

BOUCHRA

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Abiba Coulibaly

Bouchra begins with a mischievous, autotuned incitement: 'Pour your heart out / reveal your secrets to me' transmitted into its heroine's bejewelled canine ears. The synth-heavy production and reverberant cadence are distinctly Moroccan, while the background sound, the rickety patter of the MTA, places us firmly in New York. It is these two locations and their respective cultures – sometimes discordant, sometimes harmonious, always cacophonous – that animate the film and harbour the jittery waxing and waning of its titular character's romances.

Despite the film's musicality, *Bouchra* rewrites the coming out story as one defined by a hushed non-event rather than a polyphonic implosion, posing the question: what does one do when one's coming out is met without response – after build-up and release, an inscrutable quietus? Offset by its lush sensual and surreal qualities, the film is a tentative excavation of resounding silence. Nonetheless, Bouchra's transnational formative experiences and identity – mirroring Bennani's own – are employed in a manner that forgoes tropes of estrangement, conflict or split identity and instead produce nimble, capacious and self-assured sensibilities as she navigates the abundant spectrum of unexpected frustrations and flirtations of city life between New York and Casablanca. Given the dearth of queer, and specifically lesbian, narratives in both African and Arabic-language cinema, *Bouchra* makes a seminal and seismic contribution to a genre and loosely regional cinema, while employing innovations in narrative and form whose impacts transcend genre and identity labels.

When the silence yields, perhaps the most painful part is Bouchra's mother's reaction; she is not vitriolic but pitiful, viewing her daughter's sexuality as a burden when, at its most evocative, risqué and playful, *Bouchra* reminds us of its pleasure. Bennani employs her signature, gamified and heightened FX for sensory flourishes, from the kinetic hiss of a cigarette being ground out, to lingering on a gleaming fluorescent thread of saliva stretched between two snouts. Equally expressive are Bouchra's molten eyes, which possess an impossible, endearing depth and luminescence. When she misses a flight to play footsy in a bar with Lamia – a buxom bear whose affections ignite the first flutter of romance in the wake of a decade-long relationship, and who promises to remedy Bouchra's regret of never having made out with someone in her first language – the lustrous, orbital bar lights are the only thing that outshine them. Following the directions of the chancy opening line with tact and humour, *Bouchra* captures the heady, fragile sparkle of pouring one's heart out again after having pieced it together.

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