ability to escape and "look down" upon the fray.
3. The panorama creates an economy in which the vendor is valuing and marketing something that he/she does not own, and in which the consumer is not consuming a good or service. Rather, the consumer pays to see but not to have, and the vendor assesses the value the gaze. This relationship between seeing and having, and the distinction that separates them and criteria that are used to value them have vast implications in Tunisia's changing religio-political environment, where the values of seeing and having are being overturned. As women cover themselves more and resign different types of agency, and the citizens take political control but vacate physical public arenas in favor of virtual ones, to have and to see take on different meanings, and indeed different positions in the hierarchy of what is desirable and necessary as a member of Tunisian society.
4. The simulacrum and panorama provide a quasi-private space that acts in contrast with— and in the case of the Tunis panorama specifically, upon— the quasi-public spaces of mosques in a country that allows limited access to these buildings to tourists and which is also home to religious minorities who are implicitly not part of "the public," an issue of particular gravity in Tunisia's current political situation.
5. The panoramic comes with its own rhetoric of mystery and forbidden-ness in the way vendors allure people to its heights, and as such operates in a fashion not dissimilar to issues of self-concealment and self-celebration performed by citizens and souk-goers, whereas the simulacrum provides a framework of clarity and "security." The tensions between adventure, exoticism, and security and accessibility describe not only the experiences of foreigners in Tunisia but also the journey upon which Tunisians themselves have embarked in seeking stability and identity after the revolution.

In writing a critique of voyeurism in a country in which I myself am a voyeur (though I fancy myself a sympathetic one), some obvious methodological issues arise. I am fairly certain, were I a native Tunisian, my interviews would have gone quite differently, and not least because it would have obliterated the language barrier. And yet, I am fairly certain that were I Tunisian I would not have had occasion to access these spaces or be struck so by them when I did. What began as a project aiming to understand *why* and *how* Tunisians value the gaze quickly morphed into a project about *whether* Tunisians understand and appreciate the gaze. What strove to be a piece that dispensed with the arcane rhetoric of orient-occident conflict became a meditation on binaries and opposing definitions of private space and freedom. It's been a fascinating journey. I will end by paraphrasing the *New York Times*, in saying that the use of space is a theatre of war, and there's no fault in that. "Our task is to make the conflict fruitful."

Sincerely Yours,  
Rachel Hagler



Section of the view from the Panoramic Café in Sousse, the structure in the distance is the Ribat, which like the Zeitouna mosque, was inaccessible during our visit (blasted construction!)

## The Rooftop:

Afternoon breaks in Tunis as a diaphanous shift in the angle of the sun's rays, and the call of the muezzin twists its way through streets from minaret to minaret, piling into a cacophony that clogs the ears of souk-goers. I stand in the ring of reverberations from the minaret towering in front of me, the Grand Mosque of Tunis Medina. I've been inside the mosque before, but now as I step forward, head covered, to go in again, I am stopped. It is the time of Muslim prayer. It is a mosque, not a museum, and now it is in use.

On the correct assumption that I am not Tunisian—not so much an assumption as an obvious remark made by my physiognomy—a man approaches telling me in a stern mix of English and French not to enter the mosque. My travel partner and I deflate, and the man notices. “You know, there are stairs over there, you can go up and view the courtyard.” He points. We follow his arm, but apparently come upon the wrong stairs because he follows his arm as well and pursues us, saying “no, not those stairs, come I will show you something, you can still see the mosque.” We follow curiously.

Our spontaneously curried— or rather, strategically self-imposed— guide begins to wend his way through a part of the souk I have never seen, a narrow segue towards the carpet section, which I have never visited because of the surplus of temptation and paucity of student life. He ducks into a carpet workshop and begins to ascend the stairs, telling my travel partner and I of the view from the top. “Qadesh?” *How much?* I ask apprehensively in Tunisian Arabic, having become all-too-familiar with the old trick of showing someone the merchandise and then demanding *baksheesh* afterward. “Après, après” the man responds, *after, after*. We know we shouldn't, but we proceed up the stairs nonetheless.

The second floor up from the airy, plush ambiance of the carpet shop is a darker, dustier, mesosphere in which the carpets are made, then transported from the workshop to the store below. Shafts of light fall on a man cutting fabric, a young boy watches at his side with thread spilling over his thick fingers. The next level, oddly enough, is a fully outfitted bedroom complete with cameo portraits and curio cabinets, pictures of men in fezzes and women in gowns adorning a boudoir set slightly apart from a luxuriously canopied bed, gilt and made and waiting.

When we reach the top of the stairs, we come out onto a rooftop that is scattered with shards of Andalusian tile in an erratic mimicry of a mosaic. From this vantage point, one could feel as though they were

face-to-face with the crest of the mosque's minaret, look out over the blanketed souk and sprawling city, and be truly at the top of the citadel on which the lines of the walled medina were drawn. Remodeling my mode of inquiry, I asked the man, "combien pour le droit a la photo?" *how much for the right to photograph?* "Rien," came a bruised-sounding response. The man looked somewhat insulted that I had even broached the topic of payment again. My travel partner, his camera already in hand, traversed the roof and leaned over to shoot the world below...

What opens up beneath us is not just the far apse of the mosque courtyard, as promised, where people mill about finishing their ablutions and prayers, but rather the entire medina—residential terraces and all. In a world of zoom lenses and binoculars, taking part of this milling was only a click or a gesture out of reach.

After taking in the sprawling city and intimate minaret, we descended back into the warm light of the Berber carpet cooperative which had described the lush, red and blue-woven pathway toward the stairs. Now, with the rush and hustle of the market and ascent behind us, we were prompted to look at the carpets. We flatly refused, and made to exit. The man pursued us and demanded four dinars for his time and his giving us a unique experience. I kicked myself in my mind for falling for this trick—again—muttered something unintelligible about being a poor student, and shelled out a few *milim* coins with a grimace and gesture that said "this is all I have, and this is all you get." My travel partner rolled his eyes a bit, and re-communicated his distrust, his prescience, and his chagrin at my idiocy in thinking that in a souk, one could manipulate or discard the screenplay rather than being thrust into a docile role in the theater of the medina marketplace. It was not until several weeks later, upon reviewing my *Lonely Planet* guide that I noticed a brief paragraph under the heading "Scams," describing a similar encounter and referencing, as if to tease me, Paul Theroux's *Pillars of Hercules*, the inaugural reading for my field studies in Tunis.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction: Rhetoric, Theater, and Urban Space**

Rhetoric and performance can be broken up into characters (including audience members), props, settings, and the archetypes, historiography, or symbolism each of these items is used to evoke or disrupt. Rhetoric that is performative, as opposed to disembodied

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lonely Planet: Tunisia*. Pg. 70

of its speaker through radio or public address technologies, is subject to the very sensorium it strives to create. Through the gazes and participations of the audience members, prompted or unprompted by the rituals of the rhetors and the composition of their setting, “people become an audience to themselves.”<sup>2</sup> In this practice of reflecting and responding to impressions, identities are posed, accepted, denied, dominated, or subverted, and an economy emerges in which the audience develops expectations or enters with preconceptions that the rhetor, if he is to be successful, must meet at least in part.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Tunisia, the rhetors and audience members take the shape of natives— particularly those members involved in commerce— and tourists. The theaters are those spaces that tourists can access, such as markets, public squares, and medina streets, as well as spaces into which tourists might be invited, such as the rooftop in the above scenario. However, the power dynamic in these invitation-only spaces is different, and the nature of these spaces is more ambiguous because it is not explicitly public, and the tourist’s access is not explicitly permissible. The rooftop, I argue, constitutes an unassigned space in which the audience’s relationship to the rhetor, or the consumer’s relation to the vendor, has the opportunity to become one of apposition rather than opposition—that is, the dynamic of patron and client is defined through being placed side-by-side rather than face-to-face because they are articulating a common need rather than the inverse ones of supply and demand in a material exchange.

The common need, and Tunisia’s common problem in the aftermath of the revolution, is the need for unassigned and unsurveyed space in which to study one’s identity unbounded by foreign and familial pressure. Such spaces are not private in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pg. 210

<sup>3</sup> Qutbuddin, Tahera. *The Evolution of Early Arabic Rhetoric*.

domestic sense, for private spaces are not unassigned. In the following sections, I will explore how tourists support or complicate the articulation of the divisions of public, private, and liminal spaces in Tunisia, the problem of hyper-specialization of public spaces in the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution, the organization of Tunisian medinas with respect to the citadel, the souk, and the modern plaza, and how the rooftop and other super-spaces can help us to understand what an unassigned place might look like and why it is societally necessary. In the series of interviews, personal adventures, and literature and film analyses that piece together this understanding, what have emerged are the themes of removal, authenticity, agency, and purpose, which in different measures constitute an individual's sense of ability to construct his/her own space as well as how these spaces are used. These claims do not amount to a call for isolation so as to "find oneself," for no identity exists that is not relative. Rather, they seem to beg a de-emphasis of the oppositional habits of labeling that force spaces into binary— and therefore polarized— modes. Where these modes seem too entrenched, this is an exploration of new ways of viewing.

The binary relationships between the public and private, sacred and profane, above and below, imperial and native, and even Arab and Berber all come to a frictional meeting place in the souks and sacred spaces of Tunisia's old medinas, leading many an individual to seek clarity and orientation in the super-spaces of rooftops and overlooks. These spaces also exist metaphorically in the form of the tourist simulacrum—the edited version of these medinas in which so many contradictions are raised—wherein these places that were intended in their initial form to house markets *become* markets and what are elsewhere hotbeds for social economies become fractals of manufactured ideal within manufactured

ideal, from the training and comportment of the humans within to the products being vended to the place itself. The question shrouding all of these spaces, from the panoramic surreality to the simulacrum's virtual reality, is whether these spaces exhibit an effort by Tunisians to self-identify or by tourists to impose identities, whether either are effective, and what they achieve.

### **Under Surveillance: Tunisian Social Order and Creation of Need**

Tunisians are constantly under the surveillance of tourists, and prior to the Revolution, were constantly under the surveillance of police, government forces, and other arms of the Ben Ali regime—in both real and virtual spaces.<sup>4</sup> Now, this government surveillance has been broadened and abstracted through the international attention Tunisia attracted in sparking the Arab Spring. Signs brandished by French solidarity posters saying, “Tunisia, the world is proud of you,” can easily be reread as “Tunisia, the world is watching you.” Training our eyes on the more intimate surveyors of Tunisian society, namely travelers and tourists, it is obvious that these individuals are able not only to see Tunisian society but also to be seen by its members. This seeing and being seen exerts a specific type of power over the behavior of each party, in which the natives and travelers alike adjust their mannerisms to fit with or avoid offending one another. Indeed, such practices are both profitable and protective, with the native being able to capitalize on the inherent discomfort of the tourist and the tourist's urge to conform constituting both a standard and a gateway for interaction with the natives.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Countries Under Surveillance: Tunisia*. Reporters Without Borders. <http://en.rsf.org/surveillance-tunisia.39747.html>

<sup>5</sup> Interview c. Schine, Nathan (tourist). 20 April 2012.

This discomfort of the tourist displaced from his cultural milieu bears a similarity to the discomfort previously felt by the natives placed under pressure to conform to the standards of the regime, and even to grapple with and find footing in their own social standards that are now being overhauled and remodeled. During and in the aftermath of the revolution, these two types of surveillance of the Tunisian citizen body (by tourists and authorities) became more intimately entwined than they had in a very long time, as tourist-frequented areas experienced increased guardianship both to allay the fears of outsiders and to keep a close watch on the hotbeds of exchange of ideas and currency that are embodied by cultural sights, “festival venues [public squares and plazas], parks... beaches,” and shopping districts.<sup>6</sup> For the tourists, the constant surveillance was meant to provide comfort and counter-surveillance to that of “terrorists” or “extremists,” whose constant position as viewers and plotters has been inculcated in the minds of many Europeans and Americans in the aftermath of 9/11—sloganeers would brand this as necessitating an attitude of “constant vigilance”— and became a recycled rhetorical tool in tempering solidarity with and hope for the “Arab Spring.” For the average Tunisian, this new layer of guardianship very likely augmented the very discomfort it was intended to dispel, not least because of residual distrust of the Tunisian police and security forces.<sup>7</sup> Evidence of this exists both in the recent and sustained depopulation of public spaces—particularly those used as demonstration spaces— in Tunisian medinas, as well as the insistence by many Tunisians interviewed for this piece that these measures are unnecessary.

---

<sup>6</sup> *High Surveillance at Tunisian Tourist Sites: Official*. AFP, 1 July 2011.  
<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iLqEdQwZdbjNjO9u8eoGVellcNqQ?docId=CNG.6b07e1d5b9141d93e660216b69b0b89d.931>

<sup>7</sup> Henlon, Querine. *Security Sector Reform in Tunisia*. United States Institute of Peace.  
<http://www.usip.org/files/resources/SR304.pdf>

Discomfort is a powerful political tool, as is doubt. According to Michel Foucault's theory of *panopticism*, surveillance has its own "architecture," which can be manipulated, occupied, and can articulate clear definitions of both its own form and the performative roles of its occupants by placing people in particularized cells and under a constant feeling of being watched.<sup>8</sup> In Foucault's discourse, the panopticon provides a foil to power that is decentralized, disorganized, and so cannot exert disciplinary force. It achieves this by concealing the very power it represents within a venetian-blinded tower, physically in the case of Bentham's prison layout and metaphorically in the understanding of its greater implication. But what of an imperfect panoptic layout, in which the dubiously occupied central tower exists, but there are also a variety of superstructures on par with the tower from which clandestine viewers might peer, and the sub-compartments that partition the urb either do not exist or are blurred to the point of being not compartments but rather membranous non-partitions? How do people perform when they believe they are being watched by unknown authority, but have known authority and knowable standards to contend with and conform to as well? This imperfect panoptic structure approaches a description of the typical Tunisian medina.

Radiating outward and downward from a central mosque, many Tunisian medinas are walled port citadels bearing either grand forts or impressive gate-punctuated fortifications that oversee and shelter the old cities.<sup>9</sup> As such, it is clear that Tunisia's culture of surveillance has a more extensive history and historiography than the most recent forces exerted by an evolving tourist culture and dictatorship (and also supports all the more the historic and seemingly organic fixation with heights and with perceiving the

---

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>9</sup> Lecture c. Dr. Raja Khabcheche, SIT Tunisia: Emerging Identities in North Africa.

high ground as safe, strategic, and valuable). UNESCO, in its rationale for making Tunis a protected site, goes so far as to say these recent inductions undermine the integrity of the city, saying, “The Medina of Tunis is an example of a human settlement that has conserved the integrity of its urban fabric with all its typo-morphological components. The impact of socio-economic change has rendered this traditional settlement vulnerable and it should be fully protected.<sup>10</sup>” UNESCO claims that Tunis has a “coherent urban fabric,” and a “structural authenticity,” that makes it an apt prototype of an Islamic city— one worth freezing in time. This anachronistic quality is both externally mitigated by influences that make it profitable and desirable for the city to remain “intact,” and is organic in that tradition compels people to stay settled in this fashion. One tourist, when interviewed, remarked on the dollhouse effect of seeing people still inhabiting old medinas, saying that they feel like “holdovers from the middle ages.<sup>11</sup>”

It is not only the locale that is anachronistic in many of these cases, but also the carryover of the composition of the internal space. In the traditional Berber household, one is not separated from one’s relatives and cohabitants by boundaries, but rather, as Imed Melliti calls them, *seuils*, or thresholds.<sup>12</sup> Curtains or archways serve as doors, partially, and walls are fairly thin and rooms fairly close, such that not only sight but also sound becomes an ambient and unchecked feature. In the traditional coastal Tunisian household, a carryover from al-Andalus, rooms are buttressed by hallways that open as balconies onto a covered central courtyard, rather than layers of walls.<sup>13</sup> All of this contributes to a version of private space that, as admitted by one Tunisian male, differs greatly from the Occidental conception of what “privacy,” means. Moreover, with many households being multigenerational and vast gulfs of interpretation and ritual existing

---

<sup>10</sup> *Medina of Tunis*. UNESCO World Heritage Center. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/36>

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Schine, Nathan, traveler. 25 April 2012

<sup>12</sup> Melliti, Imed. *Seuils, Passages, et Transitions: La Liminarite Dans la Culture Maghrebine. Public et Prive en Islam* (ed: Mohamed Kerrou). Maisonneuve & Larose

<sup>13</sup> Khabcheche, Raja (*ibid.*)

between the oldest and youngest generations with respect to marriage, sex, drinking, politics, technology and so on, this closeness in an open household has an electric (or perhaps even electronic) and tense portent.<sup>14</sup>

According to Susan Sontag, the fact that now cameras are so universally accessible, so portable, and so unabridged in their use by codes and social boundaries, we humans are inundated with such a deluge of images of varying degrees of relevance and intimacy that our views on what we are entitled to see and what we are able to see have been irrevocably changed—specifically, they have burst open to the point of near all-inclusiveness.<sup>15</sup> However, at some point this liberty of the lens became recursive and morphed into an assumed liberty of the eye itself. That is to say, we now consider it our right and entitlement to go and view whatever has been brought to us by the photographic image, be it the desire to reach the eagle nebulae captured by the Hubble Telescope or the delight at being able to view the earth from above just as a satellite might capture. It is clear that not only have cameras and photographs altered our perceptions of what we have a right to view, but also of what is *worth* viewing. And, in accordance with human curiosity, what is worth viewing is increasingly seen as those few parts of the world into which outside viewers cannot gain access. The two compulsions of the native and tourist—to escape discomfort and to view the inaccessible—coalesce on the rooftop. And, the implied exclusivity of the rooftop for both parties opens this space up to questions of self-actualization and position in ways to which the ground-scape is hostile. Moreover, the discomfort and hostility of the ground-space can lead those particularly susceptible to

---

<sup>14</sup> Tapscott, Don. *Tunisia, Egypt, and the Coming Generational Explosion*. *The Globe*: 28 January 2011. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/commentary/don-tapscott/tunisia-egypt-and-the-coming-generational-explosion/article1885446/>

<sup>15</sup> Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On Photography*.

feelings of marginalization or particularly lacking in affinity with the culture whose aspects are oppressive or uncomfortable—namely, the tourists—to create or demand the creation of their own spaces entirely separate from these milieus.

This is where unassigned space makes its importance known to the Tunisian social fabric. It provides an escape from discomfort, a platform above the sensorium, and a space unbounded by societal imperatives—a form of security that is not spawned from surveillance but rather from a temporary claim over the space (this lack of permanent attachment is important as well, else the space might be coveted into “privacy”). Needs for unassigned spaces arise when both public and private spaces are hostile to an individual being able to achieve a sense of position. Simply put, unassigned spaces are where we work out our crises of identity. The Tunisian identity crisis is one that virtually every Tunisian interviewed for this piece acknowledged in the same breath or on the same level as the crises of unemployment and poverty in the country, often unprovoked to do so. In Tunisian medinas, one is made to feel as if every item has symbolic purpose, every structure is either ancient or sacred; every individual is from a family whose role was assigned long ago. This, to the tourist, results in the feeling of a closed society, and also a society that disrupts the position of newcomers and dissenters rather than being disrupted by it. To the modern Tunisian, it comes to signify entrenchment or social immobility, made all the more stifling by issues of money and dependence and a close multigenerational dynamic within households and neighborhoods.<sup>16</sup>

These notions of impenetrability are dangerous for three reasons: first, the hyper-specialization of space in Tunisia leads to the pressure and initiatives by foreigners to

---

<sup>16</sup> Duvignaud, Jon. 1970. *Change at Shebika: Report from a North African Village*. New York: Pantheon Books

create new spaces into which they can draw themselves so as to have greater agency over their experiences, not unlike a colonizing force imposing its own structure. Second, it undermines the ability of Tunisian society to be flexible in its use and designation of space, a necessary ability in a period of civic transition. Lastly, the seemingly closed nature of Tunisian society augments not only the desire of the native to escape, but also the desire of the outsider to gain access to its most closed aspects, and so perpetuates the romanticization of “Oriental mystique” of these old cities and their inhabitants, which fails accurately describe Tunisian culture and leads Tunisians nonetheless to install themselves in these character types as a means of profiting from their audience’s expectations.

### **Defining Unassigned Space: Cultural Reclamation and Self Discovery**

To understand the need for and utility of unassigned spaces, we must first define what these spaces are and what they allow the occupier to do. An unassigned space is not necessarily a space that is liminal, because liminal spaces automatically serve the function of constructing or deconstructing divisions between public and private. Unassigned spaces can instead be viewed as spaces outside of the public, private, or liminal classifications, and outside of these physicalities, such that the gazes and thoughts of people are unbounded and roving. Whereas liminal spaces are bounded on one side by the public sphere and on the other by the private and have agency in constructing or deconstructing these spaces through mechanisms of permitting or denying, the unassigned space does not compel its occupants to ask for permission to view and act once they are there. Moreover, their function is this roving; their purpose is to allow people within to move multidirectionally, if not aimlessly. Rather than the roving gaze that bespeaks power and omniscience, as in Foucault’s panopticon, the gazes that occur here are gustatory and indulgent, and likely

somewhat illicit. Rather than being the gazes of authority, they are often rebellions against classical definitions of authority. As previously mentioned, there are a few main binaries at work here: the above and below, the sacred and the profane, the private and the public, the romantic and real, and the Arab and Berber, all of which come together on the rooftop in the form of the panoramic gaze. The underlying question in contemplating the rooftop as a type of unassigned space, both physically and symbolically, is whether this role is already being satisfied in some fashion, whether it has the potential to evolve in a more critical or analytical mode, and whether this would ultimately be desirable or valuable.

### **Above and Below, Sacred and Profane**

When one vendor from the aforementioned Berber carpet cooperative was asked what made the space most unique, his response was, “you can see everything, you can see the whole city... my favorite thing to look at is the Zeitouna mosque,” which the viewer can see *into*.<sup>17</sup> A tourist on the rooftop, who deemed the experience worthwhile, echoed this claim after having been barred from going into the mosque.<sup>18</sup> Conscious or not, this roving gaze does exert a power, but the power is diffuse and curious rather than surgical and probing, and yet the end is the same: an invasion of private space occurs, in which the tourist assumes the role of invader. It is not difficult to extrapolate the old roles of colonizer and colonized onto this situation, and to envision the physical high ground as an assumed moral one as well, with the westerner rising above and looking down upon the fray and the Tunisian guide acting a role not unlike the folklore of Sacagawea—the Stockholm Syndrome afflicted colonizer’s sidekick, always with the insistence, “we love tourists!” on

---

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous source, interviewed at Berber carpet cooperative, Tunis souk. 20 April 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Interview c. Schine, Nathan

his lips.<sup>19</sup> This claim surely makes sense in souks, but with the invitation into homes and businesses, onto rooftops overlooking the private domains of others and even undoing the secrecy of sacred spaces, this refrain takes on a level of generosity that seems tantamount to submissiveness.

And yet, one could view this rooftop venture a reclamation of the license to view, because rather than the tourist taking the opportunity, it is instead given by the native, and often for a price, thus indicating a valuation not only of the service of showing but a sense of presiding over that which is revealed, namely, the medina's landscape. In this fashion, the rhetor-audience member analogy maintains its integrity, with the tourist being permitted to view, and the native being the revealer rather than surrendering to the invasive gaze. Just as the panopticon decisively severs the "seeing/being dyad" by concealing the body that projects the gaze, the for-sale panorama explicitly upsets the seeing/having dyad of the colonizer through compelling him to pay a pre-assessed value for his gaze to a person who has no more ownership over the landscape than himself.<sup>20</sup> In this fashion, the rhetor becomes a troll-under-the-bridge character, selling himself as a conduit rather than selling the destination. The rhetorical performance of attracting tourists to the rooftop is characterized by incompleteness of speech, with the view supplying the resolution rather than words, and the exclusivity of this view implied through the act of inviting serves to enhance this conclusion. The *granting* of access to these spaces gives them greater value through making the audience feel as though they are pushing a boundary, punctuating their 'chronic voyeuristic relation' through photographs

---

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that this was the refrain of every Tunisian vendor I spoke with, usually accompanied by urgings to tell my friends in America to come visit.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*.

and images with a real and agentive voyeuristic experience in which the gaze is their own and not that of a lens or another technological mechanism that puts the illicit space at one removal.<sup>21</sup>

These permissions and denials and their accompanying economies, according to Geertz, constitute the divisions between public and private space in North Africa in more solid ways than doors and curtains can.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, inviting an audience up to one's rooftop carries both an exclusive tone and the implication of repeatability that provokes the foreigner to question: if I am actually allowed here, where else may I go? It is significant, though, that these thoughts are couched in terms of allowances rather than entitlements. Rather than the tourist being made to think that he *is able*, he realized, because of the rhetoric of invitation, that he *is given the opportunity*. This is a marked departure from the colonialist mentality, which equates what one sees with what one can possess. In Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt*, the colonizers impose a military and surveillance-based superstructure over the city of Cairo, "enframing" the space with sentinels and working inward and upon the culture at hand through pressure applied on all sides.<sup>23</sup> Mitchell likens this to the panopticon in its function, though its structure is inside-out. In the case of the rooftop view of Tunis souk, yes, there is an act of ascent, yes there is a breach of the private sphere because of where the gaze can go, but neither of these gazes is surgical or targeted and the "compartments" of the cityscape are almost bedevilingly unclear. The voyeuristic experience being had here, while perhaps troubling, is not part of a greater schema or goal for the foreigner, and moreover it is not even the goal itself.

---

<sup>21</sup> Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*.

<sup>22</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. 1991. *Colonising Egypt*. University of California Press.

This underscores the importance of the difference between perceptions of actively seeking and passively seeing. In the case of the tourist, what is actively being sought is not the panoramic view from the rooftop, but rather the adventure of getting there, just as one takes a specific type of revelry from viewing the Sahara on the back of a camel rather than through a jeep window. The act of ascent is a culmination of walking up the citadel path that describes the old city and the souk, ascending from the “dirty” trades of smithing and leatherworks at the bottom to the “clean” trades of perfume and jewelry vending at the top, finding oneself at the bookstores selling Qur’ans outside of the mosque, and finally—being unable to penetrate the most pure space of the mosque itself— climbing to the rooftop. This gradient of dirty to clean is assigned and arranged by the Tunisians themselves, and bespeaks a social hierarchy in which forms of labor, and therefore the laboring bodies, are made into a spectrum of varying degrees of purity and impurity. The mosque and the act of ablution before prayer, through which everyone is cleansed, though, render all of these impurities moot. The one group excluded from this process of purification are the non-Muslims, and so the foreigners cannot insert themselves into this gradient, and cannot see themselves as bodies which are “cleaner,” or “dirtier” than the natives, but instead entirely apart. Their journey from the profane to the sacred is not a transcendental one but a voyeuristic one—it is entirely composed of the gaze as a means of perception, agency, and experience. Though there is no truly passive act of seeing, the excuse supplied by lack of permission to participate gives the illusion of passivity on the part of the foreigner. This is a turnaround of the long-ingrained practice of othering in the opposite direction—with the foreigner acting upon the native, and particularly the Arab native— which describes

Orientalism as a whole.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that what makes Orientalism so insidious is the unconsciousness with which it is taken up and perpetuated, for this is the very nature of the foreigner's affect on Tunisian cultural identity.

At what point does the foreigner become more than a pair of eyes—and their role more than acting as an audience member or surveyor? When the foreigner, rather than merely passing through the designated spaces, begins to push on the public-private divide in such a way that it is reshaped or forced to put up more defenses. This is apparent in museums, where displays that were once uncovered become encased in glass. It is apparent in the preservation of the ruins in Tunisia, when something that was uncovered must be re-covered for fear of damage. It is present in the competing ideologies of occidental individualism and oriental communitarianism which have been embattled since Bourguiba's break with the pan-Arab movement and concurrent modernizing initiative. In one interview, a single Tunisian woman expressed frustration at the fact that "there is no such thing as private life because no one here is self-reliant," which then spiraled into her anger at being unable to live alone as an unwed woman in her late 20s.<sup>25</sup> Another Tunisian academic posited that "in Tunisia, people substitute secrecy for privacy," because privacy is not truly private in the Tunisian household.<sup>26</sup> In some Tunisian hotels, curtains are a luxury, so much so that on some websites they are an advertised feature—thus pulling tourists into this indistinct realm as well.<sup>27</sup> The fact that these features are advertised is

---

<sup>24</sup> Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*.

<sup>25</sup> Interview c. Abbas, Najila. 26 April 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Mounir's candid musings (hope you don't mind). 19 April 2012.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. <http://www.expedia.co.uk/Hammamet-Hotels-Hotel-Le-Sultan.h898500.Hotel-Information> conf. c. other hotel amenities and reviews

indicative of the Tunisian social understanding that their “privacy” is a unique one, and perhaps even a problematic one that cannot necessarily be translated across cultures.

Not only do foreigners impose a different definition of privacy, but they also impose a different impression of what Tunisia is, and Tunisian markets and society then respond to these expectations, which become crystallized in capitalist demands. Many of these expectations and impressions are so stayed as to have become realities, with the inauthentic taking over for the authentic to the point where the strata flip, not unlike the Arabian Jasmine, introduced to Tunisia from Southeast Asia, becoming a national icon and widely believed to be integral and organic to the ecological makeup of the land. It is often necessary, in determining one’s identity, to break down these symbolic lexicons. For Tunisia, a country that has often defined itself based on what it is not, from Bourguiba’s assertions that the nation is not like its “colonial menace,” to the oft-stated belief that “we are not Middle Eastern, we are Mediterranean,” or “we are not Arab, we are Berber [or Italian or Phoenician or Moorish],” parsing these issues requires moving from the oppositional to the appositional. Foreigners help to facilitate this by acting as a bridge between the romantic and the real, making the natives “audiences to themselves,” and supplying the camera lenses and coin purses that alter native behavior and distill it down to a series of eminently repeatable reenactments, or profane rituals, which are brought to even more simplified levels of parody by the tourists themselves in a true use of *mise en abyme*.<sup>28</sup> These parodies, or simulacra, have the power to enlighten as much as they have the power to frustrate and confound, and contribute as much to the search for Tunisian identity as they complicate through importing even more variables.

---

<sup>28</sup> Bell. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*.

## **Yasmine Hammamet: Real and Unreal, Arab and Berber**

In recalling the earlier discussion of the “unlocated” or displaced tourist, the question arises as to what it means to have a sense of position or sense of place, and how the loss of this sense acts upon the individual. In one interview, a well-traveled tourist likened “unlocatedness” to anonymity or protection, one who appears unplaceable, even if they are not distinctly native, is less likely to be targeted, attract too much attention, or be hoodwinked.<sup>29</sup> Ethnic ambiguity is rife in Tunisia, and this is both a blessing and a curse in the case of Tunisians and Tunisian vendors seeking to meet the demands of foreigners. The general unplaceability of the individual in the ethnic milieu of Tunisia is compounded by what many Orientalist scholars have alluded to as the sense of no-place or illogical placement that occurs for the foreigner in a souk or bazaar, one of the more quintessential romantic symbols of the Orientalist movements in art and literature in Europe and the United States. One need only look at the paintings of Delacroix, Muller, or Gerome to see the fascination with the color and movement of carpet shops and covered markets, and also to find their attempts to make sense of these bustling spaces through peering inward to the private sphere.<sup>30</sup> Often, these cravings for the more rustic parts of the Middle East manifested themselves in portrayals of women as symbols of this private life: sitting together, weaving, dancing, or at wedding parties—women, already creatures of universal mystique constantly being demystified and remystified by artists were here portrayed performing universal tasks, thus forming a connection and grounding the viewer in a sense of place that was dissociated from geography and instead vested in ritual. Even the women’s bodies, the deeper they are ensconced in these common tasks, begin to look more

---

<sup>29</sup> Interview c. Schine, Nathan. 22 April 2012

<sup>30</sup> Hagler, Rachel. *Belly Dance in Western Sexuality*, pending publication. 20 December 2011

and more like western, white bodies that reflect the artists' culture and cultural standards of beauty—perhaps a subconscious reaction to, or a conscious refutation of the prevalent phobia about “going native,” that persisted from the Age of Exploration through the interwar period.

In keeping with Catherine Bell's theory of performance and ritual, these acts can be seen as acts of reflection, where features of another society are enacted such that the members of that society are made to look into the interpretation of another culture performing their own customs and practices.<sup>31</sup> This can be termed “cultural mirroring.” The simulacrum can be viewed not as a stage but as the performance itself, a group of concentrated archetypes set on the much messier and more complex backdrop of the country it tries to distill into one mechanized unit. The simulacrum at hand is Medina J'did Yasmine, located in Hammamet, wherein the state has constructed an entirely new medina, designed to look like the ancient (*qadima*) medinas that punctuate the Tunisian landscape, only it is set on a grid. The capstone of this sparkling new attraction is its souk, with well-ordered walk-in shops selling modern goods such as Chuck Taylor shoes and baseball caps alongside henna tattoos and chicha pipes. The new medina complex engulfs four kilometers of the Tunisian coastline, and incorporates 44 hotels, several night clubs, a theater, restaurants, “traditional dars and fundouks,” and is fenced in with “traditional ramparts.”<sup>32</sup>

There is a difference between that which is disorganized and that which is crowded. The disorganizedness of the Arab mind— be it with regards to logic, literature, or social composition, is an Orientalist fiction. And yet, when entering a souk for the first time, it is easy to trace the derivation of this fantasy. Indeed, in Julie Scott Meisami's work on Arabic

---

<sup>31</sup> Bell, Catherine. 2009. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Yasmine Hammamet (*The Resort/The Medina*). <http://www.yasmine.com.tn/anglais/Welcome.html>

and Persian poetry, which she tellingly subtitled “Orient Pearls,” she claims that critics of Arabic poetry insist on the “syntactic unity of the verse,” and includes Scheindlin’s observation that “Orientalist criticism proceeded to derive its cultural-anthropological generalization of the paratactic, compartmentalized, atomistic nature of Arabic poetry. An encompassing framework for the delineation of meaning, or a larger metaphor, was neither visualized nor suspected.”<sup>33</sup> The Arab city, which itself bears the markings of similar jargon to Arabic poetry— whose verses are composed of *bases, houses, seas, and stops*— has long been subject to similar criticism. Numerous authors have described Arab souks and Persian bazaars (virtually undistinguished in many works) as labyrinthine and impenetrable, whence comes the demand to construct these sanitized, harmonious apparatuses. To better understand this, one might look to the historic occidental view of the souk and the medina, and trace its communication with the mushrooming of the modern concern about “security,” for travelers in the Middle East and North Africa:

“It was a classic entrance to a bazaar, narrow, with fabrics hung up and fluttering like flags, and all sort of brassware and carvings stacked near it, and a beckoning fragrance of perfume and spices. Entering [Tunis souk] reminded me of the souk at Aleppo—once I stepped out of the city heat and dust I was in humid the shadows of this labyrinth, in the passageways, where men in gowns sipped coffee at the entrance to their tiny shops... Fifteen minutes later we were in the middle of the souk and I was utterly lost.”—Paul Theroux, *Pillars of Hercules*, pg. 467-468

“The general size of a store in Tangier is about that of an ordinary shower-bath in a civilized land. The Mohammedan merchant, tinman, shoemaker, or vendor of trifles, sits cross-legged on the floor, and reaches after any article you may want to buy... The market people crowd the market-place with their baskets of figs, dates, melons, apricots, etc., and among them file trains of laden asses... The scene is lively, is picturesque, and smells like a police court.” – Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*, pg. 80

---

<sup>33</sup> Meisami, Julie Scott. 2003. *Structure and Meaning in Medieval Arabic and Persian Poetry: Orient Pearls*.

“The urban ideal of Islam created no forms, no urban structure... It replaced the solidarity of a collective community [as in classical antiquity] with an anomalous disorganized heap of disparate quarters and elements... this religion [Islam] endowed with the ideal of urban life [the fullest Muslim life could only be experienced in cities and towns] produced the very negation of urban order.” – X. de Planhol (Lassner, 26)

“The contemporary Maghreb... [is] a part of the world which, resembling everything but itself (when Tocqueville first saw Algiers it reminded him of Cincinnati), has an unusual capacity for inviting the application of standard notions about how societies work, and then defeating them.” – Clifford Geertz, *Life Among the Anthros*, pg. 62

In these accounts, some more self-conscious than others, the themes of disorganization and displacement emerge, and with them a sense of insecurity both regarding one’s notions of what a city should be and of how navigation should function. Modern articles inviting people to “get lost,” in Tunisian markets and winding medinas abound. Tocqueville likens the sensation of being off the grid, so to speak, to a sense of no-place, and many others record feelings of swarming, lack of logic or control, and so on. Again, the theme of discomfort arises, but it is accompanied here with an excitement about the exotic, captured best by Twain. For many a traveler, the most ideal situation would retain this exotic flavor but be stripped of the uncomfortable or untenable features.

The simulacrum, as previously stated, is a space of “virtual reality,” a simulated environment that allows the individual to simulate his or her own physical presence in a real space. It is, like the rooftop, a way of going “above the fray,” by creating a space that is cleansed of disturbing elements, such as beggars or filth in the streets, pushy vendors or labyrinthine layouts, animal traffic and run-ins with natives. The perfectly straight and orderly nature of the souks, the linearity of the medina, and the openness of the paths, ensures that the viewer’s gaze can extend far more freely than in the real old cities, though their gaze extends over an artificial landscape rather than a real cityscape as in the case of

the rooftop. Rather than privileging the viewer with exclusivity and the permeation of the private, the simulacrum is itself private and privileges the viewer with an exclusivity that is determined by class and race—it is a declaration of position rather than a resignation of it. Like the rooftop, it is an attempt at finding clarity, though on the part of the foreigner rather than the native. The simulacrum is how the foreigner makes sense of the messiness not only of the seeming urban disorganization of North Africa, but the untidiness of being confronted with a world more dynamic and diverse than the foreigner’s preconceived notions of the society (the Geertz quote above references this issue). In other words, the simulacrum is the ordered menagerie of Foucault’s panoptic theory, and the reality of Tunisian medinas and souks is the free-range park.

Le Vaux’s menagerie at Versailles, according to Foucault, was the first of its kind in that it created a complex of habitats and assigned spaces tailored to each type of animal, rather than letting them mill in a simulated jungle. Foucault traces Bentham’s prison plan to this octagonal menagerie, compartmentalized into cages, and claims that the Panopticon has a selfsame concern with “individualizing observation, with characterization and classification.<sup>34</sup>” Though the menagerie has faded into obscurity, these human efforts to defy entropy or claim aspects of a culture and distill them into more “modern” or “civilized” molds have gotten ever more advanced. It is said, for example, that the Passage Couverts of Paris are directly inspired by the souks of Morocco, and the London Crystal Palace, with its open feel and spindly-columned nave, draws its esprit from the Alhambra mosque. These places are not only products of foreign inspiration but are pushes toward perfecting that which is imperfect to the foreign eye, and taking ownership of unmovable artifacts and

---

<sup>34</sup> Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*.

cultural phenomena that have captured the imagination, like the to-scale model of the Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee or the Epcot Pavilions of Disney Land. Unlike these spaces, though, Yasmine Hammamet is situated against the native backdrop that inspired it, minutes by cab away from the old city of Hammamet on the Tunisian coast. What is unique about this medina is not that it is a simulacrum, but rather that it is a simulacrum which emanates the very ancient-modern “holdover” quality of the authentic Tunisian medinas, only in reverse order, and moreover it is located in geographic coincidence with an actual old city, not unlike placing a China Town in the center of Beijing. As an historical homage, it fails comically, yet as an emulation of essence it strangely succeeds.

Why, though, do tourists choose to visit Yasmine Hammamet rather than the authentic old city? Among the answers gleaned from the various vendors in Yasmine Hammamet, the most prevalent was “security.”<sup>35</sup> “It is safe here,” one vendor said, people are enclosed and there are not problems with criminals or rebels or police. Another cited the extensive publicity campaign used to attract tourists to Yasmine, indeed it would seem that the state wants to cloister them away just as much as the tourists wish to shelter themselves. The vendors at the base of Hammamet’s original *ribat*, though, who have their own souk, are left to feel the sting of this campaign. “We respect people wanting to go there... but it’s not old like this place,” one vendor said, careful to sidestep the problematic aspects of Yasmine’s untruths by comparing the ages of the places rather than other cultural disparities.<sup>36</sup> When asked if he thought it was problematic that individuals go to Yasmine and believe they are having a real Tunisian experience, he shrugged and began to talk about how valuable and essential tourists are.

---

<sup>35</sup> Interviews c. vendors (anonymous), Yasmine Hammamet. 19 April 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Interviews c. anonymous sources, Hammamet souk. 19 April 2012.

Yasmine Hammamet—easy, secure, and insulated—does in part try to be a new old medina, mimicking the architecture of Tunisia’s old cities and featuring chicha dens and Berber carpet-covered cafes. Overall, though, it is dosed with a large amount of farce, from the billboard-sized posters advertising belly dance shows to statues of elephants with Phoenician soldiers astride their backs and renderings of characters from Disney’s *Aladdin* mingling with statues of stereotypical Tunisian men and women. This simulacrum, like the Epcot Pavilions or World’s Fair expositions, distills all of Tunisian culture into a set of highly accessible archetypes, often overstating Tunisia’s Arab aspects and simplifying or neglecting most else. And yet, what these archetypes do accurately manage to capture is the range of Tunisian cultural identities and the fraught pull of the Arab and Berber influences that afflict Tunisia’s self-conception, and the overhanging specter of European colonization that attempts to reorder these spaces and continues to influence their worth through a steady stream of patrons. Theroux falls into this trap in saying that Tunis souk reminds him overwhelmingly of Aleppo, and yet stating simultaneously that “Berber culture [is] real Tunisian culture.<sup>37</sup>” Yasmine Hammamet is a simulacrum that, in attempting to give the foreigner a taste of all of Tunisia’s flavors in an organized fashion, emphasizes the tragicomic difficulty of doing this, and so speaks volumes about Tunisian national identity and its complexities and complications. This is, again, an inversion of the Panopticon’s application in that, unlike the compartments that “make it possible to observe performances (without there being any imitation or copying),” it is explicitly the imitation or copy that is making itself observable.<sup>38</sup> What is curious is how much the authentic and

---

<sup>37</sup> Theroux, Paul. *Pillars of Hercules*. Pg. 467

<sup>38</sup> Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*.

inauthentic, not unlike the public and private, become muddled and confused in this case, sometimes by the natives themselves.

In one interview, a vendor inside the Yasmine souk insisted, “this is Tunisian culture... yes, this is authentic.” While others chimed in with comments that remarked on the character of the vendors, their welcoming attitude, and that this was the essence of Tunisian-ness. Partly, this is clearly out of a desire to emphasize the qualities tourists will find attractive, part of it is the act that the simulacrum encourages, in which the individual operators are compelled to keep up the ruse, and partly this might be attributable to a lack of critical analysis in a space that opens itself up to a critical gaze on the part of the native just as much as it designed to invite the pleased and unquestioning gaze on the part of the foreigner. It is, after all, a living and working commentary on Tunisian culture, set in the Tunisian landscape. When asked what they had expected to find, a Dutch couple that had only just arrived on Tunisian soil declared, “this... you know, the little shops.” Another British couple, which expressed little interest in Tunisian culture and simply a desire to “get away,” stated, “people here are very nice... everyone’s trying to get your money, of course.<sup>39</sup>” Is the reluctance on the part of Tunisians to refute the authenticity of this space a function entirely of its economy and of meeting foreign expectations, or is it rather an internalization of the ideal that Yasmine Hammamet creates? And is this so different from the romanticization of the panorama, wherein the Tunisian and foreign individuals alike find refuge, respite, and liberation? Eventually, one must exit the compound just as one must descend from the rooftop to be confronted by the reality at hand. The challenge lies in making this exit and real-world enactment a critical one rather than merely a mimetic one,

---

<sup>39</sup> Interviews c. tourists (anonymous), Yasmine Hammamet. 19 April 2012.

just as changing a street name from Avenue 7 Novembre to Avenue 14 Janvier is worthless if the principles of the event that led to this renaming do not come to reshape the space in kind, or just as it is incumbent upon a democratically elected leader to uphold democratic ideals once in office.

### **The Rooftop Romanticized: Filming the Bird's-Eye View in Tunisia**

In the binary relationship of real and unreal, the arts tend to act as a bridge and a means of “translating” raw reality into an ideal, or else exposing ideals as such, and are therefore useful to our analysis. Man has worked diligently towards modes of ascent, spiritually and physically. The word “high,” is associated with elation or happiness, and flight with freedom, and these concepts span cultures and pantheons, though each culture leaves its unique imprint. To understand the particularities of the Tunisian conceptualization of this upward thrust, in terms of maturation and of exploration, I look to the case eloquently laid out in the Tunisian cult classic, *Halfaouine*.

*Halfaouine*, or *Asfour Stah* (“rooftop bird” in Tunesi), a film directed by Ferid Boughedir, ends with the line “Descende! Descende!”<sup>40</sup> This line, delivered by an angry father to a young boy who is high on fantasy and post-coital bliss, is cast upward to a rooftop where the boy, now presumably a man, reposes and watches his one-time lover depart. The film overall provides an intimate look at the infantilization of the Tunisian male, the constrained and confused sexual culture of the country, and the lack of guidance in framing one’s sexuality or constructing boundaries. This is evident in scenes such as one in which Latifa, the primary love interest, strips off her clothes willingly because 12-year-old Noura, the young boy and her future lover, explains that this is what women do in the

---

<sup>40</sup> Boughedir, Ferid. *Halfaouine* (film). 1990

*hammam*. Never having been taken to a bath, Latifa has no frame of reference and so does not know how to counter this notion in spite of her obvious misgivings. The film also deals heavily with issues of fantasy and reality, illusions of attainability and unattainability (as in the spinster aunt's efforts to court the sheikh), and by nature of this the accessible and the inaccessible.

The majority of the exposition which leads to the climactic encounter between Noura and Latifa at the film's end takes place on rooftops and terraces, with the rooftop being the space in which the boy can learn about manhood, and the terrace being the woman's space to which the boy is too often relegated, privy to all their private conversations and infantilized by their attention and insensitivity to his presence as an "other," whose body is unlike theirs. Rather, he is treated as un-gendered or androgynous, and forced into a seemingly fixed pre-sentient and pre-sexual mold on the ground that he tests the boundaries of on the rooftop.

In the film, Boughedir makes it a point to prove that there is no privacy in which to have sexual experiences and experiments, from the scene in which a man takes a woman into his shop and they engage in "laughter in the dark," that all the passerby are able to overhear, to the curtains used in lieu of doors to the room of the young boy's divorced aunt, ensuring that she can bring nobody new into the home. The consistent use of double entendres in the film showcases language as the only interpersonal experimental arena, while the bodies are kept carefully apart. The only places in which both language and bodies unwind are, for the Tunisian women, the *hammam* and the terrace, and for the Tunisian men, the rooftops. These spaces, though divided across gender, are more divided by experience than by anatomy. The rooftop is the virginal or pre-consummate space, on

which Boughedir let's the young boys' fantasies play out, from looking at lifted pornography to the protagonist's dream about an ogre and a virgin who walks across the rooftops leaving a trail of blood— having been penetrated by the ogre's golden needle— by which to find her. The unfolding of the magazine's centerfolds, the pulling back of the aunt's curtains, the unfurling of the lover's shirt across her chest at night, the teasing tugs on the veils that women in the street are captured executing on film all serve to augment the theme of the threshold and its inherent fragility and vulnerability to voyeurism.

The film opens with a camera-pan (from the word panoramic) across the rooftops of Tunis' suburb of Halfaouine, featuring shots that look down upon the terraces of several of the homes, overlooking women's laundry, replete with negligee, and then overlooking a mosque courtyard as men kneel for noontime prayer. The next cutaway focuses on women wearing the veil and repelling the flirtations of a pair of Tunisian boys. In this fashion, the focus on the veil disrupts the seeing/having dyad with direct reference to sexual desire in the same way the rooftop encounter in Tunis disrupts the seeing/having dyad in the context of colonial entitlement; where the stunting of the gaze increases lust in the former scenario, the freedom of the gaze increases lust in the latter. The boys, frustrated and browbeaten by the neighborhood sheikh, then climb up onto the rooftop to search for empty liquor bottles, have a drink amongst themselves, and commiserate about sex and women. Noura, the protagonist, peers through an eyelet on one of the rooftops onto a neighboring terrace, where women are picking over couscous, singing, and gossiping. To see but not to have, to be on the precipice but never gain access, and to have a burgeoning sense of identity but never the freedom to test it in contrast with or out of context of

tradition are all motifs in the film that are played out on the rooftop, where Noura, finally liberated and secure in his sexuality, dances after his intimate encounter.

Halfaouine demonstrates that what is endemic in Tunisia is not a lack of self-knowledge but rather a repression of self-knowledge through a system of denials and obstacles that make it impossible to experiment. Space is starkly divided across gender lines, social roles divided across traditional boundaries, and yet identity is muddled and confused as a result of pushing against structural immobilities that are being broken by the more transient, fluid sections of Tunisia's nonpermanent society, namely, its foreign elements. One subject remarked during an interview that, in Tunisia, "tourists can do things the natives can't" either because of legal or social dictates, such as purchasing alcohol on Fridays or wearing bikinis on beaches. These disparate sets of rules, in which the divisions are clear but the reasoning is not, is captured in *Halfaouine's* use of the *hammam* as an arena for awakening and stirring these questions, and the rooftop being a place where one goes to parse them out.

The people who occupy the rooftop are the stuff of dreams and nightmares, transient and leaving questions in their wake, like the ogre beckoning Noura to the rooftop in his dream. Those who are not of dreams or nightmares are in states of being that can otherwise be considered liminal or medial: various stages of adolescence. Though from the rooftop these individuals are made privy to certain private matters, this is not the central function of the rooftop (the women's *hammam* supplies this symbolically in the film because of Noura's protracted access to it). Rather, it is the conversations and the questions that are played out on the rooftop, the celebrations of sexuality and the brazenness of viewing captured images (pornography) rather than the furtiveness of viewing living ones

(as in Noura's peering around the *hammam*) that make the rooftop a place pregnant with opportunity and void of connotation or judgment. The captured images portraying ideals are not unlike the view of the city a foreigner garners from the panoramic or a view of the self the native garners through engaging the simulacrum. Not unlike pornography, this act of gazing and the perceptions it provokes invites the viewer to view him or herself critically and reflexively in the midst of a pleasurable experience, and yet the pleasure of the experience undermines the likelihood of this type of reflection. In a sense, these spaces of repose, because they are intended to be escapes from the political, cultural, and traditional, undermine themselves.

In order for these spaces to operate to their fullest potential, people must take not only the invitation to access them but also the invitation to critically review this access and the things it permits one to see, and to review the rules and social codes that make these spaces what they are. In this fashion, these spaces might be converted from arenas for the wistful, the romantic, and the secret, to spaces where transient moments of affinity and understanding between passing foreigner and permanent resident can pile up and become meaningful analogs. The romanticization of the rooftop and the semi-scripted street theater that is played out in luring people to its heights or in the performed regalia of the processions, shows, and shops in the shiny fake city offer, "ritual dramatization[s]... [which are] flexible if delicate process[es] capable of constructing meaningful events from the raw happenings of life.<sup>41</sup>"

### **Conclusions on Identity Questions and Civic Transition: Public-Private Seepage and Deciding What Tunisia Is**

---

<sup>41</sup> Bell. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (212).

“If the symbolism of a site of the physical public space in Tunis changes, its perception, use and groups of users will also change” – Dr. Katja Adelhof et. al.<sup>42</sup>

What we have seen thus far is that the panorama and the simulacrum both provide the Tunisian with the opportunity to view themselves through the gaze of the foreigner, and both provide the foreigner with an escape from what is truly Tunisian, or rather a sanitized and consolidated view of Tunisia that places them at one removal. The emotional disturbance— or discomfort— that is produced under constant surveillance and social pressures enhances the value of these spaces, and moreover is the very set of emotions that most traditional-to-transitional societies experience in reorienting and restarting themselves after a period of upheaval. In Tunisia, this discomfort of brushing up against an “other” is particularly pronounced now because of the repressive measures of the Ben Ali regime, which saw to it that the most extreme religious and conservative subsets of Tunisian society were kept silent until his demise. Tunisia itself, in this sense, was a simulacrum that quashed certain opinions and lifestyles and marketed a veneered version of itself not only to the outside world but also to its own citizens. Though Ben Ali’s cult of personality failed, the myth of a completely secular and progressive Tunisia became pervasive enough that many people interviewed for this piece found new presences such as the *niqab*, the *salafis*, and talk of practices such as female circumcision and reinstating polygamy to be aberrations not to their own personal morals but to Tunisian-ness itself. Now, the question of what Tunisian-ness is hangs in the air. Though this question was already a complex one before the revolution, the outpouring of voices that the Ben Ali regime muffled, the seepage of religious life from the private sphere into the public, and the

---

<sup>42</sup> *Changes in Public Space in Tunis*. Free University of Berlin. June 2011.  
<http://publicspacetunis.wordpress.com/>

new imperative placed on finding an answer to this question and holding it fast as a source of stability, have seemingly served to throw the country into even deeper confusion.

Tunisia's natives are now stranger to each other than before.

In a discussion of why Tunisia succeeded during its revolution where Iran's Green Movement failed, Ben Ali's relegation of religion to the private realm is cited as being amongst the reasons opposition was able to maintain a strong position: being an enemy of the regime was completely dissociated from the legitimacy of Islamic rule and could not be made synonymous with opposition of religious ideals.<sup>43</sup> This, however, resulted in an opposition that was not "ideologically cohesive," and had a singular goal of deposing the regime without much thought as to what would transpire in the aftermath. This ideological incoherence is compounded by Tunisia's ethnic and geographic status. In one of former President Habib Bourguiba's speeches, in which he cites all of Tunisia's relevant geopolitical fields, he lists, "the Maghreb, the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean area."<sup>44</sup> Tunisia is the nexus of so many cultures and has been the crossroads of so many civilizations that what results is often utter confusion, or a sense of "no place." While other cities around the world are contained in *cartiers*, with Jewish quarters and Muslim quarters, Little Italy's and Chinatowns, Tunisian cities thrust all of these populations together. And yet, the symbolic demarcations of space are obvious to the point of overstatement, be it the Great Mosque of Carthage set on a hill of the same height and a quarter mile's distance from the hill that houses the Carthage Cathedral, or the delineation of dirty and clean trades in the souks.

---

<sup>43</sup> Heydemann, Steven. *Why Tunisia and Not Iran*. United States Institute of Peace. 25 January 2011. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/jan/25/why-tunisia-and-not-iran>

<sup>44</sup> *President Kennedy with President Bourguiba of Tunisia* (speech). 18 June 1985. <http://www.bourguiba.com/uploads/docs/pdf/en/Reagan-Habib-Bourguiba.pdf>

These historic, traditional specializations come into an ironic clash with the recent slippage and seepage engendered by the Tunisian Revolution, which converted public plazas to demonstration spaces and allowed for an outpouring of religion from the private sphere into the public and political realms; democracy is itself a form of permission. As stated at the outset, the illusion of closedness in Tunisian society leads to an inflexibility in the construction of space, while the mixed nature of Tunisian culture within these enclosures leads even these specialized and designated spaces to feel like “non-spaces.” Even in the broader regional and national sense, Tunisia, whose borders are more historic than any other African nation, retains this status as a rendezvous point or passageway more than a clear entity. Just as the man hawking the panorama sells himself as a conduit, so Tunisia has become prominent by acting as a trading post, a lookout point, an installment in a network of forts and a strategic vantage point for empires. Foucault’s panopticon forms a metonymic relationship not only with the quintessential walled citadel medina of Tunisia, but also with the situation of Tunisia itself.

As “the debate... of what actually constitutes a Tunisian national character,” continues in the aftermath of the revolution, spaces in which to test definitions and experiment with personal and political understandings are essential.<sup>45</sup> Spaces which sit above the political fray, rather than be buried too deeply underground by secrecy or obscurity— as in the Tunisian street art scene in which statements are made under the cloak of night by a loose network of taggers— have a higher likelihood of succeeding as agents of change. I stated before that, often, symbolic lexicons must be broken in order for identities to evolve past the arcane or the archetypal. It is easier, though, to prevent the

---

<sup>45</sup> Alabbasi, Mohammed. *What Makes a Tunisian?* Middle East Online. 8 October 2010. <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=41796>

uptake of inappropriate symbolic understandings than to dissolve the lexicons that are already ingrained. As such, these rooftops and platforms and soapboxes, metaphoric and real, will ideally remain open in the democratic transition, and this openness should not be mistaken for vulnerability or uncertainty but rather for opportunity. As with the rooftop, it is important that claims over and performances in these arenas be temporary, else the space might become assigned or stagnated, or else invaded and conquered by foreign powers or foreign ideas. Such is the nature of representative democracy, in which no one voice and no one party should occupy the political stage for too long. This is how the panopticon ruptures, when the authority that is “visible and unverifiable” becomes a spirit of self-governance that is intangible but legitimate.