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Author
Limbrick, Peter

Publication Date
2021

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FINAL ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT, FORTHCOMING IN *CULTURAL CRITIQUE*, 2021

"Of Marabouts, Acrobats, and Auteurs: Framing the Global Popular in Moumen Smihi's World Cinema."

Peter Limbrick, Film and Digital Media, University of California, Santa Cruz

One of the critical commonplaces in the study of Arab cinemas is the idea that we can distinguish between Egyptian cinema, a dominant popular and industrial cinema akin to Hollywood, and smaller national or regional cinemas (Palestinian, Tunisian, Algerian, Moroccan) which are typically discussed as auteur or art cinemas. While historically defensible, in that Egypt preceded these others in having its own studios and industry, such an assessment nonetheless tends to foreclose on the possibilities for those films inhabiting the "non-Egyptian" model ever be accorded the status of popular cinema. Moreover, where local distribution and exhibition for North African films has been historically partial or non-existent (due to commercial decisions that have historically favored Egyptian, Indian, and Euro-American productions), it has been difficult for many directors in countries like Morocco to avoid the charge that their films—which are often more visible in European festivals than at home—are made for other markets or audiences. Whether in sympathy with the idea of distinctive local or national cinemas and resistance to cultural hegemony, or in suspicion of the politics of international funding and coproduction, many critical treatments of non-Egyptian Arab films make of the popular an evaluative term that signifies local authenticity and a resistance towards European art cinema tendencies and that privileges commercial success over experimentation.

This essay takes a more expansive approach to the idea of the popular in an Arab cinematic context. Using the work of Moroccan filmmaker Moumen Smihi as an example, I will show how the history of Maghribi cinema forces us to rethink notions of the popular in a global frame. Smihi's films construct a dialogue between vernacular, local, and popular elements in Morocco and the Maghrib, and elements of the wider culture of the Arab world. More than that, however, his films construct a global popular that is also in dialogue with European, Asian, and American cultural forms—both cinematic and literary. While treating Smihi's cinema as a global modernist form within the history of world cinema, I show here that the assumed characteristics and preoccupations of art cinema can mask a surprisingly thoroughgoing and transformative engagement with the popular. Addressing Smihi's development of a global popular is thus instructive not only for elucidating his films' deep emplacement within the local, but for thinking about wider discourses of art cinema, global modernist forms, and cinematic histories.[1]

In deploying the term "world cinema" in its very title, and below, this essay does not suggest some kind of flattened terrain where everything circulates either in relation to Hollywood or in a multicultural sameness. In keeping with the cautionary perspectives on nomenclature developed in this dossier's introduction, I here deploy the term "world" in productive tension with the term "global" in order to suggest the world-making, generative possibilities of that the global-popular can unleash. I mean to recognize not only the "irreducible contradictions" invoked by the editors with respect to global cinematic practices, but also the sense that the "flexible geographies" (Nagib, 35) created by Smihi's cinema can reconfigure the relations that so far separate "the Arab world" from "the West," or that structure Maghribi production along axes assumed to follow those established by colonialism. By forging connections across different and more unpredictable paths, Smihi's films engage and exploit the

global in service of what I've elsewhere termed a new kind of Nahda, a renewed Arab Renaissance (Limbrick 2020). It's for that reason especially—to hold on to the possibilities for reconfigured relations within and between Arab and non-Arab worlds as engaged by a cinema of the global popular—that I use the term "world cinema" here. With its purchase on the transformative power of cinema's imaginaries, it offers not only the space for critique of what is, but also a gesture to what might still be, a doubled perspective that is particularly helpful in assessing Smihi's work.

Born and raised in Tangier, Moumen Smihi began a degree in literature in Rabat before winning a scholarship to study filmmaking at L'institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC) in Paris, which he commenced in 1965. Attending IDHEC through the years leading up to the May 1968 events, Smihi was influenced more by the many hours he spent at the Cinémathèque française and in the famous open seminars of Barthes and Lacan. His Paris formation is typical of his generation of postcolonial Maghribi filmmakers; indeed, he was preceded by other Moroccans like Mohamed Afifi, Mohamed Abderrahmane Tazi, Abdelmajid Rechiche, and Ahmed Bouanani, all of whom graduated before Smihi arrived. Across the Maghrib, one sees a similar trajectory with filmmakers like Merzak Allouache from Algeria or Nouri Bouzid or Moufida Tlatli from Tunisia. Generally speaking, most histories of Arab cinema treat these directors and others like them as participants in an art cinema model that relies on international funding and a kind of auteurist cinematic discourse that differs from the Egyptian model of popular cinema (see Armes, Shafik).

Yet we might pause to consider the grounds of such an argument. While certainly the dominant force of Egyptian cinema was historically founded in musicals and melodrama designed for popular appeal and commercial success, Egypt produced several directors whose

work might be seen to push towards the direction of an art cinema. Salah Abu Seif, for example, was one of the filmmakers to introduce a discourse of neorealism into Egyptian cinema that offered it social criticism as well as recognizable stars and music. He was a frequent collaborator with the realist novelist Naguib Mahfouz, who wrote screenplays for Mahfouz and others while also having his work adapted for the screen. Around him, other artists such as Tawfik Saleh, Youssef Chahine, Mohammed Khan, and Hussein Kamal directed films that engaged neorealist sensibilities while sometimes retaining some of the elements of the commercial Egyptian cinema. Shadi Abdel Salam experimented with sound and image to create a truly radical feature film, Night of Counting the Years (al-Momia, 1969) that articulated Egyptian discourses on the Pharaonic past and its role in contemporary Egypt. But notwithstanding even the examples of auteurist or art cinema within Egypt, most writers continue to see its studio-based industry and star system, modeled on Hollywood's, as antithetical to the kind of cinema practiced in the postcolonial North African countries following independence.

Indeed, many Maghribi practitioners themselves have articulated the specificity of their own work by explaining its difference from the Eygptian cinema that was commercial and hegemonic on the screens of the Arab world. Such an assessment has two tendencies. The Moroccan director Nabyl Lahlou, for example, in discussing his feature Brahim Yach (1982), associates Egyptian popular cinema with the creation of a particular kind of spectatorial naïveté; his films could not reach a Moroccan audience because the films were too sophisticated for their public. “I work for the Moroccan elite. Brahim Yach is too difficult for the everyday audience. The general Moroccan audience was trained in front of Egyptian and Hindi films. It is absolutely impossible for it to understand Brahim Yach” (Allessandra, 48). Hence the need to either train a new kind of spectator (the aim of the ciné-club movement in Morocco, that attempted to bring

new forms of cinema to urban and rural audiences) or to see one's work as only for the elites, as has Lahlou. In another version of the story, however, Egyptian cinema remains a negative reference point, but the difference taken from it is articulated in the search for a differently accented, nationally authentic, popular; the popular of commercial success. Such is the authorial discourse around Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi's film Looking for my Wife's Husband (À la recherche du mari de ma femme, 1993). Tazi, a near-contemporary of Smihi's (he is a few years older and graduated before Smihi went to Paris), explained the aim of his own practice by criticizing the overabundance of non-Moroccan media and cultural forms in the Moroccan cultural sphere. His intention with Looking was to redress that balance with a return to national heritage:

> I've said this again and again—people here are so stuffed full of images from abroad, even Arab images from abroad, that they'd love to see images that are closer to home, that come from their own country. That's what I put in this film, or at least tried to: humorous situations, Moroccan situations. (Dwyer, 42)

Later, Tazi elaborates on this desire of a resistance to foreign forms:

> Here in Morocco, today's consumer of films or other audiovisual forms is so sick of all that comes from abroad, of this surfeit of images of the other, that there's a real rejection of these and a very strong desire, on the part of all generations, to look at what belongs to us, to our own region. (Dwyer, 65).

Tazi here articulates the nationalist resistance towards Hollywood cinema, Bollywood cinema, European cinema, and even Arab cinema, by framing them against something "closer to home" or "from one's own country."

What he countenances as belonging to this national heritage, however, precludes certain popular practices that, he argues, have become fetishes for Western Orientalist representations: circumcision ceremonies, sacrificial killings of cocks or sheep, and so on (Dwyer, 66). We will return to such practices in discussing Smihi's work—which does include such elements—but for now I wish to show the ways that a notion of the popular might be harnessed as a form for positive, nostalgic, or self-affirming representations only; a desire which, indeed, possesses its own value judgments about what counts as worthy and what does not. In its studied avoidance of elements that might read as self-Orientalizing or non-Moroccan, Looking for my Wife's Husband constructs itself (quite unselfconsciously) as a "heritage film" full of "positive nostalgia" and "images that give Moroccans worth" (67). Tazi's instincts for what would be affirming for a Moroccan audience were well-founded: Looking for my Wife's Husband was, at the time of its release, the most-seen Moroccan film of all time. Yet it is a film that is profoundly conservative in the way in which it approaches Morocco cinematically: it hews to highly conventional and stylistically unmarked manner of shooting and editing, and its humor often relies upon the most straightforward stereotypes.

Tazi's articulation is what I might call a parochial popular or a national popular. It relies upon the idea that the signs of identity are pre-existent and universally recognized and that, in their collective re-affirmation by filmmakers and their audiences, they might serve as bulwarks against outside influence. In resisting these cinemas that had historically dominated distribution in favor of a viable national cinema, his approach is to treat the notion of the popular as a question of popularity. Tazi's film was, by his own admission, driven by a sentiment of "All right, now let's really try to make something for our own audience." This would be a film that people could appreciate and like and laugh at, not, as he put it, "pandering to the public taste for

Egyptian or Indian films," but instead hewing "close to our own heritage" (31). The problem is that a heritage cinema built on films like this (as with so many other heritage films: see Higbee; Higson; Nowell-Smith) can come to rely on such a narrow and privileged idea of national particularity that it easily slides into a hermeticism and parochialism. The desire for popularity and heritage, for example, allows the figure of Houda's developmentally disabled husband to be instrumentalized as a figure of laughter for the audience, and her brain-damaged, partially-paralyzed father to be used as a simplistic metaphor for the damage done by international television and media. Moreover, this kind of rendering of the Moroccan popular overlooks the possibility of a longer or more extensive elaboration of the popular as those things pertaining to a culture and its view of itself. It is this kind of Moroccan and Arab popular that is, by contrast, traced in the films of Smihi's work, a popular that, I argue, is global.

Smihi's work proposes a global popular that freely mixes elements from diverse sources, so that the local intersects with the global. His cinema thus becomes the scene of a dynamic play of images and sounds that envision the place of Morocco and the Maghrib within wider worlds. Smihi wants to recognize cinema's technological provenance as a product of colonization and as a worlded, global form to understand how it comes to function in relation to other elements of culture that are pre-existent in Morocco, in North Africa, and in the Arab world. In particular, his interest in the potential for cinema to be a kind of anthropology—his conscious debt to Jean Rouch, Robert Flaherty, or Claude Lévi-Strauss, we might say, but from the perspective of a Maghribi postcolonial—emerges from his desire for cinema to reflect a culture to itself and yet to at once be engaged in a world. This, he argues, is the task of a cinema that can engage with the oral and written history of a given culture while also accessing modernity—not simply modernization, but an Arab modernity of self-critical ideas and images and sounds.[2] Here, we

might see his work as engaged in the kind of project of cultural translation that Rey Chow has called for, one that ultimately undoes the kind of epistemological boundaries of ethnographer and ethnographized to move beyond the "reductive permutations of the two terms—East and West, original and translation—and instead see both as full, materialist, and most likely equally corrupt, equally decadent participants in contemporary world culture" (Chow 195). Chow's perspective, focalized through questions of Chinese cinema, also resonates with that of the Moroccan sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi, whose work on the concept of a pensée autre and a "double criticism" is a profound call to embrace the mutual destabilization of languages and epistemologies that the bilingual, postcolonial situation of the Maghrib demands (Khatibi 1983, 1985).[3] Smihi's cinema further visualizes Chow and Khatibi's formulations while showing the diversity of languages and practices that underpin the project of cinematic cultural translation in which he is engaged.

Returning to Egyptian cinema, then, we can see its history as germane to the process of experimentation in Smihi's work; rather than rejecting it, Smihi's films help us understand Egyptian cinema's role and importance in the Arabic-speaking world. Following the arrival of cinema with colonialism, cinema developed quickly in Egypt within an industrial mode of production that mimicked the already extant Hollywood studio system and that adopted many of classical cinema's generic and narrative conventions. With a particular combination of melodrama, musical numbers, dance sequences, and stars, it quickly became a commercially successful form that also constituted a core component in Egypt's modernizing social and economic status. As Walter Armbrust has argued, that modernization process came with a particular complexity in the case of the Arab world, and the question of language was central to it. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, often referred to in Arabic as fusha) was developed during the

period of the Nahda or Arab renaissance (in the early years of the twentieth century) as a means to draw on the depth of classical or Quʾranic Arabic while simplifying its grammar. MSA aimed for a kind of modern lingua franca or vernacular with which Arabs could communicate across the reach of the Arab world, bypassing the exigencies of local dialects and languages to become a force in the project of Arab nationalism; fusha became the standardized language of print media, government, official discourse, and educated settings across the region. For example, the postcolonial Arabization projects in Algeria and Morocco adopted it over or alongside the previous official language of French. Yet it was a different vernacular, Egyptian ʿamiyya or dialect, that quickly became the spoken language of cinema. This diglossic situation led to what Armbrust calls a "split vernacular," in which a "classicist" pole valorizes Islamic history and linguistic classicism while striving for modern relevancy and ubiquity, and an oral, colloquial pole, embodied in the Egyptian dialect, exists as a language that is quotidian yet devalued (Ambrust, esp. 41-48).

For Smihi, then, engaging with popular culture in Morocco means engaging with both the classicist and oral vernaculars of Arabic, not as practices against which a Moroccan authentic should be recuperated but as part of a broad Arab popular that is integral to Moroccan contemporary experience. Along with singers like Umm Kulthum and Mohammed Abdel Wahab, the voices of other singers like Asmahan (Lebanese) and Abdel Halim Hafez (Egyptian) were famous and beloved for their filmed songs. And, as I argue elsewhere (Limbrick 2020), they contributed to an Arab nationalist sound space that was articulated through the radio station Voice of the Arabs, which, in the period after Nasser's military coup in 1952, had powerful broadcast transmitters that could send a signal from Cairo as far as Morocco in the Maghrib and Iraq in the Mashriq. President Gamal Abdel Nasser himself was a recognizable voice in this

shared soundscape of Arab nationalism, along with famed announcer Ahmed Said. These facts are dramatized across Smihi's films: along with the ubiquitous news broadcasts, we hear snippets of Umm Kulthum and Abdel Wahab on radios, we watch clips from films where Farid Atrash and Asmahan sing, and we hear characters humming snatches of songs by Egyptian heartthrob Abdel Halim Hafez.

Hafez features prominently in Smihi's films, especially Girls and Swallows (Les cris de jeunes filles des hirondelles, 2008), where he is invoked in a scene between Larbi, the young Tangerian protagonist, and Rabea, one of his romantic interests: Larbi asks her if she's ever heard of ʿAbd al-Halim Hafez and she replies by singing snatches of "Bitlumuni lih" and "Asmar Ya Asmarani," two songs that featured prominently in Hafez's filmic oeuvre (the first made famous in A Love Story [Hakayat hub, Helmy Halim, 1959), the second sung *to* him by Faeza Ahmed in The Empty Pillow (al-Wisada al-khalia, Salah Abu Seif, 1957). Hafez is also one of the voices heard at the end of Smihi's The Sorrows of a Young Tangerian (Tanjaoui: peines de coeur et tourments du jeune tanjaoui Larbi Salmi, 2013) as the young postcolonial radicals, the film's central characters, march through the Perdicaris Forest in Tangier: the sound over that we hear is of a radio's squeal as it tunes in and out of the song "Watani al-kabir," (My Great Nation) composed by Mohammed Abdel Wahab and sung by a cluster of famous artists including Abdel Halim Hafez. But it is Umm Kulthum or "the Voice of Egypt," as Virginia Danielson refers to her, who is the most famous voice to inhabit Smihi's popular vocal soundscapes. Her singing was instantly recognizable throughout the Arab world and became central to Egypt's radio broadcasts, which are often represented in Smihi's films. Umm Kulthum herself recognized the immense significance of radio as a popular form, once declaring, "We are in the transistor age… Everyone is able to listen to radio anywhere" (Danielson 183, citing al-Naqqash, 41). But it was

the quality of her voice itself that drew listeners to her from the 1920s through the height of her popularity in the 1940s and even through periods of time depicted in Smihi's films: Tangier of the 1950s and 60s in The East Wind (El Chergui, ou, le silence violent, 1975), A Muslim Childhood (Le gosse de Tanger, 2005) and Girls and Swallows. As Danielson recounts, Umm Kulthum had established herself as the preeminent singer in Egypt by the late 1930s, rivaled only by Mohammad Abdel Wahab. Danielson explains: "Using her native abilities as a foundation, she cultivated what the cognoscenti of Cairo taught as historically Arab aesthetics of singing and joined them to the style of the mashayikh.[4] She applied that sound to new compositions, and it became one of her signal accomplishments. The basis of her idiom was meticulously controlled vocal power" (Danielson, 192). During her exceptionally long concerts (which could last up to six hours), Umm Kulthum was able to deploy a range of different styles or "colors" with her voice, including those of bahha (hoarseness) and ghunna (nasality), the latter being a particular signifier of what most people regarded as authentic and traditional Arab singing.[5] Thus by the 1940s, Umm Kulthum had become not just a national phenomenon (from working class beginnings in the Nile Delta, she became wealthy and famous for her music) but also a regional one, beloved across the Arab world thanks to her "first Thursday" broadcasts on Radio Cairo (Danielson, 87).

Her vocal appearance in Smihi's films (even her physical appearance as an image in a few moments) thus functions on multiple levels. As a voice, hers joins the many others in the films that compete for our attention in a soundscape that is attuned to accent, language, space, and tone. Her voice connects Smihi's locales to a wider Arab soundscape that (in the historical moment represented in some of the films) was Nasserian and pan-Arab. Moreover, her voice offers a kind of benchmark for qualities of properness, authenticity, and respectability: Umm

Kulthum was praised for her perfect pronunciation of Quʾranic Arabic, the pureness of sentiment from her religious songs, and her respectability (Danielson, esp. 90-91, 196-97). A cafe scene in A Muslim Childhood references this status. A sound bridge of stringed music connects a scene in the streets of the medina to a new scene inside a cafe, which Larbi enters with a friend. The strings belong to the diegetic sound of Umm Kulthum's orchestra, and as the cut takes us to the new scene (beginning with a shot of two portraits, one of the Sultan Mohamed V), the loudness of the music markedly increases as Umm Kulthum's voice arrives. The next shot cements our understanding of her voice by alighting on a photographic portrait of her on the wall of the cafe, under a large valve radio attached to a shelf on the wall. But what is remarkable on the level of voice is the contrast between the voices heard in the streets and the cafe and that of Umm Kulthum herself. Larbi and his friends have been roughly reciting a rhyme in Moroccan dialect that is about circumcision, syphilis, and anal infection; Taʾiz, a local in the cafe, is loudly describing how he used to shit while in prison. The cafe owner, dressed in a tarbouche and a waistcoat, attempts to silence him, saying he's had enough of such obscenity, especially with the "son of a preacher" (Larbi) listening on. Yet the conversation and the argument about it continue as the cafe owner tries to kick Larbi out and silence his friend. All the while, however, we hear Umm Kulthum singing in her recognizable and deeply proper voice. Hers is one of the many overlapping voices in the multifaceted, polyphonic soundspace of the medina, but it also represents a contrast between the loftier elements of Arab musical culture and the rough vernacular of the Tangier medina. Crucially, Smihi's film does not favor one discourse over the other, but it does allow their difference to be manifest through sound.

The Egyptian Arab popular of radio and song is conjoined with other kinds of music, and at several moments in his films, Smihi depicts the music of the Gnawa (Moroccans of sub-

Saharan African heritage whose ancestors were brought to the country as slaves). In The East Wind, as Aïcha and her friends walk along the beach towards the Hercules Grotto to make her fatal offering to the gods, we hear the qraqeb or castanets of the Gnawa musician before we even see him playing. Another Gnawa musician appears next to Larbi's home in A Muslim Childhood, and groups of Gnawa are seen prominently in the first part of Moroccan Chronicles (Chroniques Marocaines, 1999). As the presence of the Gnawa musician shows, music is a key aspect of Smihi's embrace of a vernacular Moroccan culture. We hear the importance of the everyday Moroccan musical soundscape as the films elevate that music to a level of historical importance. The opening credits of all three films in the Tangier trilogy use Moroccan songs in with a dynamic play of instruments and voices that plunge the viewer deep into a Tangérois atmosphere before we see a single photographic image. In 44, or Tales of the Night (44, ou, les récits de la nuit, 1981), diegetic music becomes as important as the image in Smihi's attempt at presenting a culture to itself cinematographically (fig. 1). In published remarks on the film, the filmmaker has stressed the need for cinema, in the wake of the destructive material and ideological presence of colonialism, to develop a representation in image and sound of the elements of a popular culture. To do so is to attempt more than a simple recuperation or rehabilitation of the culture on screen. Instead, it is to interrogate "by and in the film the forms that belong to a particular culture: the popular representation of the storyteller, the traveling musician, and vernacular chants in dialect; the presence of poetry; and the fragmentation of narrative structure." These investigations, according to Smihi, necessitate "another kind of writing, for every image is above all the image of the ritual belonging to a society" (Smihi 2006b, 129). While that strategy works on the level of the image, Smihi is adamant that it is also a question of the dynamic of image and sound, so that the culture might hear itself as well as see itself. Music, then, including, in his words,

"noises, silence, objects, instrumental games" (129) is critical to the process of visualizing and respecting the popular.

Along with their love of popular music, the films demonstrate an intense appreciation for the varieties of ʿamiyyat or dialects that are spoken across the region: Egyptian vernacular in The Lady from Cairo (La dame du Caire, 1991) and, in all his other films, the Moroccan vernacular, usually referred to in Morocco itself as simply darija. Moroccan darija (the word is a synonym for ʿamiyya in Arabic; it is used by Moroccans as the specific noun for their own dialect) is a syncretic language that transforms the sound of classical Arabic by tending to elide vowels and stressing the interaction of consonants. Its lexicon and pronunciation differs from place to place around the country, incorporating different words from Tamazight, Tariffit, and Tashilhit languages (themselves spoken widely, especially in rural areas) as well as from French. As such, it has a historical particularity that can be juxtaposed with the many instances of classical or modern Arabic that are also invoked in the films. Language and its deployment thus become important elements in the films' discourse on the popular. Smihi's love for what he has termed idiolects—a distinctive manner of speech but, in this case, the speech proper to a local culture—is reflected in this interaction between language and popular custom. One of the earliest and most illustrative examples is the film El Chergui or The East Wind. The chergui is the strong, insistent easterly wind that blows across northern Morocco's coast and mountains, including Tangier. Smihi takes its ubiquity and sound to signal something dramatically conflictual in the multi-layered spaces of the city. The film's narrative is organized around the story of Aïcha, a young woman living in the medina of Tangier whose husband wishes to take a second spouse. Resisting this prospect, she joins other women around her home in magical practices connected to the belief in marabouts, the saints or holy men that are a relic of the pre-Islamic, Amazigh popular

practices and which are frowned upon by traditional Islam. Aïcha is shown in the pursuit of these practices: receiving a herbal massage, making offerings to the saints of the sea at Hercules Grottos, the caves on the coast near Tangier, and agreeing to submit to an immersion in the waves there, all in an effort to derail her husband's plans by making herself irresistible to him. On one of her visits to the caves, on the festival of Sidi Qasim, she is swept away in the sea during the inundation ritual in what could either be an accident or an act of suicide.

The montage of local languages and popular customs in this film exists on the level of both sound and image. The film opens with a juxtaposition of two Amazigh songs and moves through several sequences that are documentary-like in their focus on the practices of medina residents. The choreography of voices in the greetings between women doing laundry on the rooftop is remarkable in its attention to the sounds and rhythm of their voices: Smihi captures the customary formula of the interaction and the elaborate back and forth of their "la bas?" "La bas. La bas?" and so on, (a greeting that could be roughly translated as "How are you?" "I'm fine, how are you?" but that can stretch out across several exchanges, asking in different ways about one's interlocutor and family). The frequent visual references to other contemporary popular practices are also evident in the sequence in which Aïcha's family sees the face of exiled king Mohammed V in the moon (fig. 2). During the years of the French Protectorate, this popular belief was one aspect of an anti-colonial structure of feeling: nationalists often reported seeing Mohamed V's face in the moon during the years of his exile, sustaining nationalist dreams of a future in which the French would be expelled and the king reinstated. Smihi's actors in The East Wind were largely nonprofessional and thus performed their own social roles, backgrounds, and languages; even those who were actors by training were encouraged to lose their technique and they spoke in their respective dialects (Fassi, from Fez, Tanjawi, from Tangier, Riffian, from the

rural areas of the Rif mountains, and so on). His method of direction and his actors' method of performance was thus, by his description, sociological or anthropological rather than industrial or professional. Crucially, however, just as one might find reference points for such practices in European cinema practices (Antonioni's constructions of city spaces, Bresson's use of actors as models, or Rossellini's belief in the possibility of nonprofessional actors and real locations), Smihi was always responding to elements within Arab or Moroccan thought or practice, too. In a 1978 interview in Arabic he stated his interest in representing the specificities of the Moroccan mise-en-scène, since every culture, he argued, has its own relationship between bodies and space (Smihi 2005, 17-18).

The East Wind's embrace of a polyphonous mode of the popular that incorporates the local with the global is evident in a later film, Moroccan Chronicles. From the outset, the film combines western literary, filmic, and musical citations (Shams, the female protagonist of the second of the film's three chapters reads Virginia Wolf and sings "Stormy Weather" and the film's nondiegetic soundtrack includes Bach, Schubert and Liszt). But it also mobilizes innumerable local oral and popular traditions that intersect in the Jemaa el-Fnaa (Marrakesh's carvivalesque public square) in the first part of the film. These include the story telling of the halaiqi or Moroccan storyteller (fig. 3), the tradition of gymnasts from the long line of Sufi followers of Sidi Ahmed ou Moussa, and the music and chant of the Gnawa musicians. The film's second chapter prominently features the white haik or women's robe that is typical of the town of Essaouira. Such intense interest in and commitment to popular elements of Moroccan culture here and in The East Wind is described in an interview Smihi conducted about the former film. Discussing The East Wind, he was asked: "This film depends on popular heritage in its language, is that so?"

> I, too, think that a lot of the elements of this language in the movie stem from the Moroccan popular folklore…. What I am interested in personally is to trace the pensée sauvage [Smihi here uses Levi-Strauss's term, but translates it into Arabic as al-fikr al-washi] within Arab culture; to find it all you need is to listen to popular culture. Moroccan popular thought manifested itself throughout centuries and generations in many fields, some that are in my practice as synthetic forms: the art and technique of building cities, architectural art, abstract art forms that appear in the ornamentation of weaving and the artform of patterns in painting and metals, as well as in popular imagination in the form of story-telling, legends, proverbs, jubilant cries… in narrative forms as mentioned before, as well as in the beauty and the genius of Arabic traditional popular paintings, or Persian paintings or miniatures, which offer to us, as cinéastes, a visual reference we cannot ignore in our own practice. (Smihi 2005, 9)

Here we have evidence of Smihi's intentions to elevate the popular to the same level of importance as other forms of textuality and to refuse any kind of hierarchization of the European high culture over the local and popular; all are accorded equal weight in his global popular practice.

Such a concern for the revaluation of the popular is also evident in his 44, or Tales of the Night, a film which he has described as being inspired by the American slogan, "black is beautiful" (Carrée, 119). 44 is Smihi's attempt at a kind of radical narcissism in which he takes elements of the culture and shows them back to itself while simultaneously tracing the indignities suffered through the forty-four years of the French colonial protectorate. The film's narration, whose form can be traced equally to the Arab philosophies of al-Jahiz and the modernist narration of James Joyce, is equally organized by the perspective of a storyteller who relates the

battles against the French in the Middle Atlas mountains. It is in such a context—in a small, rural village, that we see the figure of Smihi himself, dressed like a follower of Sidi Ahmed ou Moussa (a marabout who was a resistance fighter against Portuguese colonists and whose name is now associated with the acrobatic tradition seen in Moroccan Chronicles, and here). The film's narration responds to the halqa tradition of public storytelling, the word halqa denoting both the space of the circle where the narrative takes place (as in the scene from Moroccan Chronicles in fig. 3) as well as the cyclical kind of narrative itself (performed by the halaiqi), a form that is also compatible with the film's Joycean and Jahiz-ian elements. Much of the poetry recited and used as interior monologue in the film is from a long tradition of oral verse from the city of Fez, verse whose female authors are anonymous. According to Mohamed El Fasi, who collected and translated many of these poems as Chants anciens des femmes de Fes (Ancient songs of the women of Fez), the poetry was spoken and sung by women in garden settings around Fez. "These poems were destined to be sung in pleasurable events organized by the families in the gardens that surround the city of Fez. The young women, balanced on swings, devoted themselves to their movements and each one struck up an 'aroubi' [an Arab-Andalusian genre of classical poetry and music] either of her composition or to a communal repertoire which was transmitted orally from generation to generation without knowing who was the true author" (El-Fasi, 7). These poems, writes El Fasi, were exclusively romantic in nature and often speak longingly of a lover but always in the context of strong expressions of Muslim faith and the ability of God to alleviate the suffering imposed by distance or loss. El Fasi, however, also points out that whereas classical poetry employed an exclusively masculine voice and gendered the object of affection as always feminine, "here we are in the presence of the opposite phenomenon; it is the women who speak of their loves using the feminine" (8). Smihi's adoption of this and

other popular practices is a gesture that works against their colonial appropriation and or denigration. In contrast to the loss or appropriation of Moroccan custom, then, Smihi redeploys all these elements, allowing them to structure his narratives and inflect his representations of history.

Here we might compare Smihi's work to some of his Moroccan cinema contemporaries, or those that just preceded him. I have elsewhere discussed what I called the "vernacular modernism" of the 1950s and 60s courts-métrages and documentaries produced under the auspices of the CCM (Centre Cinématographique Marocain). Mohamed Afifi and Ahmed Bouanani, in particular, were notable for the way that they conjoined experimentations in documentary representation with an interest in popular practices and global modernisms. The intertextuality of those films is comprised of American culture, European avant-gardes, and local elements. Bouanani, for example, filled the soundtrack of his radical film on Casablanca, 6 and 12, with bebop jazz and American rock 'n' roll even as his films like Tarfaya, or A Poet's Walk continued a longstanding documentation and visualization of Moroccan folk traditions that one can trace across the Moroccan modernism of the time (Limbrick 2015). Such an intertextuality reveals that the recovery and valorization of the local might be conjoined to the influence of international modernism in productive, vernacular ways. Rather than seal the local within a kind of reclaimed nationalist authenticity, to be always resistant to the foreign, such a modernism embraces a critical wordliness.

While I have used the term "vernacular modernism" to address the use of popular and quotidian practices in the context of Moroccan experiments with modernism, I intend to also invoke it with respect to a local cinema's negotiation of foreign influences, as Miriam Hansen's formulation of Shanghai cinema with respect to Hollywood would have it (Hansen). Smihi's

films, in their intertexuality, demonstrate how a Moroccan and Arab modernism is comprised of an engagement not only with local customs, voices, and discourses but also with a world cinema which influences it and to which, in turn, it must be seen as integral. Such influences are multidirectional, spanning the proximate or ubiquitous (Egyptian and Arab, Hollywood, and European cinema) and the more distant (Asian and Latin American film), the popular and the art traditions. For example, despite the fact that his aesthetic and mode of production stand in opposition to the factory system of Egyptian commercial cinema, Smihi's films also demonstrate a deep love for its popular traditions, stars, and influence. As I signaled above, Smihi's invocation of Egyptian popular cinema is often to be felt in the inclusion of songs by singers like Umm Kulthum, Abdel Halim Hafez, and Asmahan. But the integration of Egyptian popular cinema into the films operates on an extensive visual level also. In A Muslim Childhood, Larbi and his friend Ouahrani are transfixed by the sight of Hind Rostom dancing seductively in a bikini for Farid al-Atrash in Youssef Chahine's film You Are My Love (Inta habibi, 1957). Smihi includes footage of the Chahine film playing in the theatre in a moment of intertextual homage to Egyptian cinema and its place in Tangerian life. The posters that grace the theatre there (and the walls of Larbi's room in Girls and Swallows) are another explicit sign of the ubiquity of Egyptian cinema in the Tangerian and Moroccan landscape. Towards the end of A Muslim Childhood, the camera lovingly pans in extreme closeup over the details of posters for films like Rendezvous with a Stranger (Mawaʿid maʿ al-majul, Atef Salem, 1959), starring Samia Gamal and Omar Sharif, Among the Ruins (Bain al-Atlal, Ezzel Dine Zulficar, 1959), starring Faten Hamama, I am Free (Ana hurra, Salah Abu Seif, 1958), starring Lubna Abdel Aziz, or A Day in My Life (Yawm min ʿumri, Atef Salem, 1961), starring Abdel Halim Hafez. In an earlier scene, Larbi has pointed all of these out to Ouahrani, making him his apprentice in

the appreciation of these Egyptian stars: "Look, Faten Hamama… Another star! Isn't she beautiful?" In The Lady from Cairo, soon after her arrival in Cairo, Amina visits a screening of Love and Revenge (Gharam wa intiqam [1944], directed by Youssef Wahby and with songs written by Asmahan's brother, Farid al-Atrash) where she watches Asmahan perform the song "Merry Nights in Vienna." As in A Muslim Childhood, Smihi includes this footage on the big screen of his own fictional diegesis, as he intercuts Amina and the audience watching and listening attentively. The enthusiastic endorsement of the film by Amina and her friend as they exit the theatre complements the wide shots of the theatre's lobby and poster art, presaging the similar scene in A Muslim Childhood; taken together, these scenes cement the idea of the cinema, as institution and physical site, as a kind of (secular) sacred space in his work.

Just as Smihi's films are able to navigate the influence and legacy of Egypt, the hegemonic cinema in the region, in all its aspects, so has his work profited from its critical engagement with both the dominant representational force of Hollywood as well as US cinema's auteur-driven, more marginal currents. The imagined geography of Michael Curtiz's Casablanca (1942) or Josef von Sternberg's Morocco (1930) are but two examples of a long history of exoticized and Orientalist Hollywood representations of Morocco. Yet the fact that Casablanca was not made in Casablanca nor Morocco in Morocco has not prevented Moroccans from taking up its representations and others like it, as Edwards has documented (Edwards). To narrate the cinematic relationship of Hollywood and Morocco (both in terms of representation and production) only as a story of cultural hegemony obscures a longer history of Moroccan engagements with US cinema, one that includes the films of the eccentric Moroccan cinema pioneer Mohamed Osfour, who drew on Tarzan and Douglas Fairbanks when shooting with home-made equipment around his home of Casablanca, and the postcolonial Moroccan

modernists mentioned above (see Bouanani, Amahan, Fabre). Smihi's intertextual engagements with Hollywood reformulate the relationship between Hollywood and European imaginaries and Morocco. Hitchcock's The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956) uses Marrakech's famous Jemaa el-Fnaa square, referenced above, as the site of the Midwestern couple's fascination with an Orient that is strange, enchanting and, as they will find, dangerous. But in reprising Hitchcock's scene—replete with snake charmers, acrobats, and storytellers—Smihi's film Moroccan Chronicles reclaims the longevity and vivacity of performances and practices that have long been part of the popular culture of the square. The film both acknowledges the terms of Morocco's entry into the circulation of Hollywood cinema—standing for an otherness that might be exoticized within an economy of sameness— and yet manages to claim from Hitchcock's movie an irreducible quality to those same practices, a quality might be useful for a representation of Moroccan custom back to itself.

A similar kind of doubling operates in part two of the same film, which Smihi shot on the ramparts of Essaouira. Built in the eighteenth century by Genoese engineers at the command of Moroccan king Mohammed III after two centuries of Portugese control of the coast, the ramparts were used by Orson Welles for his film of Shakespeare's Othello; he also shot footage at al-Jadida, further up the coast. Shakespeare's text itself becomes an intertextual reference, in that Smihi extracts from its already-charged racial narrative (of the Moor and the Jew) another potential story about the suppression of Desdemona's desire. Smihi takes the dramatic cinematic spaces of Welles's film and repurposes them to offer further evidence of the way that Morocco itself is worlded by its cinematic past. Within the intertextual world of Smihi's Essaouira, one that includes Welles's Othello (1955), Shakespeare's Othello and Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, the filmmaker creates a polyphony of Moroccan and non-Moroccan voices. Such a

polyphony allows the film to address multiple planes of meaning simultaneously, evoking, for example, the determining limitations of foreign visions of Morocco but also the possibilities those visions might offer for thinking back against colonialism or against the patriarchal elements of Moroccan society.

Smihi's films demonstrate the limits of the delineation between art or auteur cinema and popular commercial cinema. As I argue at length elsewhere (Limbrick 2020), we should see the work of Smihi and some of his contemporaries as active participants in an Arab modernism that is global in its genealogy and influence. But it would be a mistake to see that modernism, easily recognizable as part of a global art cinema, as being divorced from or antithetical to the popular. Rather, as this essay has shown, Smihi's work inhabits a terrain of the global popular, a formulation that surpasses the parochial limitations of a nationalistic popular with its demands for authenticity and the rejection of the foreign. By contrast, Smihi's global popular is radical in what it offers: a recognition of the destructive histories of colonization and globalization along with an affirmation of the local customs and practices that they threatened; a love of the cultural and cinematic legacy of the Arab world along with a critique of its mythologies; and an embrace of the legacies of world cinema, including Hollywood, as a way to re-narrate histories of Morocco not only for Moroccans, but for a world.

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[1] Many of these ideas are developed further in my book Arab Modernism as World Cinema: The Films of Moumen Smihi (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020). Some of the material below also appears there.
[2] Space does not allow for a full engagement with Smihi's own theoretical and critical writing here but it is advanced across a range of texts in Arabic and French. For collections of previously published articles and interviews, see Smihi (2006, in French) and al-Smihi (2005, in Arabic).
[3] Of course, the Maghrib is more than bilingual: aside from French and Modern Standard Arabic, there is Moroccan darija, described further in this article, and the Amazigh languages. Khatibi speaks rather of the dominant linguistic and epistemological traditions, French-European and Arab-Islamic, that structure Morocco's intellectual history.
[4] The term, the plural of the more recognizable *shaykh*, here refers to religious singers.