

Technology, resistance, and Franco-Arab transculturalism in Nadia El Fani's *Bedwin Hacker*

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Abstract:

The development of social media use in Tunisia between 2008 and 2011, the protests that led to President Ben Ali's ousting from power, and the larger Arab Spring movement demonstrate the power of technology for global resistance. Planting the seeds of opposition to oppressive dominant power, Nadia El Fani's first feature-length film, *Bedwin Hacker* (2002), a cultural product of President Ben Ali's regime, foreshadowed and, to a certain extent, laid the groundwork for social media forms of resistance to emerge in 2010 and 2011. While complete freedom of expression may have seemed very unlikely in 2002, the significance of *Bedwin Hacker* lies in the fact that it identified or showcased individual and grassroots forms of resistance by showing the ways in which the community, the image, communication, and media, especially the Internet and television, can be effective tools of revolution. In *Bedwin Hacker*, the main character, Kalt, a maverick hacker who represents resistance par excellence, disregards any national purview and diffuses subversive messages in Tunisian-Arabic dialect delivered by a cartoon camel on French national television. In this article, I argue that while the possibility for cultural exchange is great between French and Maghrebi cultures, *Bedwin Hacker* exposes the invisible restrictions on freedom that the global North places on the global South. In the film, Kalt uses and reconfigures technology for her own purposes as a mobile citizen who defines freedom in her own terms. Moreover, *Bedwin Hacker*, as well as the Arab Spring, illustrates the ways in which individuals can communicate and speak against power in order to form a collective voice and to redefine themselves as citizens. The circulation of information via technology leads to unprecedented choices and relationships to authority: this redefinition creates the opportunity for social change toward the beginning of the third millennium.

Keywords: technology | global resistance | *Bedwin Hacker* | social media | Arab Spring

Article:

Arab Spring 2011, specifically the Tunisian protests that led to President Ben Ali's ousting from power, has much to teach us about resistance, especially the use of technology and social media networking, toward the beginning of the third millennium. On January 14, 2011, after weeks of mass protests, Tunisian president Ben Ali stepped down and fled to Saudi Arabia after being in power since 1987. The protests, which became known as the Jasmine Revolution, ended a

corrupt and repressive regime. This grassroots political revolution started in 2008 with protests in the phosphate mining regions of Gafsa and Gabès, but took a significant turn on December 17, 2010 with the self-immolation of twenty-six-year-old Mohamed Bouzid, a small town with about a thirty percent unemployment rate. After he refused to pay a bribe, his cart was seized by a police officer. He became very frustrated by his treatment and set himself on fire in front of a government building and later died in the hospital on January 4, 2011.¹

The development of social media use in Tunisia between 2008 and 2011 and the larger Arab Spring movement demonstrate the power of technology for global resistance. During and after the Gafsa protests, from April to June 2008, many Tunisian blogs were censored, including an official ban of Facebook on August 18, 2008 (Rensburg, “Tunisia Was Hit by a Facebook Tsunami” and “Tunisia and the Technologies of Freedom”). Without a rapid worldwide spread of the images, these protests remained in a specific region and the Tunisian government easily squelched them without much media attention. Ben Ali’s decision to lift the ban on September 3, 2008 appears to have indirectly led to his eventual downfall. At that time, Tunisia only had 28,000 Facebook users in contrast to the almost two million Internet users. Two years later, the number of Facebook users grew to nearly two million (Rensburg, “Tunisia Was Hit by a Facebook Tsunami”). Thanks to social network media, namely Facebook, images of the 2011 protests and police mistreatment were diffused nationally and internationally: a cyber café owner posted images on Facebook and one of his contacts, a journalist for Al-Jazeera, in turn circulated the news globally. What started in a small town in Tunisia, spread to the capital of Tunis and ignited other protests in other countries in the region, becoming part of a wider movement of resistance and revolution in the larger Arab world, including Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Images of former Libya’s leader, Muammar Qaddafi, who was killed on October 20, 2011, not only announced the end of the reign of another dictator in the Arab world, but also illustrated the lightning speed of technological circulation of information. Mobile telephone cameras and social media sites made information available to the broader public before reports by government officials confirmed his death.

Arab Spring from an individual act of resistance to the wider Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia where the people said “No!” exemplifies collective resistance. I am using the term resistance both in the general sense of a refusal to accept something and an organized movement against authority. The social movements of 2011, including the occupy movement in many countries, aim to give visibility to restrictive economic and political practices. The Occupy movement, in particular, with its slogan, “We are the 99%,” seeks to represent the general population who do not comprise the one per cent elite and wealthy while challenging the invisible fence created by government policies and corporate interests. Although the outcomes of these social movements are still unfolding, the collective voice of resistance echoes loud and clear around the globe. In particular, the revolutionary resistance in the Southern Mediterranean that is organized especially by unemployed youths has demanded widespread change from the grassroots level that Islamic fundamentalism had yet to provoke (Boukhars 63). Now that iron-fisted dictators in this region have been toppled, the vision of democracy and what form it will ultimately take has yet to be seen. Western economic interests supported by policies coming out of Washington DC or Brussels may indeed strongly suggest a future Western democratic framework.

Planting the seeds of resistance to oppressive dominant power, Nadia El Fani’s first feature-length film, *Bedwin Hacker* (2002), a cultural product of President Ben Ali’s regime, foreshadowed and, to a certain extent, laid the groundwork for social media forms of resistance

to emerge in 2010 and 2011. While complete freedom of expression may have seemed very unlikely in 2002, the year *Bedwin Hacker* was released, the significance of *Bedwin Hacker* lies in the fact that it identified or showcased individual and grassroots forms of resistance by showing the ways in which the community, the image, communication, and media – especially through the Internet and television – can be effective tools of revolution. In “Introduction: Mobile Citizens, Media States,” D.N. Rodowick argues that: “participatory citizenship has shifted the ration between rights and responsibilities. This is a bottom-up notion of citizenship that demands a more loosely defined, though more directly committed, notion of democratic participation, which may not necessarily recognize the authority of the nations” (14). In *Bedwin Hacker*, the main character, Kalt, a maverick hacker who represents resistance *par excellence*, disregards any national purview and diffuses subversive messages in Tunisian-Arabic dialect delivered by a cartoon camel on French national television. Julia, whose agent name is Marianne, attempts to maintain national security by tracking down the anonymous hacker. The technological gymnastics both women perform to infiltrate the other’s system highlight the transnational connectivity between Franco-Arab cultures while underscoring the tensions and mistrust in these transcultural relations. Cultural diffusion and knowledge production – both within France and within Tunisia and between the two countries – are therefore at the heart of this film. El Fani investigates dominant knowledge production and the ubiquitous presence of media images to perturb space and ways of seeing between the North and the South, the Occident and Orient, and the West and the global other.² I suggest that the potential transcultural and transnational exchange and mobility in the film are linked to freedom, specifically attempts to gain or restrict freedom. I will argue that while the possibility for cultural exchange is great between French and Maghrebi cultures, *Bedwin Hacker* exposes the invisible restrictions on freedom that the global North places on the global South. This film specifically renders visible Western hegemonic practices and discourses about the Arab other while showing forms of resistance through images and cyber-connectivity.

El Fani, born in 1960 to a French mother and a Tunisian father (who played the role of Kalt’s uncle in the film), embodies the tensions of the film since she is bilingual and bicultural herself and has lived extensively in both countries (Hillauer 390-391). El Fani was born in Paris, grew up in Tunis, lived in Paris as a teenager, has lived on both sides of the Mediterranean during her adult life, and has settled in Paris (Hillauer 390). Before writing, directing, and producing *Bedwin Hacker*, she worked as assistant director to well-known filmmakers, including Roman Polanski, Franco Zeffirelli, and Alexandre Arcadi. Prior to *Bedwin Hacker* in 2002, El Fani made several short films: *Pour le plaisir* (1990), *Qahwa ashra/Fifty-fifty mon amour* (1992), *Tanitez-moi* (1993), *Du côté des femmes leaders* (1993), and *Tant qu’il aura de la pelloche* (1998). In 2008, El Fani completed a documentary, *Ouled Lenine*, on her father and other communist militants (marin, *Screens and Veils* 132). She continues to make films with a political edge: her documentary, *Laïcité, inch’Allah!* (2011), which proposes separation of religion and state in Tunisia, provoked attacks against the filmmaker, as well as a lawsuit (Barlet, “En politique, ce n’est pas grave de perdre”).

El Fani had to negotiate censorship to get *Bedwin Hacker* made and released: the production details of the film illuminated both her political project and the internal mechanisms at work that directly and indirectly control artistic production within Tunisia during President Ben Ali’s reign when forms of expression were suppressed or censored. Florence Martin explains that “caught between, to simplify, a Western secular world and an Islam-inflected culture, Tunisian cinema has evolved imaginative strategies to create films that avoid various

levels of censorship at home through the use nuances” (“Cinema and State in Tunisia” 282). Perhaps one of the reasons that El Fani succeeded in getting her message of resistance through the censors is that she criticized the French government more directly than the Tunisian government. Josef Guglar points out that Tunisians notice the subtle references to the police state under Ben Ali in El Fani’s film more easily than Western audiences (286). The Tunisian Ministry of Culture demanded the following changes to the screenplay: elimination of references to Saddam Hussein and to Ramadan at a party with drinking. El Fani also changed the reference from Saudis who buy on the Champs-Élysées to general tourists (289). She stood her ground, however, in her refusal to cut the lesbian/bisexual content of the film, threatening an international scandal if the shots were eliminated. In so doing, this is the first Maghrebi film to represent bisexual and lesbian sexuality (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 151).

Content aside, *Bedwin Hacker* breaks ground as the first Tunisian film shot digitally, but El Fani had to struggle to receive funding for the film. She finally received financing from the Tunisian Minister of Culture after four application attempts and funding from Morocco; she did not receive French funds, however, which is very unusual for a Francophone film since former colonies still depend on France in many ways for capital, especially funding for artistic projects. Although El Fani sought European financing, she had difficulty obtaining it since the film goes against Western stereotypes of Arab Muslim countries: for example, the women in the film were not considered “Tunisian” enough since they drank in front of Kalt’s uncle and went out in the evening by themselves (Barlet, “Casser les clichés: A propos de *Bedwin Hacker*”). Because of a limited budget of 800,000 euros, El Fani had to forego expensive establishing shots created an aesthetic that emphasizes dislocation. While El Fani would have liked to include expensive shots done with helicopters and cranes, the form that emerged from limited technical means resulted in an aesthetic that significantly reflects the content of the film. I would like to point out that the high-tech focus was ambitious for a first feature-length film, especially since El Fani had to work within the constraints of a limited budget. Although she would also have liked more money for production and post-production, I posit that the “low-tech” quality of the film actually enhances its content.

Biculturalism, transculturalism, and power

While *Bedwin Hacker* can be described as “the story of an Arab woman challenging Western domination of the global media in cyberspace, with a French secret-service agent in hot pursuit, [with] the qualities of a thriller at times” (Gugler 285), I maintain that the film is profoundly about resistance and self-definition. The main character, Kalt, represents the Tunisian citizen who is obliged out of necessity to know *both* French and Tunisian linguistic and cultural codes while, generally speaking, the French know very little about the Arab other within its national borders and on the other side of the Mediterranean. Kalt, transnational and transcultural, skillfully shuttles between both countries and cultures, embodying the “in-between” as does the filmmaker herself. Martin has pointed out that El Fani first explored this theme in “her second short, *Fifty-Fifty mon amour/Fifty-Fifty, My Love* (1992, 20 min) [that] follows a young woman between Tunis and Paris, between two men, between identities” (*Screens and Veils* 132). In *Bedwin Hacker*, the notion of simultaneity is also important because Kalt is always already both entities. Although she may travel between both places and cultures, she embodies both of them at the same time and ultimately does not have to choose since both elements constitute the way in which she exists in the world. Kalt as a character represents the possibility of existing in both

worlds very well: she speaks both languages without an accent and she negotiates cultural codes flawlessly. In addition, her sexuality is fluid since she sleeps with both women and men. These messages of simultaneity can be read as a message to the expat community in France that one does not have to choose between cultures, as well as a message to French of European descent that French citizens can integrate both European and Maghrebi cultures. While this assertion may seem very obvious, it goes against French national models of assimilation in the colonial past, and to a large extent in contemporary France. Discussion of France's integration of second and third generation citizens of North African descent is still often framed in terms of assimilation; however, I suggest that the notion of simultaneity in regards to national identity gives visibility to individuals who live both existences on a local and transnational scale.

El Fani herself often feels caught between both cultures, since the French do not view her as completely French and Tunisians do not consider her completely Tunisian. In an interview, she states that she feels obliged to claim the position of Franco-Tunisian. She explains that:

As far as I am concerned, I feel that I am completely Tunisian – a particular kind of Tunisian, admittedly – but if people want to think of me as Franco-Tunisian, OK it's true, I'm both. After all, in the Tunis that I know, people speak Arabic and French; that's how we are. [...] in my milieu, everyone speaks French. Even if they aren't French, they all have this problem of living between Paris and Tunis. (qtd. In Hillauer 390-391)

As a result of colonialism, the presence of the French language remains in place for the educated elite in Tunisia due to complicated cultural ties. Likewise, geographic displacement often causes pain, according to El Fani, since Tunisians who live in Paris wish they had the courage to return to their homeland and those who have returned to Tunisia wish they had had the courage to stay in France (391).

The transcultural underpinnings of the film raise questions about nationality, citizenship, and authority, as France tries not only to maintain its geographic borders but the pervious virtual ones as well. Literary and cultural studies show an increasing interest in the influence that physical space has on the construction of cultural practices and interactions. Rodowick argues that: “the compression of space and time effected by the new global media ecology also releases new possibilities for communication and resistance – parallel information networks and alternative strategies of reception and use” (16). In this context, space is understood as a dynamic sphere that enables cultural formation, that governs power structures, and that contributes to new forms of cultural production “wherein the local becomes transnational and global” (16). The notion of space is crucial in the film, since it not only pertains to the control of borders, geographic space, an illegal immigrants, i.e., the monitoring of those allowed to enter and leave the country, but also in the sense of both belonging and choice. Kalt opts for the open area of the Tunisian desert as both a cultural symbol and an area in which she prefers to be; this physical space contrasts with both Tunis, the capital, and Paris, the French capital. Cyberspace then becomes a third entity that may hold much potential for transnational and transcultural exchange, but in similar ways it may also reinforce borders and boundaries.

Julia, as the computer expert on the French side, represents Marianne, the gendered iconographic representation of France. Her code name Marianne evokes the French Republic (Martin, “Transvergence and Cultural Detours” 124, and Gauch 40) that came into existence through revolution in 1789, but a republic that emerged specifically from European Enlightenment ideals. In Eugène Delacroix's painting, *La liberté guidant le peuple* (*Liberty*

Leading the People), revolutionary ideals, her iconographic image is equivalent to the United States' Uncle Sam. The original revolutionary edge has been taken away, and she now represents dominant French culture founded on republican ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which historically have only been available to a limited set of French citizens. The film therefore raises doubt about true transnational and transcultural connectivity when France has historically named itself the dominant cultural reference point. In other words, how will contemporary France fully integrate its citizens of North African descent or recognize its neighbors on the other side of the Mediterranean?

Using the framework of transculturalism, El Fani exposes unequal power dynamics in current Franco-Maghrebi relations. According to Jeff Lewis, in his article "From Culturalism to Transculturalism," "transculturalism is distinguished, in particular, by its emphasis on the problematics of contemporary culture, most particularly in terms of *relationships, meaning-making, and power formation*" (my emphasis). He argues that:

transculturalism is interested in dissonance, tension, and instability as it is with the stabilizing effects of social conjunction, communalism, and organization. It seeks to illuminate the various gradients of culture and the ways in which social groups "create" and "distribute" their meanings. Equally, though, transculturalism seeks to illuminate the ways in which social groups interact and experience tension. (unpaginated)

Lewis goes on to explain that: "Transculturalism locates relationships of power in terms of language and history" (unpaginated). In *Bedwin Hacker*, French is peppered throughout conversations in Tunisia, which shows the ongoing influence of French language in its former colonies. Martin argues that: "Even though the languages are still two distinct entities they each contain traces of the other's passage or continuity" (*Screens and Veils* 145). In the film, this phenomenon is couched as influence and presence embedded within hierarchies of power. Lewis's comments reflect a growing interest in processes that perhaps have always existed, but that globalization has accelerated.

The notion of transnationalism is without a doubt connected to citizenship in *Bedwin Hacker* since immigration, control of borders, and tension between France and its former colonies reveal the stakes of officially sanctioned belonging. During the course of the film, we learn that the main character, Kalt, turned down French citizenship and the possibility of a lucrative career for a self-chosen marginalized life of negotiated freedom in Tunisia. From a Western perspective, Kalt's refusal of French citizenship and therefore economic security does not make sense, or at least very little fiscal sense. Her choice to live in a country that restricts the freedom of expression of its citizens seems contradictory for those living in the West. Since the offer of French citizenship, however, comes as extortion or blackmail, the possibility of life in France is tainted or at the very least the price tag or points of negotiation are clearly marked. The fact that Kalt wants to define both her existence and the way in which she wants to live points to specific notions of freedom. As El Fani states in an interview: "Kalt represents freedom: she could have chosen to 'become somebody' in French society but she preferred a society in which she is not free, and that is the epitome of freedom" (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 146).³ By refusing to follow France's prescription of cultural assimilation and models of success, she fully embodies dissonance and resistance *par excellence*. *Bedwin Hacker* thus exposes contradictions in transnational and transcultural approaches to freedom "in order to signal traces of disobedience or dissidence within one system and the other" (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 149). In

France, the law protects freedom of expression and economic security exists for some social classes; however, dominant social practices and government control do affect its citizens and those living within its national borders.

Technology and multiple forms of space

Technology and multiple forms of space are the main forms and theatres of resistance in the film: technology creates cultural mobility and geographic fluidity characterized by anonymity, immediacy, and exchange. The manipulation of computers, hard drives, satellites, and cell phones allows Kalt to thwart dominant French culture from a village in the Tunisian desert. The presence of both languages, as well as cultures, suggests the possibility of communication across distinct borders that have become blurred through technology. Rodowick notes that “as geography becomes less and less a barrier to communication and movement, cultures become more exposed to one another. This produces an intricate field of tensions, creolizing not only identity but also communities” (16). Cultural contact through technology changes each community, eventually modifying the balance of power.

Kalt’s technological knowledge points out the limits of official information proliferation. As the French authorities disseminate misinformation about the compromise in their security systems to maintain face and the status quo, their authority continues to be undermined by one person’s manipulation of networks and satellites without ideological or religious motivation. Critic Suzanne Gauch explains that: “Hacking into French television broadcasts from Tunisian locations, Kalt nonviolently disrupts the established television order, enjoining spectators playfully to resist passive consumerism” (30). In terms of resistance and activism, Gauch further points out that: “Rather than arguing for great access and more balanced representation on behalf of the global South, *Bedwin Hacker* exposes the less visible restrictions placed on expression and communication in the global North, even as the pace of televisual convergence and media globalization accelerates” (31). By rendering visible these limitations of expression in the North, El Fani invites the spectator to evaluate freedom of expression in France and in other Western countries.

In *Bedwin Hacker*, the French government seeks to regulate who creates knowledge and subsequently circulates information: a high-stakes endeavor that warrants restrictions on individual freedom. Ultimately, the price of freedom is not what is at stake, but rather who gets to set the parameters of freedom or articulates self-determinations. Western hegemonic practices often skillfully elide or make invisible restrictions on its citizens. In other cases, namely at border crossings or the edge of national borders, the limits are policed and regulated. Transnational movement therefore becomes even more layered when the displacement and circulation of physical bodies give way to cyber travel and disruption of national media boundaries. The breaching of these impermeable boundaries not only makes their weaknesses apparent, but heightens government anxieties over official knowledge production and cultural diffusion.

The migration of people, texts, and ideas beyond the nation space and to its former colonies suggests mobility in an increasing global world. The repercussions of these flows on both sides of the Mediterranean manifest in very organic ways through people, music, and culture, which contrasts with the French surveillance of both its physical and cyber borders. People, ideas, and culture ultimately get through and these transnational migrations invariably transform the culture of the “homeland,” allowing for mitigated reception and integration. While

transnational and transcultural mobility through technology creates opportunity for ideas to pass through national borders, constant vigilance of both physical and cyber borders indicates anxiety over the status of the nation. Critic and filmmaker David MacDougall adapts the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of transcultural and provides two distinct concepts: "The transcultural: transcending the limitations of cultures. The transcultural: crossing the boundaries of culture" (245). His definition articulates different degrees by which one may go beyond limitations of culture: from transcending or subverting to crossing over into other cultures.

El Fani, bilingual and bicultural herself, puts both Western and Arab cultures in conversation with one another through the opening images. Both languages are literally inscribed on the digital film in the title sequence. The opening credits in both languages, French and Arabic, show the director's name, "Un film de Nadia El Fani" and its equivalent in Arabic, moving from opposite directions, which reflects the opposite directions in which each language is read (Arabic is right to left, French left to right). They cross over each other first in superimposition and then each side by side, which indicates that both languages, and by extension both cultures, are hopefully more than ships passing in the night, but can reach some sort of coexistence and cooperation. The establishing shot of the desert that opens the title sequence firmly situates the film against the Tunisian landscape both literally and culturally. The desert landscape, a source of pride, beauty, and wonder for Tunisians and an exotic space and source of fear of terrorist hideouts for certain Westerners, occupies a central presence from the very beginning of the film. A medium shot reveals a satellite dish that emerges out of a large barrel in Midès, a remote village; the profile of the satellite dish evokes the crescent symbol present on the Tunisian flag – a visual inscription of Arab culture, as well as a Muslim symbol, coupled with technology.

El Fani chooses the media image, specifically the TV screen and by extension digital cinematic space, as the contested space for transculturalism and cultural diffusion. The opening shots of the film serve as an introduction or exposition to the hacking that will soon follow. The image of the camel appears on the TV screen of a history documentary on U.S. President Harry Truman and atomic bomb energy and weapons. Dressed in a T-shirt and pants, the camel's humanoid appearance links a symbol of the desert to human beings, specifically Western human beings, since the clothing gives the camel an American or Western look. This dromedary that resembles Joe Camel of Camel cigarettes while evoking Saharan caravans (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 143) is thus a transcultural symbol.

From the opening images of the film, El Fani interrogates knowledge production, specifically government control of information, and meaning making on the world stage. Infiltration of this media space occurs through cyber hacking; knowledge production by dominant forces therefore depends on the control and maintenance of image diffusion in this film. The documentary about President Truman – an official version of American history – when overlaid with a cartoon character who later transmits messages in Tunisian dialect of Arabic indicates that while the government, or those that create dominant discourse, circulate these images and stories in a clear way over national television, alternative national and cultural perspectives exist simultaneously. MacDougall specifically links the image to transculturalism as a way of going beyond national boundaries.

Visual representation, it is worth noting, has intercultural as well as transcultural implications. Images, by standing outside the system of "cultures" and national states, create new links based on points of recognition among otherwise separated social groups.

Visually based media – including film, photography, television, and video – have already significantly undermined stereotypical perceptions of national identity, often in the face of nationalist interests. (261)

The image therefore becomes an ideal way to destabilize national identity since alternative representations of marginalized groups can circulate freely, going against the grain of official national discourses.

In addition, El Fani's subversive use of the image exposes unequal power relations between nations and cultures. Critic Radhiuka Gajjala argues that:

If cyberfeminist agendas are to product subversive countercultures or to succeed in existing technological environments so that they are empowering to women and men of lesser material and socio-cultural privilege the world over, it is important to examine how individuals and communities are situated within the complex global and local contexts mediated by unequal relations to power. (54)

Through the television image, El Fani references unequal structures of power, specifically deadly use of nuclear power by Americans, to contextualize global Western power beyond France. The image, global power, and socio-cultural privilege remain closely bound to one another; by subverting the former, El Fani seeks to perturb the other elements.

Transmission of image links both spaces across the Mediterranean, establishing the connection between both cultures and geographic spaces, specifically between the North and the South, France and Tunisia. From the desert, the scene then switches to Paris where there is a peaceful gathering in support of *san papiers*, undocumented immigrants, without any clear transition or demarcations, as critic Carrier Tarr has pointed out in "Franco-Arab Dialogues in/between French, Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French Cinema(s)." This sequence in which the police raid the illegal immigrants (including Kalt's friend, Frida, an Algerian singer living in exile) is transformed into a French television news clip and transmitted to the remote village of Midès where Kalt and Frida's daughter see these images on their television. Kalt states that she is going to get Frida and then the subsequent shot puts her in the 18th *arrondissement* with Sacré Cœur as an evident establishing landmark. After Frida's papers are controlled, presumably because she is Arab, and she is not able to provide the proper documentation, the two women are brought to local police headquarters. Kalt's ingenious hacking into the police officer's computer via her mobile phone to change the identity status of Frida to the niece of the Moroccan ambassador gets her related, but the French authorities later notice the change.⁴

Resistance, the image, and visibility

Although Kalt uses advanced technology to infiltrate French airwaves, she employs, to a certain extent, an older former technology – the television image – to reach the masses. A close-up shot of Kalt wearing her camouflage green military hat situates the women in a van in the desert and establishes a return to Tunisia, without a clear transition once again. The raised satellite dish hints at the forthcoming television hacking incident, specifically the camel superimposed on a soccer match. Under the camel, the following message in Tunisian-Arabic dialect scroll across the screen: "In the third millennium, there are other epochs, other paces, other lives. We are not a mirage ...," signed by Bedwin Hacker. The fact that Kalt chooses to write this message first only

in Arabic indicates that there are other ways of speaking not articulated in the same ways as Western Romance languages. The different direction in which French and Arabic are written and read symbolizes the different worldviews and different starting points of communication.

El Fani chooses the soccer game as a key moment of media infiltration since millions watch this sport on television, accessible via satellite. She selects this medium to convey her message to ensure that a large number of people will see the message. Although television, which has been around for over half a century, is not as cutting-edge as Internet or cyber communication, the diffusion of messages via television can reach more people at one time. The impact of synchronous time therefore should not be underestimated. In contrast, if she only disseminated a cyber-hacked message on the Internet, it would not necessarily be simultaneously accessed by a large number of people. Posting messages to the Internet to a certain extent is like throwing bottles into the ocean despite the potential of reaching a great number of people. Some messages, however, do get a lot of traffic depending on a combination of luck and wit. Websites such as YouTube track the number of hits and, in fact, popularity is measured by the frequency of hits. Through television, Kalt effectively relays her message of visibility via a sport that has the largest audience worldwide, including viewers in the Western world. In so doing, she conveys a highly charged political message, albeit a pacifist one, through mainstream popular culture.

Although the camel has a very simple message of recognition and visibility, this pacifist message seems almost more disturbing to the DST than a message from an Islamist terrorist group whose specific demands could be easily understood and contained. An implicit request for recognition and visibility across national borders is almost incomprehensible for the director of DST who represents a caricature of a state-sanctioned limited mind set. Julia picks up on “mirage” as a reference to a famous/infamous hacker, but the primary message about the visibility of the Maghrebi population in France and across the Mediterranean is essential to the overall message of the film. Julia also recognizes that the first part of the computer hacker’s signature, Bedwin Hacker, is an anglicized version of the feminine of *bédouin*, historic desert nomads (Martin, “Transvergence and Cultural Detours” 125, and Gugler 291). Kalt therefore directly links herself to these nomads described “as wandering rebels against established seats of power” by fourteenth-century historian and proto-sociologist Ibn Khaldûn (Martin, “Transvergence and Cultural Detours” 123).

By referencing historical and legendary figures, El Fani plays with notions of modernity and traditional life that are constantly reappropriated and transformed. In addition, El Fani decided that a female hacker would be an ideal way to counter stereotypes: “I thought of a female hacker to illustrate access to speech. I wanted to show that there are free spirits, south of the Mediterranean. Our images are not broadcast in the North, thus leading to a misunderstanding: people here believe that we are backward people not living in 2002” (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 143).⁵ El Fani not only challenges gender stereotypes, but cultural ones as well by depicting a group of freethinkers on the fringes of Tunisian society who stay connected to international events through the Internet and newspaper. Kalt’s message of recognition and visibility therefore exposes the limits of Western perception by revealing common and often harmful stereotypes of the Arab other.

Referencing Arab culture in general, the cartoon camel that suddenly appears and disappears on the screen over the opening documentary footage and the soccer match has many different layers of meaning. During the soccer game, the anthropomorphic cartoon camel makes a peace or victory sign with its hands. Kalt’s playful use of the cartoonish image of the camel suggests a form of resistance that is nomadic: “in the end, the Western screen ins only a cultural

detour for the camel, rather than a fixed sign” (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 152). According to Martin, El Fani asserts the right to make images incorporating transcultural elements, specifically elements from *both* cultures without having to choose between cultural codes (*Screens and veils* 151-152). Through the reaction of the French authorities, the spectator understands the ramifications of the camel’s messages: embodying both cultures and codes is radical indeed.

Bedwin Hacker shows both the immense effort of decoding the French authorities are willing to undertake to control their airwaves, and, by extension, the dissemination of information. Julia’s colleague, Zbor, points out that this is their first Arab hacker: he says “rebeu,” which is Arab backwards, twice in *verlan*. This is an important example of dominant French culture absorbing expression of minority groups – the equivalent in English would be back slang or urban slang entering mainstream language. Julia at the end of this sequence muses, “So you speak to us in Arabic ...” This initial point of contact in Arabic is received with nervous anxiety by the French authorities, which is reflected in the dark interior filled with screens and computers where Julia, as Agent Marianne, works.⁶

After the first media infiltration incident, the DST launches a misinformation campaign, explaining that the appearance of the camel was a mere technical error. The second hacker message of resistance transmitted over a television news and program montage is a bilingual message in French and Tunisian explicitly stating that “We are not a technical error” and calls people to wear *babouches*, North African slippers. A Maghrebi cultural referent, *babouches*, becomes a sign of resistance when people wear them the next day in the streets of Paris, much to Julia’s dismay. Not only does the statement call out the misinformation efforts of the French government, but it also represents a more insistent claim of recognition. There are indeed other cultures on the other side of the Mediterranean that exist in their own terms but also in relation to the West as the former colonial power. Since *Bedwin Hacker* does not make any specific claims to the French government, monetary or otherwise, this pacifist message of visibility and recognition remains unsettling for dominant French culture. Even though *Bedwin Hacker* is practicing cultural infiltration and not military infiltration, Kalt’s military hat indicates, however, that the stakes for this kind of knowledge control may be just as high. El Fani chooses to depict her with this cap, since the military hat visually challenges national security, however that may be defined.

During a third hacking incident, the camel, once again a larger symbol of Arabic desert culture, targets centers of global capital represented in the financial business complex of La Défense. The camel ushers in another message of resistance: a computer-generated voice in Arabic encourages people to zap the phone lines of La Défense one minute to midnight to crash the system of the financial and commercial district in Paris. The French authorities decide to shut down the financial district in a preemptive attempt to thwart the hacker’s call to resistance. The desired outcome, however, is achieved with millions of euros lost in productivity: *Bedwin Hacker*’s message of visibility has economic repercussions after all.

El Fani also links historical space to contemporary culture by showing vestiges of world history present in Tunisia, which underscores the importance of the physical place in history. One such place is El Jem, an amphitheater that dates back over 2,000 years. By having Frida, an Algerian singer, give a concert in this ancient amphitheater, El Fani shows the continued use of physical space and the interaction between contemporary culture and its complicated past. From this location, Kalt launches her last cyber hacking attempt from her mobile phone: the camel once again appears over the French television programs with arms raised in the peace/victory sign. The proliferation of the camel’s image, culminating in a total of ten at one time, and its

sudden arrival and disappearance, suggests an inability to control the other. The scene in the amphitheater shows the layering of technology with the past, especially in terms of physical places that have lasted centuries and millennia. Once again, the multiple mappings of space for the characters expose the importance of culture and physical location. How do the characters locate themselves against a backdrop of world history, Tunisian culture, former colonial French rule, and global capitalism? Cyberspace seems to offer an alternative space where transnationality may be moot.

El Fani connects the open space of the Tunisian desert to the cyber computer realm. The opening shot of this sequence reveals an unintelligible space that subsequently becomes understood as the motherboard of a computer, a part of a computer that is rarely seen unless one is a self-proclaimed computer geek. While the visual similarity between the motherboard and previous shots of the desert is striking, the shot also suggests a transformation of a familiar trope in French and Maghrebi literature and film. As we know, the desert can represent an open space of possibility, freedom, and the unknown. By connecting the Tunisian desert to a third space, the relatively new domain of cyberspace, El Fani suggests that the virtual world may offer more “connectivity” and the possibility of belonging than either France or Tunisia can afford. Likewise, this third space may be a way to circumvent “layer after layer of economic, political, social, and cultural oppression” (Martin, *Screens and Veils* 152) that both countries apply to those living within its borders. Since hacking can occur from Paris or the remote Tunisian desert via satellite, pinpointing the specific physical place then becomes very challenging for French authorities. Which shows that dislocation is becoming a norm and form of resistance.

What does this suggest for future relations and communication between the two cultures? The inability for individuals to connect in a meaningful way face-to-face as evidenced by the police interrogation of Frida in the 18th *arrondissement*, for example, contrasts with the instantaneous connections via the Webcam that facilitate communication. The immediate albeit remote connections between people and nations supersede direct contact, which could lead to mutual understanding. On the other hand, does the cyber/Internet connectivity imply false communication between the two cultures and nations? At the end of the film, both women say “Dommage que tu sois de l’autre côté” (“Pity you’re on the other side”), meaning in terms of cyber hacking and the DST. These statements – Kalt’s initial one and Julia’s reply in echo – can be interpreted culturally and nationally as well: they would like to be together but find themselves on either side of a huge gulf of misunderstanding and distrust.

The former Tunisian leader, Habib Bourguiba, insisted on an early transnational Francophone community “situated beyond politics or geography – its criteria are above all philosophical, involving the great ideals of 1789 and the aspirations of humanity to freedom, dialogue and mutual support” (Majumdar 3). Margaret Majumdar argues that this abstract form of the universal, on that “is more *virtual* than *concrete*,” has given way to an insistence on geography in the reformulation of *La Francophonie*. If we understand the second meaning of virtual in terms of cyberspace, then this third space “situated beyond politics or geography” is no longer an abstract notion, but one linked to electronic connectivity. Martin insists on the importance of the Web and digital media for this film: “The narrative itself plays on the fluidity of movement, the blurring of nation state borders – indeed, their potential erasure on the World Wide Web – in the context of the polymorphous reality: individual, political, virtual, and digital (this is the first Tunisian film shot digitally)” (“Transvergence and Cultural Detours” 121). The Web creates another space of interaction, one that simultaneously goes beyond nations and points out their limits.

The penultimate image of the film, however, reveals France's preferred model of immigration – assimilation. Julia and her boyfriend, Chams, leave the remote village, holding hands; Julia takes the initiative and grabs his hand, almost pulling him along at first. Their pairing at the end can be read as dominant French culture coupled with the assimilated immigrant as the triumphant model since the spectator assumes that Chams is returning to France with Julia and not staying in the desert with Kalt. Chams represent the “good” postcolonial subject since he is the assimilated Tunisian citizen who wants French citizenship and is willing to comply with dominant cultural norms and practices in order to obtain that citizenship. Julia's romantic involvement with him suggests acceptance by dominant French culture, but one that is predicated on his choice of France over the place of his ancestors. The spectator assumes that the coupling of Julia and Chams, read together as the French republic and the assimilated immigrant, is the last image of the film since the credits are rolling; however, the very last image, a cut to Kalt smiling at the spectator in a medium shot, suggests a vision of crafty resistance and undermines the assimilation model. In terms of resistance, whether illegal computer cyber hacking or personal resistance to dominant Western culture, the last image of Kalt smiling directly at the camera suggest a positive idea of freedom and happiness at the end of the film: she has made choices for herself and has not yet been caught by the French government. The specifics of her future, however, remain uncertain or at least unimagined at the closing of the film.

The last image of the film, open to interpretation, suggest that future relationships between the South and the North may be defined in different, perhaps new cybernetic ways. They do, however, insist on the materiality of the people who travel between both spaces. Julia, for example, goes to the remote village to stop Kalt and takes Chams's hand at the end; this latter image of physical proximity contrasts with their previous Webcam chats while he is in Tunisia. The physical displacement of characters between the two countries coupled with virtual communication suggests that transcultural exchange is possible though the content, for the time being, may be fraught with misunderstanding.

El Fani links technology and resistance together to show the possibility of individuals who enact change on local and transnational scales, thus encouraging a reformulation of national power. New technologies indeed give shape to new forms of political participation. As Poster asks, “Can the new media promote the construction of new political forms not tied to historical territorial powers?” (qtd. In Rodowick 20). For Arab Spring 2011, a blogger explains the ability of social media to engender new political engagement: “Twitter and Facebook played a very important role in our revolution, and I am confident that if we were not using social media we wouldn't have accomplished our goals. Social media empowered our communication infrastructure” (Rensburg, “Tunisia and the Technologies of Freedom”). Almost a decade before El Fani's depiction of individuals who say “no” to powerful structures created the representational possibility for acts of resistance that go against the grain of hegemonic forces. In terms of technology, a major shift occurs from Kalt's fictional illegal cyber hacking to social media proliferation in Tunisia between 2008 and 2011. Unlike Kalt's hacking that requires very specialized technical computer-programming skills, social media only necessitate an Internet connection. Constant communication, especially twenty-four-hour information circulation through social media, opens up new channels of resistance unimagined less than a decade before Arab Spring 2011.

In *Bedwin Hacker*, Kalt uses and reconfigures technology for her own purposes as a mobile citizen who defines freedom in her own terms. Foregrounding resistance through the use of technology, El Fani foreshadowed the Arab Spring movements that depended on social media,

novel forms of communication and visibility, in order to capture worldwide attention. Likewise, *Bedwin Hacker*, as well as the Arab Spring, illustrates the ways in which individuals can communicate and speak against power in order to form a collective voice and redefine themselves as citizens. New forms of political power may in fact depend on these new forms of technology. The circulation of information leads to unprecedented choices and relationships to authority: this redefinition creates the opportunity for social change toward the beginning of the third millennium.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank my colleagues who attended our inaugural department LLC Works! Research series for their valuable comments on a draft of this essay.
2. These terms have replaced the “first world:” and the “third world” designations since the second world no longer exists after the end of the Cold War.
3. Martin provides her translation of Olivier Barlet’s original interview with El Fani in French: “Kalt représente la liberté: elle avait le choix de ‘devenir quelqu’un’ dans cette société française mais a préféré une société où elle n’est pas libre, ce qui est le summum de la liberté.”
4. The DST (Direction de la surveillance du territoire), is the equivalent to the CIA/Homeland Security.
5. “L’idée m’est venue d’une pirate informatique, pour une prise de parole. J’avais envie de dire qu’au Sud de la Méditerranée on trouve des esprits libres. Nos images ne sont pas diffusées au Nord et il en ressort un malentendu terrible qui fait croire aux gens qu’on est des arriérés et qu’on ne vit pas en 2002” (Barlet, “Casser les clichés).
6. This dark space represented of the French authorities contrasts with the lively colors, music, and laughter between friends and family in Tunisia.

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