

Cinema's proximity to Morocco, Morocco's cinema of proximity

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To define the essence of Moroccan cinema in a few words is a difficult task. This difficulty is due to the fact that the Moroccan identity itself is not clear. Indigenous Amazighi groups, Arabs coming with Islam from the Arabian Peninsula, Andalusia's refugees from Spain, Africans, all these elements, plus the heterogeneous result of their mixture, compose a Moroccan identity that, once we try to circumscribe, we grant it automatically a political color and we risk falling in with the classifying clichés. Thus, as Moroccan filmmaker Saad Chraïbi points out, the question of Moroccan identity is that it is in constant evolution, and imposes on Moroccan cinema a constant rectification of vision and plan of action. The author of the film **Chronicle of Normal Life** (1991) concluded that we cannot create a cinema, but *cinemas* that respond to different aspirations and expectations, taking into consideration all the cultural and artistic components, and configurations of a multiple and richly diversified Morocco. As result to this, filmmakers of Morocco whether are the kind of the local and veteran Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi, or the kind of the young, living abroad, Hassan Legzouli agree on one truth: there are Moroccan films, but no Moroccan cinema.

Moroccan cinema(s)

To speak of Moroccan national cinema is also misleading. National cinema, to mention a few ingredients, is often defined by a strong national film industry, massive production specifically for the big screen, ample distribution, and a solid film consumption infrastructure. Morocco produces films indeed, but is this enough? The government support for Moroccan filmmakers residing in Morocco or living abroad has helped increase production by the astonishing number of some 30 to 40 long feature films and more than 80 shorts a year, surpassing their traditionally leading Maghreb neighbors Algeria and Tunisia. Other indicators on the status of national cinema such as film culture, institutionalized criticism, academic film studies support, and literary film adaptation, to mention a few are showing signs in Moroccan cinematic life more than ever. Slogans, such as "*Moroccan nouvelle vague...New Moroccan cinema*", although effective stimulants more than verifiable facts, are showing fecundity and dynamism. All point of views and styles are explored by Moroccan filmmakers who stand out by originality, taste of diversity, and mixture of genre.

Breaking from the colonial past

Since its beginning, with the arrival of French pied noire camera operator Felix Mesguich to Casablanca in 1907, and the first ever film shot entirely in Morocco, "Mektoub" by the French J. Pinchon and Daniel Quenton, in 1922, cinema and Morocco have been in close contact. Cinematic imagery and imaginary were shaped and configured by cinematic images from

Casablanca, Morocco, and Orson Welles's *Othello* to mention a few. Morocco was an objectified orientalist backdrop from which colonial cinema inspired its test and thesis. Although to a lesser degree interested in veiled women, and indigenous peoples with blood shot eyes captivating white western women, as Pierre Boulanger put it in *Le Cinema Colonial*, Moroccan dunes, and minarets still attract worldwide filmmakers from different film industry backgrounds and diversified cinema authorship. Whether it be the scene for roman gladiators, biblical prophets, or the journey of the stereotypical western adventurous tourist, Morocco still assumes this function of cinematic chronotope, sometimes shadowing symbolically a narrative, as is the case of **The Last Temptation of Jesus Christ**, by Martin Scorsese; sometimes functioning as a significant component in the semantic of the film as is the case of **Babel** of the Mexican Alejandro González Iñárritu.

The first generation of Moroccan filmmakers was young when cinema in Morocco was an entertainment largely reserved for the French colonizers. They may well have been first introduced to the classics of French cinema through screenings arranged in schools by French authorities. By the time they became filmmakers themselves, Moroccan screens were colonized by the same mixture of films found everywhere in the third world: commercial US, French and Italian films, supplemented by Hindi and Egyptian melodramas and Hong Kong karate films. Being members of westernized bilingual elite, of the kind found throughout the postcolonial world, Moroccan filmmakers, as Roy Ames (2005) remarks, can probably claim to be the best-educated group of filmmakers in the world, with qualifications which many academics might envy. Whether educated and trained in France, (the prestigious IDHEC), Lodz's Poland, Moscow; or self taught cine-club activists, à la French cinémathèque du jeudi, Moroccan filmmakers were seeking new forms of expression. Cinema meant for them this ambition to express their reality; and to express it as seen from a Moroccan perspective. Pioneer Moroccan cinema, of the first years of independence from French colonialism, was not only an echo of independence and emancipation discourse, dominant in literature and Arab thought of the period; it was also a call toward another independence, this time from the weight of colonizer's cinema.

Sharing the same interest as his contemporaries in the field of philosophy and literature, like Abdullah Laroui and Abid Aljabri, Moumen Smihi engaged himself in this emancipatory task of freeing the Moroccan image. Postulating a local vernacular of film language was the subject of his theoretical writing in *Hadith Assinema* (About Cinema), the two parts volume he published. His suggestion was a new cinema that engaged and continues engaging in this postcolonial moral responsibility that, in the words of Edward Said, "... search what might constitute the African being, the Arab being, their imaginary, their culture". Smihi's task was quite difficult in the sense that the medium of expression, that is cinema, is rooted in western tradition in all aspects, mostly the narrative one. To invent an Arab cinema consisted of, first and foremost,

breaking from the narrative patterns put forward up to now by the west. Smihi wrote: "New plot structure should have roots in the national culture insofar as this can be recovered. To tell our stories to ourselves and to others is to relate them within our patterns of narratives." Smihi's own approach, inspired from classical Arabic literature, precisely 9th century Al Jahiz narrative style, consisted of "proceeding by successive departure or entries derived from the films theme but also in opposition to linear narrative, which by this fact became disarticulated, or articulated in another way." (*Hadith Assinema- 2001*).

This approach found its expressive materialization in his masterpiece **El Chergui** (The Wind of the East) 1975. According to Smihi it is "a Moroccan film made for Moroccans before anyone else". El Chergui is based on the tangling together of small narratives. It is the story of Aisha whose life is turned upside down when her husband decides to marry a second wife. Evoking the condition of Arab women in general, El Chergui is a tale heavy on symbolism that translates Smihi's artistic and reexamining project. This project starts from offering another outlook to the colonial nostalgic space of the city of Tangier, where the story of Aisha takes place. The city of Tangier, as Smihi put it, had an international reputation which is quite exaggerated for the most part. Tangier, as known for Moroccans, is where El Chergui (wind from the East) and El Gharbi (wind from the West) meet. The two winds ruled over the city, which, in addition is the meeting place of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. The setting, for this story of soft revolt, that took place in the wake of Moroccan independence, is emblematic. Shattered by injustice, exploitation and oppression, it is the space of collision between colonial aggression, and new winds of change. Arab thinkers, who influenced in great deal Morocco's independence movement, were refugees from the East and settling in Tangier. Smihi's cinema in theory and practice has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves.

Realism: 'traces' not to be erased

Being conscious of this conflicted relationship between the giant industry of western cinema and their homeland perception of it, where the medium and the art of cinema are still regarded as a colonizer tool of westernization, early Moroccan filmmakers developed this sense of self representation, to forge a Moroccan nationalism and gain an audience lost to the above mentioned production. The result turns out to be what the majority of Moroccan film critics coined as *the scenario of proximity*; this mise en scene centered on Moroccan reality with whatever elements may forge it, and whatever this reality may entail. The 70's generation of Moroccan filmmakers opened the road wide, to generations yet to come, with one guiding sign. Making cinema is making a cinema of proximity.

In Smihi's tradition of breaking from cinematic colonial patron and patterns, Hamid Benani made his debut feature **Wechma** (Traces) 1979. This highly impressive film tells the story of an orphan who grows from awkward child to delinquent adolescent following a path that can only

lead to death. As Fatima Zahra and Fouad Souiba mentioned in their book *Un siècle de cinéma au Maroc* 1995, “Wechma was a true revolution in Maghrebian cinema. For the first time, a filmmaker had thought deeply about the filmic language which he was going to use, shot by shot, had sought and found an original form of expression which distinguished itself totally from the clichés of Western art or commercial cinema and went directly back to the sources of the Moroccan imaginary.”

El Chergui and Weshma along with **A thousand and One Hand** (1972), of Rome educated Souheil Benbarka, are considered by critics in both Maghreb and Europe as one of Morocco’s major contributions to world cinema. These experimental works, as Tunisian cineaste Farid Boughedir put it, also “... protest against the blockage of a society stuck in its rites and dogmas by adopting an extremely innovative form, with a great power of expression but at times hardly accessible to the non-initiated.”

Moroccan cinema of the 80’s was an exposé and reflection of the realities of post colonial Morocco. Three major themes were: *the search for identity*, *social injustice* (particularly with regard to the status of women), and *the suffocation of the individual*. In the same route paved by Hamid Benani, Jillali Ferhati, who had studied Literature and sociology in France and cinema in Poland, began a career devoted to social realism with **A Hole in the Wall** (1978), a study of life on the margins in Tangier, as seen through the eyes of a deaf-mute. With **Reed Dolls** (1981) and **The Beach of Lost Children** (1991) Ferhati prove to be another key figure in the socially committed realist stream of Moroccan cinema.

Equally concerned with society, although at a rural level, Ahmed El Maânouni made **The Days, the Days** (1978) a close perceptive and realistic look at everyday life in a Moroccan village, filmed without any trace of folklore or exoticism. The title of this film is inspired by Aliyam Aliyam’s song from *Nass-el Ghiwan’s* band, whose music, based on traditional Arab, Amazighi, and African sources, is extremely popular in Morocco. To this band El Maânouni dedicated his second feature **Trances** (1981), a study in the music and the group, can be considered a leading cinematic work in the genre of film-essay. El Maânouni distinguished himself as a film author with the musicality of his pictures and his docu-drama style films form. His film are this crossroad where reality meets fiction and poetry meets narration, configuring an image about a lyrical Morocco that leave a lasting impression in anyone fortunate to have seen his film. El Maânouni invented a counter-Casablanca cinematic *imaginaire* for Morocco, this *cinelandia* inhabited by Martin Scorsese, Peter Gabriel, and Hakim Belabbes.

Another milestone in Realistic tradition is Mohamed Reggab (1942- 1990). A graduate from Moscow, Reggab made his sole feature film, the widely praised, **The Barber of the Poor Quarter** (1982). This is the story of a poor barber deprived of everything, including his shop and his wife, by the rich man- an ex-collaborator with the French- who now controls this area of

Casablanca called *darb-alfoukara* (the Poor Quarter). This masterpiece, unparalleled in the Arab cinema of the late eighties and early nineties, offered an exemplary work in Third Cinema tradition. Mixing styles from Italian Neorealism and Brazilian Cinema of Hunger, Reggab was a craftsman using cinema to the limits of what it can offer as art and a medium of expression, in terms of social commitment and engagement. With very limited resources, Reggab shot the scenes of his film in *sitio*, engaging the space and his real inhabitants **The Barber of the Poor Quarter** is a surgical analysis of a Moroccan society oppressed by political and social norms. It is a picture that was, as the filmmaker Abd-el-Kader Lagtaâ put it, “questioning society, questioning social practices, and questioning how people behave, and the kind of relationship they have with one another”. The commercial failure of **The Barber of the Poor Quarter** with local audiences, attributed to the film’s style, intelligibility, and obscurity, is hardly convincing. Reggab died in debt in 1990.

Following in the same path of social commitment traced by Reggab, although adding their respective degree of audacity, Abd-el-Kader Lagtaâ, Hassan Benjalloun, and Hakim Nouri, Farida Bourkia, and others, made films drawing attentions to troubling phenomena in Moroccan reality, such as gaps between the poor and the rich, corruption, child servitude, prostitution and displacement. Films from the range of **A love Affair in Casablanca** (1991), **Other People Celebration** (1990), and **Stolen childhood** (1993), substantiate the essence of Moroccan cinema in this *mise en scene* of proximity. Although this social criticism as much as it can be an element of identification for the audiences, it can also have an opposite effect and turn into an agent of alienation. What the literary and film scholar, Ahmed Ararou, coined as *Miserabilism* (for *Realism*) tints Moroccan cinema with this sort of *dolorism* making of it a cinema of dead ends, and pessimism, distancing, as result of it, local audiences from local screens.

Cinema of Heritage: toward a constructive positive nostalgia

Deviating from this line of macabre social realism, Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi found a way out through the potential of family centered themes, and humoristic style. His masterpiece **Looking for My Wife’s Husband** (1993), is crowned the most successful film ever in Morocco with audience figures of around a million spectators. It is the story of Hadj Ben Moussa, a wealthy jeweler from Fez, in constant conflict with his young and beautiful third wife, until he discovers -after divorcing her for the fourth time- that he can only take her back if she consummates a marriage with another man. Of autobiographical origin, Tazi skillfully parallels between past and present, using the double temporality charged space of Fez, the medina, inside the wall, where- “... you can imagine we are in the 1950s... ,” and the modern Fez of outside the walls where “...you are squarely in 1993” as he said in essential interview with Kevin Dwyer (2004). This “atemporality” has a social critical function which consists in “...taking something that is happening today and situating it in a rather timeless period, allowing [you] to

be critical but not in too obvious a way..." Themes of polygamy, patriarchy, polarization between traditional behaviors, rooted in an unquestionable past, and some sort of neocolonial wrapped up modernization, made Tazi, in making this film, engage significant key players such as screenwriter and feminist cineaste, Farida Benlyazid who wrote the script, and also the worldwide read sociologist Fatima Mernissi, acting a role with heavy intertextual allusions. Looking for My Wife's Husband was also a project of creating, a la Jacquot of Agnes Varda, this sort of screen/skin memory of Moroccan heritage. Tazi described his film as "a tremendous amount of work, but I was fully convinced of the need for it, because we have to impress these things, our own heritage".

Conscious of the positive engagement of heritage, or what Tazi called *constructive positive nostalgia*, Farida Benlyazid made her directing debut; the well studied and acclaimed, **A Gateway to Heaven** (1987). One of the first Moroccan films dealing with the problem of *identity and displacement*, it is the story of a young woman Moroccan father and French mother who, upon returning from France, rediscovers her Islamic identity and goes through a process of spiritual transformation. Inspired from sources of feminist discourse and Islamic Sufi tradition, Benlyazid cleverly set the tone for, not only Moroccan feminist filmmaking, but also for Moroccan women filmmakers' revisionist style later depicted in Leila Marrakchi and Nargiss Annajar's work. Her second feature **Women's Wiles** (1999) is a journey in this area of feminine Arab-Islamic literature often ignored, and silenced, in mainstream discourse, and/or obscured by western stereotypes and clichés. Farida Benlyazid, as Valerie Orlando put it, "portrays Moroccan women as dynamic and resourceful as they struggle to exist within the paradigms of a very patriarchal society where they are often disproportionately affected by illiteracy and poverty." (Screening Morocco- 2011)

Although not too daring in confronting taboos, because "there are limits beyond which one must not go" as Tazi advised, Moroccan films were conscious but never insensitive to Morocco's historical, social and political issues. During the era of King Hassan II, known in local literature as *The Lead Years*, films would metaphorically or symbolically criticize the social situation, but filmmakers learned never to be overtly critical. "Cinema was more of an adequate means of denunciation and not a force with the goal of blind and intolerable subversion", as director Mustapha Derkaoui justifies.

Neorealist new Moroccan cinema

After King Hassan II's death in 1999, Morocco started a new era of political transparency and openness unmatched anywhere in the Arab world. Moroccan cinema was the mirror that reflected these societal and political transitions. A new generation of filmmakers, living in Morocco and abroad, along with the pioneer generation, started making a new picture. Influences shifted from Pasolini and Godard to Abbas Kiarostami and Emir Kusturika. Moroccan

Cinema ceased to be this reflective spectacle, and became a generator of awareness and discussion within Moroccan society and parliament. As a media, it impact and advance change as the country moves forward in the millennium. Cinema started exploring the themes of *political oppression*, opened by films about the Lead Years (from 70s to mid 80s) during which random incarcerations and disappearances of thousands took place. Saad Chraïbi **Jawhara** (2003), Hassan Benjalloun **Black Room** (2004), **I Saw Ben Barka Get Killed** (2005) by Serge Le Peron and Said Smihi, and **Memory in Detention** (2004) by Jilali Ferhati, among others, are this corpus of visual treatment of stories of former prison detainees. Ferhati's film, which was distributed across Morocco in 2004, is considered to be the best and most effective of his range of Moroccan film production. Reopening this chapter of Moroccan history Ferhati, at no time, was pointing the finger at any party. The plot vagueness with regard to a specific time frame, generalized the theme, inviting audiences to think about freedom and human rights on a universal level, as precious and always in danger of being abused.

The majority of films produced between 2001 and 2005, Lead Years films offered a contextualized parallel reading to episodes of human right abuses happening, in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. In this fashion, they appeal also to the worldwide conscious to reexamine and reassess the act and motivation behind these crimes. As French film critic Loic Gourlet said in regards to **I Saw Ben Barka Get Killed**: "Ben Barka is the prototype of a man one should not kill. When men like Ben Barka are killed, we find ourselves with Bin Laden".

Moroccan political openness on dark episodes of history went parallel with openness at social, religious and linguistic levels. The marginalized Morocco of Shanty towns, homeless and street urchins became also a central theme on the big screen. This other Moroccan version of New Realism started with Nabil Ayouch's masterpiece **Ali Zaoua** (1999), the first Moroccan and Arab film to be considered for an Oscar. Ali Zaoua is an outstanding study of street children and an uncompromising portrait of life in the slums of Casablanca. The children in the film are all played by genuine orphans and abandoned children, whom Ayouch met and trained to represent themselves in this crossover between reality and fiction picture. A decade later, Nabil Ayouch went back to the same slums of Casablanca, to closely examine the sociocultural roots of terrorism in an astonishing cinematography, **God's Horses** (2012).

Nabil Ayouch started this trend of street-margin realism in Moroccan cinema of which Kamal Kamal **The Moroccan Symphony** (2005), and Mahmoud Frites satire **X- Chamkar** [formerly a Glue sniffer] are important additions. Although **Casanegra** (2008), directed by Nourddine Lakhmari, went even further in terms of transporting to reel realism, the long time silenced reality of Darija's (Moroccan Arabic Vernacular) obscene language and vulgarity. The same realistic filmable ingredient he used later on in his latest work **Zero** (2012).

Amazighi and MRE Films: Morocco *In*National and *Inter*National cinema

Twenty first century Moroccan cinema is also a cinema of linguistic diversity. For the first time, after countless years of oppression, Amazighi language and culture (also known as Berber) found their way to the silver screen. Once again Casablanca, the Moroccan cinematic chronotope by excellence, the setting of multiethnic, multilingual, class struggle, is the ideal setting for a film where characters finally speak their native Amazighi tongue. Thus appears the Casablanca of the Italy trained, and director of Ourzazat's film school, Mohammed Asli In **Casablanca Angels Do Not Fly** (2004). English subtitles wouldn't be able to reflect the *diglossiac* use in film dialogue of Darija, Amazighi language, along with French, much less the conflictive meaning of this polyphony (this is true about almost any Moroccan film).

In less than a decade Moroccan Amazighi films became visible, locally and widely celebrated, such films as **Itto Titrit** by Mohammed Oumouloud Abbazi, **Tamazight Oufella** by Mohammed Mernich and **Sellam and Dimitan** by Mohammed Amin Benamroui, were seen in international festivals, reflecting an essential component of Moroccan culture and society wrongly obscured and silenced for many years, if not centuries.

Moroccan cinema is also the cinema of displaced Morocco. MRE filmmakers-*Marocains Resident à L'étranger* (Moroccans Living Abroad) – share the same fate of other displaced Maghrebi cinemas by being funded by France, Belgium, and Canada. But also they have the advantage of being supported by CCM (Moroccan Center of Cinematography), as part of the politic of its director **Nourddine Sail** to promote the image of Morocco abroad. MRE filmmakers are a prime example of this cultural Hybridity pointed out by Roy Armes. Defining Hybridity, in the figurative sense, as anything derived from heterogeneous sources, Roy Armes sees Maghrebian cinema as a relevant insight. Split between Morocco and Europe, and North America, MRE filmmakers view the world as global citizens and impose this view in a film praxis focusing on democratization and human values in a borderless geography. From their double stand point, their cinema figures as a continuing treatment to general topics in human rights addressed by filmmakers in their adoptive country, as much as it offers another perspective of some issues treated by their countrymen filmmakers in the homeland Morocco. "Their cinema completes ours as ours complete theirs, we were the one who invited them to come home," said Saad Chraïbi.

In this fashion, Ismail Ferrouki's **Le Grand Voyage** (2004) is a film that can be read in two ways; in inward and outward with regard to Moroccan reality of displacement. It is this road movie about a spiritual journey toward the source. From another side it can be approached as a depiction of the prognostic reality of this immigration aspiring protagonist almost present in every Moroccan film made in Morocco in the last two decades.

MRE filmmaking's stamp of accented cinema, in Hamid Naficy terms, is doubly applicable to describe their work either locally or globally. Their cinema is a body of work that forces new

meanings in redefining the notion of Moroccan identity, and suggesting new interpretations of Moroccan national culture. Leila Marrakchi's **Marock** (2005) ignited a polemic around what is Moroccan and what is not in the film, to the furthest point of questioning the filmmaker's intentions in pushing this different, westernized, and somewhat neocolonial normalizing agenda, in the opinion of too many, to mention director Mohammed Asli among others.

MRE cinema also became synonymous of delicate and stylish cinematography with contents marked by audacity in treatment. The aftermath of 9/11 pushed some of the MRE cinema to treat more generally global issues of shared citizenship, harmony and tolerance, as *Le Grand Voyage* suggests, by offering an image of an international Islam as a religion of peace. In this same spirit Nabil Ayouch's **Whatever Lola Wants** (2008) offered itself not only as a setting for reexamined stereotypes, but also as a set of unsettled borders between geographies and languages, and also cinemas, and cinematic codes. Images of New York with Arabic music in the soundtrack, Moroccan actors speaking Egyptian dialect, made this film a set of juxtaposition between reel and reality, communication and stereotype.

MRE filmmaker's style is diverse and polyvalent, reflecting their nomadic self as displaced agents between realities and different cinematic experiences. Their cinema keeps its mobility in the realm of doubt and question, and incessant interrogation. This transcendental style is what distinguishes, the Chicago resident, Hakim Belabbes among MRE and other Moroccan filmmakers at large. His latest film **Defining Love: A Failed Attempt** (2012) is an astonishing meditative docudrama, with stunning imagery of Morocco, providing the backdrop to an allegorical exploration of love. Defining Love as Moroccan film columnist Bilal Mermid pointed out cleverly: is an attempt to define this diligent and delicate cinema of Hakim Belabbes. It is a physical realization of what Morocco aspires from MRE cinema; that is offering film lovers at home and abroad a universal message with authentic estheticism, and a meaningful experience in film.