

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Producing Public Intellectuals: Shifting Scales and Social Critique in Moroccan Cinema

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Posteconomic liberalization, increased openness to global capital, and new distribution mechanisms have opened up avenues for alternative storytelling and depictions of Moroccan life that challenge hegemonic narratives about culture and society through cinema. This coincided with Morocco's emergence as one of a few small countries with the political will to restructure the film industry and the concomitant rise of a new generation of Moroccan filmmakers ensconced in transnational networks of policy, funding, and storytelling. This article uses industry and discourse analysis to study the shifting industrial logics of Moroccan cinema and the ways in which this "new" cinema is, in turn, sparking debates and resetting the boundaries for dissent in authoritarian contexts.

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On a cool Friday evening in September 2013, 1,700 people filed into Toronto's historic Elgin Hall for the world premiere of Laila Marrakchi's *Rock the Casbah* as part of the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). After the screening, Marrakchi took the stage to answer questions about the film and her responses resonated with the sensibilities of many Moroccan filmmakers of her generation: She said that the film's fictional story was inspired by reality, that she did not want the music to be folkloric but something more universal, and that she thought Moroccan audiences are ready for cinema to push social boundaries.

Marrakchi's premiere at TIFF alone indicates expanding aspirations about the audience for Moroccan cinema and its role in an increasingly transnational cinema landscape. This article maps the contours of this "new Moroccan cinema" by analyzing shifting industrial logics on an organizational level and the ideological interventions of these logics in social and political discourse. Ultimately, the article

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analyzes the relationship between industrial logics and possibilities for a new generation of Moroccan filmmakers to make certain types of ideological interventions. With particular focus on the Maghreb and Europe, cinema is examined as a site of contestation over flows of capital, frictions associated with cultural influence, and Moroccan modernity writ large. Together, the institutional developments that have shaped the new Moroccan cinema as an industry and the discourse of Moroccan cinema that takes art as a space of advocacy are indicative of the ways in which cultural elites, nation-states, regional politics, and global markets intersect in the competition for currency on the world stage.

Many scholars have shown that cinema cannot be considered exclusively within the confines of the nation in the Moroccan case and more generally (Curtin, 2009; Dwyer, 2008; Edwards, 2008; Galt, 2010; Higbee & Lim, 2010; Khalil, 2008; Naficy, 1999). In deploying this framework, my research indicates that escalations in trajectories of creative migration (Curtin, 2009) have expanded transnational industry logics to emphasize a politics of coproduction and engagement with multiple publics, which in turn has changed the ideological composition of the cinema itself. I argue that a key dimension of the new Moroccan cinema is its situation within transnational flows of people, capital, and media that have shifted from a nation-centric space to something more regional in terms of distribution and global in terms of financing. While these dynamics have always characterized Moroccan cinema to some extent, their conjunction with a transnational cultural politics emanating from the EU, media liberalization in Morocco, and new opportunities to engage with publics (revolving primarily around audience access to technology and theaters) has constructed cinema as a site of contestation over distinct political projects—raising questions about the intersections of culture and politics in an increasingly mediated global era. Additionally, Mohammed VI's ascent to the throne, the opening up of civil society, and appointment of Noureddine Saïl as head of the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM) ushered in a new era of dynamic debates around cinema, characterized by increased resources, reduced censorship, and recognition of cinema as a political priority. At the same time, subject positions between states have increased filmmakers' autonomy, opening up possibilities for social critique and commentary on issues previously off limits that are closely related to the transnational ethos of this cinema. In the process cinema has become a transnational space for a sort of mediated activism, driven in large measure by filmmakers acting as public intellectuals and seeking to challenge Morocco's traditionally state-centric media discourses as well as the rise of Islamism, while also trying to integrate social and political norms with those of global civil society in a way that is inclusive of, yet not specific to, Morocco.

Morocco's film industry makes an important case study of the role of media and culture in transitional societies in the process of debating different versions of modernity and encounters with globalization. Morocco has long hosted international shoots and more recently emerged as one of a few small countries with the political will to restructure its film industry in the midst of increased consolidation of film

production and distribution at the global level. The rise of a new generation of Moroccan filmmakers ensconced in transnational networks of policy, funding, and storytelling highlights some of the powerful tensions at play in a world of global media flows, transnational policy imperatives, and technological change. By interrogating the industrial logics of this cinema and its subsequent discursive interventions, this article adds to our understanding the processes through which alternative storytelling and depictions of Moroccan life that challenge hegemonic narratives about culture and society become possible, as well as the way in which these discourses construct transnational spaces of articulation and activism.

The new Moroccan cinema

In the summer of 2010, the francophone Moroccan news magazine *Telquel* published a cover article about the “new Moroccan cinema” that discusses how this cinema reproduces the everyday reality of Morocco in the Moroccan language (Boukhari, 2010, n/a). Described as “do-it-yourself” these films include many major hits such as *Casanegra*, *Marock*, and *Sur la planche* that reject “dialogues sanitized into pure classical Arabic,” and embrace the idea of “film as a mirror of society” (Boukhari, 2010, n/a). Although representations are never mere reflections, the inclusion of Moroccan Arabic and more candid portrayals of taboo themes such as sexuality are noteworthy in a media environment dominated by classical Arabic and conservative social mores. This *Telquel* article is but one example of many discussions about changes in Moroccan cinema that have taken place in recent years. Armes (2005) talks about Nabil Ayouch as the beginning of a new generation of Moroccan filmmakers, and a few years later Radio France International published an article titled “The New Breath of Moroccan Cinema” describing the influx of young filmmakers in Morocco by saying, “This generation says things in a more direct manner, less symbolically, with an energy and a new touch of subversion” (Maréchaud, 2007). These tendencies reach new heights in the Arab Spring moment, when an article in *Jeune Afrique* discusses the first film of Nabil Ayouch’s journalist-turned-filmmaker brother, Hicham, as “an ode to liberty and the right to live as one understands, at the risk of offending, and what it can cost you” (Rochebrune, 2011). Above all this cinema is characterized by tensions between individuals and the collective in Moroccan society, emphasizing stories about defying social norms and their place within universal themes such as adolescence, tradition, inequality, and love.

While celebrated in *Telquel*, *Jeune Afrique*, and circles concerned with artistic liberty and freedom of speech, the new cinema has been a source of tension for social conservatives and the Islamic Justice and Development Party (PJD) in particular. In 2013 *Au Fait Maroc* published an article titled “The New Moroccan Cinema and the Justice and Development Party (PJD),” describing the disapproval of the now-ruling Islamist party in regard to recent developments in Moroccan cinema:

For several years, Moroccan cinema has technically and artistically improved a great deal, all while addressing social subjects that disturb religious

conservatives ... In the eyes of Mohammed Laghrouss, journalist and PJD member, all the modern Moroccan filmmakers such as Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, Nabil Ayouch, Lahcen Zinoun or Abdelkader Lagtaâ are only westernized Moroccans who have forgotten their own civilization and hide the nonsense of their films behind risqué scenes. (Sedrati, 2013, n/a)

In a culture that emphasizes family viewing, the new Moroccan cinema's frank portrayals of sex and other taboo topics are considered by many to be highly offensive. It is no accident that most of these films come from Casablanca and that many of the realities they purport to address relate to an urban modernity in many ways divorced from the realities of rural and semirural Morocco. While some films such as Narjiss Nejjar's *L'Amante du Rif* (2011) do take on particularly what it means to be a woman in rural Morocco, it does so from the perspective of daring women and the risks they face in defying community codes. In the new Moroccan cinema's concern not to further folkloric representations it perhaps stops short of acknowledging the full complexity of Moroccan society across various geographic and social spaces. Yet through highly mediatized debates, this cinema does intervene in Moroccan public culture across these spaces, provoking debate and pushing publics across borders to reimagine a more cosmopolitan Morocco embedded in universal issues, while not losing sight of the political.

Moroccan cinema in historical perspective

Any discussions of a "new" Moroccan cinema must be situated within the larger historical context of cinema in the country. As part of France's "civilizing mission," cinema in Morocco began as colonial propaganda aimed at promoting patriotism (Jaïdi, 2001). The desire to increase film production and combat pan-Arab nationalism emanating from Egypt resulted in French colonists building up cinema infrastructure and creating the CCM in 1944 as a government-run entity charged with producing, regulating, and promoting cinema in Morocco (Armes, 2005; Carter, 2008; Dwyer, 2004). These developments were largely oriented toward and financed by the colonial administration. According to Armes (2005), "all North African film production activity in the period before independence was financed by foreign capital, used foreign players, and was destined for foreign audience" (p. 6). The creation of this cinematic sphere separate from Moroccan society evolved into an industry oriented toward well-financed foreign productions with domestic filmmakers often struggling alongside.

The development of infrastructure and connections with foreign studios that make Morocco a popular filming location for many major Hollywood films even today (think *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Babel*, and so on) leads Moroccan filmmaker Muhammed Abderrahman Tazi to draw a sharp distinction between "making films in Morocco" and "Moroccan filmmaking," often seen as a manifestation of the complex relationship between the global and the local (Dwyer, 2004, p. 18). The first Moroccan feature films appeared in the early 1970s and with them visions of

a contested society eclipsed earlier. Jaïdi (1994) asserts “Hamid Bennani’s *Wechma* (1970) and Souheil ben Barka’s *A Thousand and One Hands* (1972) presented themselves as works of fiction that developed a muted questioning of Moroccan society” (p. 107). Thus a historical precedent exists in Morocco for couching social and political critique in cinema, but these critiques were often limited in scope or shut down entirely during the Years of Lead when persecution of the left and public fear were the norm. While earlier cohorts of Moroccan filmmakers such as that of Bennani, Tazi, Ahmed Bouanani, Mohamed Sekkat, Latif Lahlou, and Moumen Smihi, who studied in Paris at IDHEC in the 1960s, were perhaps more revolutionary from an ideological standpoint, their work met a myriad of obstacles including surveillance and censorship. For example, Bouanani’s first feature film *Mémoire 14* (1971) became a short after it was cut by censors (Khalfallah, 2011) and he was forbidden from working as a director for several years after being branded a communist (Akalay, 2010). Overall, Morocco in the 1970s was not an encouraging environment for this politically engaged and enterprising group of filmmakers.

The 1980s saw the introduction of state aid as a form of film financing, which Dwyer (2004) describes as “the core of each film’s budget” (p. 155). Lack of commercial distribution for Moroccan films and buying power on the part the public led to the establishment of a Support Fund in 1981, which after restructuring into the Aid Fund in 1988 to include changes in selectivity, amounts awarded, and the timing of their disbursement, remained largely in place until 2006. During this time some filmmakers started to look at coproduction as an additional funding mechanism for expenses not covered by the state, especially from foreign TV stations willing to put money up for production in return for distribution rights (Dwyer, 2004). However, coproduction remained a rarity and production rates low, averaging only five feature films a year from 1990 to 1999 (Ali, 2012), even if some of those films, such as Tazi’s *Looking for my Wife’s Husband* (1993), are now considered Moroccan cinema classics.

While funding for Moroccan cinema generally increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was not until the early 2000s that major shifts in the resources dedicated to culture built on an upswing in production accompanying political opening and a new generation of filmmakers coming of age post-Years of Lead. From 2001 to 2011 feature film production increased from 4 to 25 per year (Ali, 2012; Dale, 2012), production aid multiplied sixfold between 2001 and 2012, in 2006 the CCM adopted a system of “advance on receipts” based on the French model requiring repayment to the fund out of the film’s earnings, and coproducing films became part of public television mandates in 2005–2006 (Ali, 2012). Within this time Moroccan films also began consistently topping the box office with one or two Moroccan films outselling the next best by almost double — this despite having significantly smaller budgets than most foreign productions (Centre Cinématographique Marocain, 2012). Together, these changes are indicative of significant shifts in Moroccan cinema, both from the standpoint of production and its place in society.

Shifting scales

As Curtin (2009) points out, “the traditional frame for studying cinema is the national cinemas approach” (p. 108), which is seen much of the prior work on Moroccan cinema (Armes, 2005; Carter, 2008; Dwyer, 2004; Jaïdi, 1994). Govil (2009) suggests that cinema is a means of legitimizing the state in that it functions to strengthen symbolic attachments while simultaneously attempting to attract capitalist economic development, and therefore strengthening the state’s role in the economy. While this is certainly the case in Morocco, these dynamics now exist in parallel with alternative means of financing and distribution that have given filmmakers more freedom from the political imperatives of the state. Thus Moroccan cinema can be seen as part of what Sassen (2006) argues is an overlooked dimension of globalization, namely, the way processes and transformations inside the nation participate in its disassembly as the sole order and authority. At the same time the Moroccan government has shown a certain willingness to open up the cinema sector to more modernist visions of a society acknowledging its problems and notably hasn’t withheld filming permits or (usually) censored films despite heated debate. In fact, increased resources for the CCM have been a source of legitimacy for the Moroccan state at a time when authoritarian forms of government and Islamic states in particular have been under close scrutiny by the global community.

Thus the new Moroccan cinema can be defined by a shift in scale from taking the national as the assumed frame of reference to operating according to a wider regional and global framework, in part due to transnational influences in cultural policy and their interactions with globalization. Morocco’s colonial history with France and France’s tradition of subsidizing cinema has contributed to the development of Moroccan filmmakers, as well as their visions about markets and messages. It is significant that the growth in Moroccan cinema has come at a time when Morocco is opening up economically and seeking to integrate more fully into the EU community. The Euromed Partnership, also known as the Barcelona Procedure, is a 1995 agreement between EU countries and those bordering the Mediterranean (including Morocco) to create a free-trade zone in exchange for development aid from the EU Investment Bank. The agreement emphasizes peace and stability as part of a “European politics of neighbors,” and also contains a cultural component. Euromed Audiovisual is one manifestation of this politics in the form of a three-phase project, of which the third phase was an €11 million effort dedicated to the development of cinema sectors of South Mediterranean countries over 4 years (2011–2014), notably focusing on the encouragement of coproductions. These agreements and initiatives are fundamental components for the construction of what Kraidy (2013) has called a “deterritorialized industry whose production, distribution and consumption operate across cultural, national and sub-regional boundaries” (p. 37). Because many cultural assistance funds such as France’s Aid to World Cinemas include coproduction requirements and specifications about where the money can be spent, they are specifically structured toward forging relationships that support the development of cinema industries in the global

South, but also the integration of their well-being with that of audiovisual industries in Europe.

While these collaborations are growing, few Moroccan producers are benefitting from new Gulf funds despite the increased presence of their films at festivals such as the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF). Arab media developers have traditionally viewed the Maghreb as an undesirable market due to lack of buying power and low education rates (Kraidy, 2013). For these reasons among others, Morocco's mediascape, particularly in the cinematic realm, has tended to orient itself toward Europe rather than the Middle East. These connections and disjunctures are examples of what Punathembekar (2013) calls looking at media as "scale-making projects" that allow mapping of "the complex connections across multiple spatial scales that define the imaginations and practices of media professionals" (p. 67). Indications abound that filmmakers of the new Moroccan cinema are both living their lives and imagining their audience internationally, taking advantage of what Curtin (2009) calls "trajectories of creative migration" to intervene in issues across borders (p. 113). These trajectories result in a clustering of creative talent by a workforce that is self-consciously motivated by aesthetic innovation as well as market considerations and attempts to take advantage of "mutual learning effects" and "the largest pool of employment opportunities" (Curtin (2009), p. 113). These trajectories are one mechanism through which filmmakers have become more tightly interconnected with industry structures across the Mediterranean, and today it is important to note that rather than a singular "migration," these migrations are multiple and constitute a frequent back and forth as filmmakers attempt to take advantage of opportunities in Morocco and abroad.

Among the Moroccan creative class operating along this trajectory are Laïla Marrakchi, director of the controversial 2005 hit *Marock*, who is from Casablanca and lives in France; Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, director of the 2008 hit *Casanegra*, born in Safi and living in Oslo and Casablanca; Narjiss Nejjar, director of *L'Amante du Rif* (2011), born in Tangier and living in Paris; Leïla Kilani, director of *Sur la planche* (2011), who divides her time between Paris and Tangier; and Nabil Ayouch, director of *Horses of God* (2012), who was born in Paris and currently lives and works in Morocco. These filmmakers are key cultural activists in a socially engaged transnational cinema that sees the state as one element of a creative ecosystem in which capital, producers, texts, and publics are all increasingly mobile. Their films represent a broad swath of Moroccan cinema since 2005, but more importantly, they have all been mentioned in conjunction with discussions of a new Moroccan cinema, inspired debate about the boundaries of politics and culture, and achieved some level of success at the box office or on the film festival circuit. I analyze the processes involved in the production of two films—Marrakchi's *Marock* and Kilani's *Sur la planche*—to offer examples of these industrial logics, before going on to analyze their discursive construction and interventions in public culture.

Industrial logics

The new Moroccan cinema is the product of many changes: technical and artistic improvements, expanded resources, political support, civil society and media liberalization, and increased public accessibility. Perhaps the most important shift, however, is the adoption of coproduction as the organizing logic of Moroccan audiovisual production. The 50+ year history of Moroccan filmmaking has pretty much always passed by France, but the logic of coproduction instituted as policy with accompanying industry structures attempting to match capital and creativity while managing risk is relatively new. The scope and scale of these efforts by both institutions and private entities has grown enormously in recent years, as indicated by the fact that most coproduction markets began in the first decade of the 21st century. In 2003 Screen International reported, “With an historical lack of state support, and a disinterested local financial community, Moroccan producers are increasingly looking to attract international coproduction partners—particularly from France” (Forde, 2003, n/a). For Moroccan filmmakers in particular, this logic of coproduction builds on historical dynamics, including trajectories of creative migration and Paris’s status as a media capital, while also affording a greater degree of autonomy to push boundaries through cinema.

According to CCM assistant director Abdellatif Lassaadi, films like *Marock* and *Sur la planche* do much better than the average Moroccan film because they are French coproductions, which he described as “beneficial for all production because coproducers bring (a) resources, (b) expertise and good technicians, and (c) these films are automatically distributed and released abroad” (Lassaadi, October 2014, personal communication). *Marock*, for instance, is a Franco-Moroccan film that was entirely French-financed, made out of a €1.8 million budget privately assembled by Marrakchi after she was denied support from the CCM (Ghorbal, 2006). Its three producers—Lazennac, France 3, and Canal+—are all French, but according to Marrakchi “a large part of the technical team was Moroccan” including the executive producer Latif Lahlou (Antona, 2006). Marrakchi’s ability to access these resources is undoubtedly tied to her elite upbringing in Casablanca, education at University of Paris III, and her personal connection to Alexandre Aja, the French director of international horror films such as *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006).

Marock’s appearance at Cannes in 2005 was accompanied by discussion about Morocco’s representation at the festival being “the logical consequence of a particularly coherent complementary organization of film and television, and especially policy implementation of effective measures that other countries in the region have yet to take” (Tebib, 2005). The 2005 and 2006 mandates for broadcasters SNRT and 2M required them to get 30% of their programming from external actors and to coproduce a certain number of films each year (20 for SNRT, 10–15 for 2M), an outcome of audiovisual reforms set in motion early in Mohammed VI’s reign (Allali, 2007; Boukhari, 2006b; Hopewell, 2006). These measures effectively upped investment in local production companies and content, aiming to create an independent audiovisual

sector. While results have been mixed, in recent years the Moroccan government has received widespread applause in cinema circles for its forward-looking policies and support of the CCM, whose operating budget doubled between 2001 and 2002 and continued to increase steadily up to an all-time high of 56,530,000 MAD in 2012 (Ali, 2012, p. 97). As indicated by a roundtable devoted to the subject at DIFF in 2009, Morocco is often considered a model for the region; however, the participating filmmakers including Kilani and Lakhmari did not hesitate to discuss the limits of CCM funding and the organization's political nature (Quilty, 2009). Even if filmmakers do receive some state support, inevitably it is not enough.

After Kilani's second documentary *Nos Lieux Interdits*, the CCM officially barred documentaries from funding, as Kilani said, "They closed the door. They said: 'Documentary is not cinema'" (Quilty, 2009). Kilani's next film was her first foray into fiction, and received CCM funding, a clear indication that funding inherently affects the types of films that get made. With a €1 million budget, the Moroccan-French-German coproduction *Sur la planche* reported no fewer than 16 investors from seven countries in the Euromed Coproduction Census (Rosant, 2012). The largest percentage of funding (25%) came from the CCM, and apart from 4% and 1% coming from film initiatives in UAE and the United States, respectively, the remainder was financed by European capital. Kilani's precarious hodgepodge of funding meant that at one point she was forced to stop filming due to lack of funds, with expensive scenes still to come, but according to Kilani "during these times you just have to say that there are Chinese people making great films in their kitchens!" (Péron, 2012). That great films can be made with few resources is a refrain repeated frequently by Moroccan filmmakers.

The paradox of Moroccan cinema is that increases in productions, their quality, and popularity have come at a time when traditional distribution mechanisms are in a state of disarray, yet audiences have more access to texts than ever before. "In 1982, Morocco had 246 theaters selling 45 million tickets for a revenue of 118 million MAD. In 2011, there are not more than 68 theaters selling only 2.2 million tickets and revenue of 68 million MAD (6 million euros)" (Ali, 2012, p. 116). The rapid decline of theaters over the last 30 years is frequently named as the number one challenge facing Moroccan cinema, a dynamic that is seemingly due to a perfect storm of technological change (more access to the Internet, ease of piracy, competition from satellite, VOD platforms), poor business practices, and shifting urban geographies associated with leisure. A government report on the economics of culture declared, "Concretely, the CDs that sell for 3 MAD and the DVDs for 8 MAD have had a devastating effect on cinema ticket sales. Piracy has been devastating" (Tagemouati, Berroho, Azam, & Fili, 2010). To combat this trend, the CCM has more recently introduced an initiative dedicated to the renovation and digitization of theaters, plus the construction of new multiplexes, aimed at making cinema-going a middle-class leisure activity.

One avenue that provides a platform for films and increases public engagement with cinema amid closing theaters is the film festival, which is part of a broader festival culture that has erupted in Morocco under Mohammed VI. In 2008, 36 film festivals took place around Morocco, and the CCM devoted 23 million MAD of its

budget to funding these festivals (Midech, 2008); by 2014 there were 54 festivals and the CCM had formed a commission devoted entirely to their support (Centre Cinématographique Marocain, 2014). According to a government report, “These events allow the public to view films that might not necessarily appear in theaters, they give media an opportunity to talk about them, and create a meeting between cinema professionals” (Tagemouati et al., 2010, p. 114). Although often receiving at least some support from the CCM, Moroccan film festivals are put on by a variety of municipalities, civil society associations, and educational institutions. In 2005 Zagora, a rural town in southeast Morocco, decided to organize its own Trans-Saharan Film Festival in order to benefit from the industry that made its neighbor Ouarzazate famous. “With this festival, we want to give a boost to tourism. Cinema is becoming a separate industry, a mechanism for the cultural, social and economic development of a city. Why should we not also profit from it?” asked the director of the festival, who is also the head of the provincial tourism council (Midech, 2006). By providing a forum for publics to engage with cinema, festivals open up spaces for debate, which some allege mimic the earlier function of ciné-clubs in the country.

At the same time that domestic festivals have been growing, Moroccan cinema has increased its visibility and acclaim on the international festival circuit. In 2009, 78 Moroccan films were selected to participate in international film festivals; in 2012, 145 films were selected (Centre Cinématographique Marocain, 2009, 2012). These films are not just participating, but winning awards, which increased from 22 to 65 over the same time period (Centre Cinématographique Marocain, 2009, 2012). For filmmakers from the global South, film festivals have emerged as key sites for funding, coproduction markets, workshops, and networking that are central to ambitions to access global markets. *Sur la planche* participated in 25 film festivals in 2011 alone, reporting funding from three festivals and attendance at three coproduction markets (Rosant, 2012). Kilani’s film was widely acclaimed on the film festival circuit, but also demonstrates that with fewer resources, a darker storyline, and aesthetics more in line with documentary or art house cinema Moroccan films still struggle for commercial acceptance. *Sur la planche* had a slow start at the Moroccan box office, selling 11,531 tickets in 2012, while in France the film had sold 31,906 tickets by March (Centre Cinématographique Marocain, 2012; Rosant, 2012). *Marock* was released in France and Belgium several months before its release in Morocco, where it topped Moroccan box offices in 2006 and set a record with 136,889 tickets sold (Tagemouati et al., 2010, p. 111). It is difficult to know how seriously ticket sales should be taken as an estimate of audience in an age of pirated DVDs, downloading/streaming, and VOD platforms, and instead this article focuses on how these films have been constructed as sites of contention over distinct social projects in public discourse. In covering the *Marock* controversy, *Telquel* journalist Karim Boukhari (2005) pointed out, “When it becomes a public object, cinema no longer belongs to the one who made it but to those who watch it,” (n/a) and if anything can be said definitively about the new Moroccan cinema, it is that these films have provoked passionate debates among publics and in politics.

Discursive construction

The new Moroccan cinema has been hotly debated and evoked many critiques from its detractors: that neither the film nor the filmmaker are Moroccan, that Zionists have funded the project to denigrate Morocco and Islam, and that the taboo behaviors represented are only Western imports being impressed upon a society ultimately interested in morality. Yet among supporters they are lauded as victories for freedom of speech, celebrations of Morocco in all its diversity, and markers of a newfound openness to social and political critique. In the discourse surrounding these films, two themes stand out: (a) the importance of telling stories rooted in the real and (b) participation in a universal alternative cinema.

Docu-fiction

A key component of the discourse surrounding Moroccan cinema is the desire to address the complexities of Moroccan modernity by telling stories rooted in the real. Often these stories originate from filmmakers' personal experiences and are fictionalized to fit cinematic forms. These films have been referred to as hybrid genres of "docu-fiction" (Nejjar) or "cinema of the real" (Ayouch), but even absent explicit labels all of these filmmakers have used similar rhetoric to position their films as fiction inspired by reality and making use of documentary filming tactics. A report on the 2013 Moroccan National Film Festival describes this movement in Moroccan cinema as "a dual structure with a documentary component, and another fictional, supported by the interplay of performers who give the real a dimension that transcends TV news" (Bakrim, 2013). Sometimes this documentary component is the result of small budgets that require filmmakers to make use of the world around them, but just as often it seems to be an aesthetic choice, or some combination of the two. Kilani describes some of the motivations for moving in this new direction in *Sur la planche*: "It looks like a documentary, but it isn't at all a documentary ... however, I wanted to keep the energy, the vitality, the rough and rugged dimension of the real" (Cratzborn, 2011). This emphasis on a particular set of realities involves a process of selection and attribution of value in which interpretation is inherent. For the new Moroccan cinema reality exists at the margins of society, constituted by issues previously obscured from media portrayals and off-limits in the arena of public culture: religious extremism, violence, sexuality, corruption, clandestine migration, and so on. In addressing these issues, Moroccan filmmakers try to find a balance between neo-realist auteur dramas and a popular cinema that is socially relevant but also appealing to a broad audience.

On first glance *Marock* might be dismissed as just another coming-of-age feature film, complete with forbidden love and all the trappings of the global romance drama adapted to an elite segment of Casablanca society. However, the film takes on social issues such as inequality, secularism, and corruption, all while detailing the romance between a Muslim and a Jew in a society where romance across religious lines is taboo. When asked about the controversy generated by *Marock*, Marrakchi responded, "I wanted first of all to tell a story, knowing well that there were sensitive subjects" (Gauch & Lindsey, 2006). Among the most sensitive of subjects is the

social stratification of Moroccan society, where elites live a lifestyle of impunity and public space is portrayed as a playground for rich adolescents submerged in global rock-and-roll culture complete with drugs, alcohol, sex, and defiance of conservative social mores in all forms.

When the film showed at the national film festival in Tangier it evoked a nationwide debate, with the most publicized criticism coming from Moroccan filmmaker Mohamed Asli that “*Marock* isn’t a Moroccan film” (Boukhari, 2006a, n/a). The PJD later took up the cause and advocated that the film should be banned or boycotted, while the CCM was criticized in parliament for having authorized the film to be made in Morocco (Tuquoi, 2007; *The View from Fez*, 2006). In response, the news magazine *Telquel* contended, “if *Marock* has triggered such passion, it’s because it has hit some indisputable realities on the nose” (Boukhari, 2006a, n/a). In telling stories from the margins, filmmakers have forced Morocco to come face to face with some societal issues it might prefer to ignore both internally and in representing itself to the world.

If *Marock* chronicles the reality of Casablanca’s elites, *Sur la planche* turns its attention to the seedy underworld of Tangier’s *zone franche*, or free-trade zone. Kilani’s first fictional feature delves into the dark world of young women who work in Tangier’s shrimp and textile factories by day and engage in petty crime by night. Inspired by the “feminization of crime” discussed in Moroccan newspapers, independent journalist turned documentary filmmaker turned feature-film Cannes nominee Kilani asks difficult questions about life lived on the margins of global capitalism. As the main character remarks in an oft-quoted scene,

It is best to stand, bound by a lie, than to lie down and be run over by the truth of others. I don’t steal, I reimburse myself. I don’t rob, I recover. I don’t deal, I do business. I don’t prostitute myself, I invite. I’m not lying ... I’m just ahead of the truth: my truth! (Péron, 2012)

By acknowledging the subjective nature of reality Kilani illuminates the disenfranchised margins of global capitalism inhabited by workers, for whom public space is a hostile place full of struggles to advance one’s position in incremental ways. For some these sorts of representations are a new form of freedom to engage with Moroccan modernity as it really exists, rather than as authorities would prefer to portray it, while for others they constitute a flagrant disregard for societal rules, religious norms, and those whose honest labor is rarely rewarded.

A universal alternative cinema

According to filmmaker Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, Moroccans have similar problems as those plaguing societies around the world. “We’re a little bit sick of representing Morocco as a folkloric stereotype ... We want to see films about us, told from our point of view, telling the world that we have universal problems” (Quilty, 2009, n/a). Often using the personal as a window to the universal, the new Moroccan cinema tells stories based in the realities of Moroccan society, yet is underscored by more universal themes capable of being transferred to other contexts and identified with

by other audiences. For Marrakchi the topic is adolescence and the angst that comes with finding oneself while navigating the interstices of tradition and modernity, while Kilani looks at labor and frustration on the edge of global capitalism. As Marrakchi remarked in an interview with *Ecran Large* “There are both personnel things and those that are more universal. As soon as you touch the topic of adolescence, you tell stories that are for the most part common, which are key to situations that transcend borders and cultures” (Antona, 2006). *Marock* represents Morocco as a participant in global rock and roll culture of the late 1990s, complete with a soundtrack full of Western hits of the era. Marrakchi “chose the title *Marock* precisely to represent the paradoxes of a youth shared between ancient Moroccan traditions and more rock ‘n’ roll aspirations” (Boukhari, 2006a, n/a). The flipside of the addressing universal issues and telling stories of urban modernity, however, is that both the market and audience expectations become ambiguous. According to filmmaker Swel Noury “Foreign sales agents often complain our films don’t feel Moroccan enough” (Dale, 2009). Yet these concerns seem to be exactly the point for filmmakers like Marrakchi and Kilani who express a desire to defy stereotypes and clichés, as Kilani states, “I wanted to evoke, without Orientalism or aestheticism, the normal social order vis-à-vis the Arab woman—and how it can be denied” (Rochebrune, 2012). In innovating around production structures and taking on taboo topics, filmmakers of the new Moroccan cinema demonstrate aspirations to not just to open up their own market, but to also become a leader of the cinema in the global South and an advocate for alternative viewpoints to those articulated by a globally dominant Hollywood industry and Western news narratives. When asked if he is a product of a third-world cinema, Lakhmari responds “Cinema is universal. Maybe we don’t have the same means, the same industry, but we’re there” (Mrabet, 2013). Morjana Alaoui, the lead actress in *Marock*, also articulated a desire for Moroccan cinema to be judged according to the same criteria as cinema from anywhere else, saying “It always annoys me when people say ‘it’s not bad for a Moroccan film.’ I find it very condescending” (Ziraoui, 2011, n/a). Moroccan cinema has been a saving grace for many neighborhood cinemas in recent years, and the fact that Moroccan publics are excited about and engaging with it constitutes a significant shift in an environment where Moroccan cultural products have more often been objects of disdain.

As an outward-looking industry with aspirations at infiltrating markets in Europe and elsewhere, one of the primary concerns of critics seems to be the image of Morocco abroad. As part of the debate surround *Marock*, a communiqué from Mohamed Hassan El Joundi, the secretary general of the Moroccan Theater Syndicate was published on the front page of *Attajdid*, a daily newspaper associated with the PJD, in which he went so far as to comment “this communiqué is not addressed to *Marock* only, but to all artistic creations having the intention of blemishing the reputation of our country” (The View from Fez, 2006). Moroccan journalist and art critic Kinza Sefrioui said the criticism of *Marock* “did not focus on whether the film was any good or not, but on the bad image of the country” (Burke, 2007). For many, the new Moroccan cinema could be damaging to a country that is heavily

dependent on international investment and tourism, and depicting social problems that challenge its credibility in the international community. Yet to others the new cinema is key to building the country's credibility by demonstrating a degree of openness through funding for film and tolerance for social critique. That the government does not seem interested in withholding support or suppressing these films suggests that they are in fact benefiting from the recognition of critical Moroccan voices in the international arena and the accompanying perception of the country as a bastion of artistic freedom in the MENA region. In a moment of regional instability, the Moroccan state is seizing the opportunity to use Moroccan cinema as currency to improve its reputation vis-à-vis freedom of expression and human rights more broadly, while also maintaining pressure on Islamists at home.

In many ways, developing an alternative cinema positions filmmakers alongside advocates for freedom of expression. According to Marrakchi, "Fortunately... there are people in Morocco who know how to react in order to defend freedom of expression" (Antona, 2006), suggesting that there are networks that spring to life when debates over films like *Marock* arise. Former CCM director Nouredine Saïl has been heralded as a champion of free speech, or at the very least, an advocate of a hands-off approach to regulating film content. Despite that, fears continue about political interference in cultural spaces, and media in particular. When the PJD came to power in 2011, Moroccan filmmakers and cultural actors of all varieties published a manifesto online urging Moroccans to defend their freedom of expression saying "we, the signatories of this manifesto, artists, filmmakers, intellectuals, women and men of letters, and more generally, freedom-loving citizens committed to the universal values of democracy and human rights join our voices together to say: careful!" (Chraïbi et al., 2012). The manifesto demonstrates continued concern about the limits of social critique couched in cultural products, especially under an administration that conducted very vocal campaigns against such products. Almost 2 years later, Lakhmari says that while "we have been much criticized by the Islamists... today they are less aggressive. These attacks were made when they were the opposition. As for my liberty, I take it" (Mrabet, 2013). If filmmakers can continue opening up spaces for expression, Kilani believes Moroccan cinema can become synonymous with an alternative approach. "If we can make it from a different point of view, then we will be making a real contribution to cinema" (Quilty, 2009, n/a). The diversity of stories in Moroccan cinema is already considered an industry strength, and Kilani's comment indicates there is a growing sense that Moroccan cinema should be synonymous with stories and approaches outside the status quo.

Cinema as mediated activism

Ultimately, the new Moroccan cinema industry exists at the intersection of state support, transnational cultural politics, and individual filmmaker initiatives. The political prioritization of cinema, recognition of culture as an important vector of development, and capital influxes from multinational corporations have increased

the resources available for filmmaking on all these fronts, as well as the ability to assemble financing from a diversity of sources. At the same time, filmmakers who grew up in an era of economic opening and political transition have worried less about censorship and looked beyond nation-centric conceptions of audience. In aiming for international audiences, they have perhaps inadvertently appealed to domestic publics, overcoming a long-held disdain for Moroccan cultural products and making cinema more truly popular. While still confronting commercial distribution problems, an explosion in domestic film festivals has placed cinema at the center of cultural agendas and given it a privileged place in public culture at the same time that independent media have made cinema a cause célèbre with Internet access providing space for further public engagement. Increased presence on the global film festival circuit is ameliorating distribution somewhat and constant cycles of news coming out of the region post-Arab Spring has helped increase visibility and interest in Moroccan cultural products, although this interest is often accompanied by specific expectations about genre and topic. What is clear, however, is that films such as *Marock* and *Sur la planche* intervene in public culture by taking on controversial social issues and in doing so challenge the hegemony of state-produced narratives about Moroccan society and culture. In many ways these films act as platforms for the production of a certain segment of Moroccan filmmakers as public intellectuals speaking for a progressive counterculture oriented toward individual liberties, secularism, and a more variegated understanding of Moroccan experiences and everyday life.

All of this suggests that shifting industrial logics established the conditions of possibility for a certain type of liberal ideological intervention, creating cinema as a space of encounter through which filmmakers negotiate societal tensions and offer alternative visions of Arab societies that oppose official discourse. For this group of filmmakers, the new Moroccan cinema is symbolic of a society in transition and a version of Moroccan modernity more open to and engaged with the world. Yet their interventions could also be understood as the product of a capitalist-driven elite that plays into a different type of miserabilist Orientalism than the folkloric one it seeks to subvert. Freedom is of course highly subjective, and the version privileged by this strand of Moroccan cinema is undeniably individualistic, especially as it portrays people, and youth in particular, as caught up in systems outside their control. Regardless, the public furor ignited by this cinema raises important questions about who gets to speak about and for Morocco. A key component of new Moroccan cinema is the intention not only to make a contribution to cinema, as Kilani suggests above, but also to intervene in the social and political landscape by illuminating certain realities, asking difficult questions, and eliciting debate from a society in the midst of many transitions. By embracing these roles, new Moroccan cinema has become a space that blurs the lines between cinema as art form and mediated activism. Due to a confluence of factors, critical discourse has been able to gain traction, and the “eruption of Moroccan cinema in the social field as an expression of the imaginary” seems to have changed the relationship—and relevance—of cinema and society (Bakrim, 2013). Engagement

with the social imaginary has put cinema on the political agenda, as the discussion of *Marock* in parliament clearly demonstrates (Ghorbal, 2006). The oft-cited initial critic of the film, director Mohamed Asli, later stated that, “If Moroccans like this film, I’m with them. I’m also glad the film is coming out in theaters because it pushes us, finally, to debate, real debate, about our society, about our politics, but also about how our cinema is financed” (Boukhari, 2006a, n/a)—two things that this analysis shows to be more closely related than they may initially appear.

If the new Moroccan cinema has aspirations to the real, it also has aspirations to influence real outcomes. The uprisings and political reforms of 2011 have presented new challenges and issues to be addressed, and in some ways this cinema is as experimental as the recent changes in society. In addressing her subjectivity and the way she positions herself as a filmmaker, Kilani says “in becoming a filmmaker I left the neutrality of a researcher in order to deliver all my subjectivity and say ‘I’” (Fabre, 2012). By speaking from somewhere and pushing the boundaries of representation the filmmakers of the new Moroccan cinema have participated in the production of culture as a deliberative space, even if the nature of their interventions are often called into question. While some audiences interpret this cinema’s social criticism as aversion to Moroccan society, filmmakers seem keen to demonstrate exactly the inverse: That it is commitment to their society and belief in its possibilities that keep them engaging in social and political debates through cinema. Marrakchi emphasized in an interview that the end of *Marock* “isn’t a sad end for my heroine, it is this memory that demonstrates the attachment she has to Morocco. And this is a positive force” (Antona, 2006). Similarly, standing on the stage at TIFF 4 years later, after the premier of her second film, Marrakchi emphasized the important role leaving Morocco played in allowing her to engage in social commentary, saying, “there comes a moment where it’s important to leave the family, the clan, in order to realize oneself and express oneself.” In other words, the shifting industrial logics of the new Moroccan cinema and its situation within transnational networks allow for ideological interventions by filmmakers that construct cinema as a discourse of social critique in which the “new Morocco” is articulated and contested.

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