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Moumen Smihi's Tanjawi/Tangérois/Tangerian Cinema.¹

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"I was born in Tangier. My whole life deals with this city, with the residues and effects that it left in me."

Moumen Smihi, *Ḥadīth al-Sīnimā*

"Pratique (illumination) de l'hétérogène: je ne suis ni/et ceci, ni/et cela. Ni/et ici, ni/et ailleurs. Le sens est toujours affaire d'indiscernables flottements. Et le travail est cela même qui s'agite, se révolte, s'obstine (mais non s'entête: il est acéphale) et (se) dynamite."

Moumen Smihi, "Maghrébitude"

As filmmaker, theorist, and critic, Moumen Smihi is one of the most consistent and determined artists currently working in Arab cinema, yet he is also one of the least well-known to Anglophone audiences and readers. Born in 1945 in the medina of Tangier,² Smihi moved to Paris on a student scholarship in 1965, a sojourn that deeply influenced him as young postcolonial. Attending film school at IDHEC (L'Institut des hautes études cinématographiques), he also participated in seminars at L'École pratique des hautes études with Roland Barthes, and discovered the work of Jacques Lacan,

¹ I am extremely grateful to Moumen Smihi for his generosity during the research and writing of this essay. I would also like to thank Fabiola Hanna for her help with Arabic translation; all translations from French are my own. This research was supported by the Senate Committee on Research and the Arts Research Institute of UC Santa Cruz.

² As Edwards explains, Tangier is the commonly used American spelling of the name; Tangiers the British. In Arabic the city's name is *Tanja*, and the adjective is *Tanjawi*; in French, *Tanger* and *Tangérois*. Just as Edwards uses all these names as a way of denoting the multiplicity of meanings of the space they signify, I invoke them in my title and below to signal the multivocal nature of Smihi's work. See Edwards, Brian, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 123-24.

Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Having shot his first short film, *Si Moh, pas-de-chance* (*If Moh, no Luck*) in Paris in 1970, Smihi returned to Morocco to make a series of groundbreaking films and has continued to produce one feature-length work approximately every three to five years. In addition, Smihi has published five volumes of writing on cinema in Arabic and in French.³ While not every one of his films is set in Tangier itself, most of his productions directly engage the city and all of them, I will argue here, are informed by its political, cultural, and aesthetic contours. In his films as in his writing, Smihi continues to elaborate the need for an Arab cinema that critically engages its cultural and political environs not through the singularity of nationalist, postcolonial, or religiously-driven identity but by exploiting and further exploding the contradictions and heterogeneity that mark cinema's existence in the Arab world. Paradoxically, his films, discussed by some critics under the sign of their so-called "intellectual" or "francophile" or "Western" address, in fact endeavor to carve out a space that is at once resolutely grounded in Arabic language and history and hostile to culturalist tendencies that would ossify Arabness into something fundamentally oppositional to Western discourses. In working toward an aesthetic of an Arabo-Islamic culture, Smihi's films evince his desire to build a history of the cinematographic image in the Arab world which is not commensurate with Euro-American or other cinematic traditions but which instead raids them, transforms them, and ultimately addresses them from within localized traditions, of which Arabic language and culture is an important but not exclusive aspect.

³ Moumen Smihi, *Écrire sur le cinéma* (Tangier: Slaïki Frères, 2006); *Ḥadīth al-Sinimā*, vols. 1 and 2 (Tangier: Silikī Ikhwān), 2005, 2006; *Fil Sinīma al Arabiyya* (Tangier: Silikī Ikhwān), 2009; *ʿAbqariyyāt Sinimāʾiyya* (translation of texts by Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, and Alfred Hitchcock; with pref. by Moumen Smihi), (Tangier: Silikī Ikhwān), 2011.

In the environment of the Maghreb, such a reckoning with the twinned histories of colonialism and cinema (cinema having arrived there with the colonizer) is located, metaphorized, and exemplified by the history and quotidian realities of Tangier. Like the city that is his home, Smihi's critical practice is built of a heterogeneity of voices and images—not a cacophony in the terms that the French *cinéma colonial* deployed in its Orientalizing constructions of Arab and Berber inhabitants, but a layering of French, Spanish, American, Arab, Berber, Andalusian and African languages, institutions, individuals, and cultural practices. Smihi's cinema and critical work together reveal their formative debt to a specificity of place—Tangier—as they constitute a practice that escapes the rigid singularity and stasis of identity.

Smihi's filmmaking is mostly absent from English-language history and criticism on Moroccan cinema: in two recent volumes his work appears only in the margins and is invisible from a third,⁴ and his critical writing is not at all mentioned there. He features a little more prominently in earlier work on Maghrebian cinema; Roy Armes has a significant chapter on Smihi's film *El Chergui* (1975) in his *Postcolonial Images*, and an interview with Smihi, translated from French, appeared in Downing's *Film and Politics in the Third World*.⁵ A new essay on *Chergui* also appeared in a recent film journal.⁶ Criticism about his work is more readily accessible in French and Arabic. His feature

⁴ Orlando, Valérie, *Francophone Voices of the "new" Morocco in Film and Print: (re)presenting a Society in Transition*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Gayle Carter, Sandra, *What Moroccan Cinema?: A Historical and Critical Study, 1956-2006* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009). Dwyer, Kevin, *Beyond Casablanca: M.A. Tazi and the Adventure of Moroccan Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

⁵ Armes, Roy, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Smihi, Moumen, "Moroccan Society as Mythology", in Downing, John D.H., *Film, Politics, and the Third World* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1987), pp. 77-87.

⁶ Simour, Lhoussain, "Narrating Silence and (Re)locating Space: Cinematic Reflexions on Moumen Smihi's *al-Shergui awi al-samt al-anif* (*al-Shergui* or the Violent Silence)," *Film Matters*, no. 3 (2010): 14-19.

films have been positively reviewed in French in Moroccan and French magazines, and his work has been written about in French and francophone journals and monographs too.⁷ In addition, there are Smihi's own books in French and Arabic, which often include interviews conducted with him (volume one of *Hadīth al-Sīnīma*, or *Talking about Cinema*, for example, is comprised of interviews). To some degree, the lack of English-language criticism on his work is a function of the lack of VHS or DVD distribution of his films and their scarce theatrical distribution in anglophone countries (his films have, nonetheless, shown in some Arab film festivals in the US and at other international festivals and he was won awards there too). Yet distribution questions alone cannot account for their critical absence: the three biggest studies of Moroccan cinema in English feature many filmmakers not in US or European distribution. Dwyer focuses on the figure of M.A. (Mohammed Abderrahman) Tazi as the fulcrum for his study. Orlando has a broad sweep over literature as well as film (more the former than the latter), and even though Smihi's work in the 1980s and 2000s could have been germane to her argument about dissenting voices in Moroccan culture, it appears only briefly in a list of productions from the period. Carter's extensive history is the place where one might expect Smihi's work to be most thoroughly addressed; there, however, its near-absence seems symptomatic of the author's insistence on an ideal of a national cinema in which Moroccan films might emerge coevally with a zealous and economically sustainable audience. It is in part this desire for a straightforward model of a national cinema (a desire apparently undisturbed by the currents of contemporary film and media studies, in which national cinema models have been extensively critiqued) that leads her to

⁷ See Khayati, Khémaïs, *Cinéma arabes: topographie d'une image éclatée*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996); Jaïdi, Moulay Driss, *Cinégraphiques: cinéma et société*, (Rabat: Al Majal, 1995).

(mis)characterize Smihi (based on a quoted interview) as uninterested in Moroccan publics and more in tune with Parisian cultural elites than audiences at home.⁸ That a filmmaker whose work falls outside of mainstream commercial distribution (where the logics of commercial distribution have historically disadvantaged many Moroccan filmmakers, as Carter duly notes) or whose work demands some degree of viewer participation should be thus marginalized as outside of the framework of a viable or relevant Moroccan cinema is an unfortunate outcome indeed. Such an assessment tends to establish a realm of content or cinematic style outside of which lies “foreign influence” or inauthentic intellectualism: in other words, it binds films too quickly to a practice of partaking in or forsaking an authentic or appropriate rapport to national identity or aesthetic style. That much about Smihi’s critical practice of cinema⁹ runs counter to the main currents of Arab or Moroccan filmmaking would alone make his cinema worthy of further attention. But here I will argue that beyond the already-compelling task of revealing counter-histories of experimentation within Arab cinema, there is also a pressing historical need to rigorously question the rift between discourses and ideas assumed to be either “foreign” or “Western” and thus “other” to Arab culture, and those that are assumed to stem from within it. Such a dichotomous logic, which is both cause and effect of, on the one hand, a Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations” thesis and, on the other, a ghettoizing of Arab cinema behind a seawall repelling destructive or antithetical Western influences, is generated as much from within contemporary Arab societies as

⁸ Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁹ I use the term “critical practice” with due recognition to my colleagues at UC Santa Cruz, where we have developed the term to describe a graduate program built around the idea of working across the boundaries of theory and praxis: Smihi’s oeuvre embodies a similar mode of working.

outside them, as Samir Kassir trenchantly argued and as I shall discuss further below with respect to some responses to Smihi's work.¹⁰

Placing Tangier at the heart of Moumen Smihi's critical practice thus contextualizes aspects of his work that have been so far beyond the purview of most English-language interpretations. Just as the city of Tangier itself challenges any kind of expectations about unitary national, ethnic, linguistic, or geopolitical identities, understanding Smihi as a Tanjawi director opens up his work beyond the temporal or spatial straitjackets of "Arab" or "Moroccan identity", language, or cinematic style—that is, beyond strategies that advertently or inadvertently idealize, Islamize, or nationalize Arab identity. Smihi's *Tangérois* cinema revels in its contradictory discursive elements just as it yokes them to the realities of time and place that Tangier itself provokes. Brian Edwards identifies something similarly generative in the city's environment and geopolitics in his discussion of the literary work of Mohamed Mrabet and Paul Bowles. In this collaboration, the illiterate Mrabet dictated stories that Bowles then transcribed, translated, and published. Acknowledging the asymmetrical and ambiguous nature of the relationship between the two men—a relationship that has been posited by Moroccan and non-Moroccan critics as variously queer, exploitative, neocolonial, or Orientalist, as well as brilliant and vital—Edwards argues that ultimately the ambiguous quality of the Mrabet/Bowles encounter is irresolvable and, in its lack of fixity, is best understood as (among other things) a distinctly Tangerian phenomenon. "The Mrabet-Bowles collaborations," writes Edwards:

¹⁰ Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*. Trans. Will Hobson. (London: Verso, 2006).

are ‘Tangerian’ works. Tangerian literature emerges from and responds to a particularly rich set of circumstances... the city’s international history, its collapsed communities and the crossing of its social networks, its linguistic multiplicity, and its tension in relation to the rest of Morocco. [Tangerian literature] ... emerges from a situation peculiar to Tangier—a Tangerian condition—frequently inscribed in the texts themselves.... And perhaps the most promising and exciting lesson of these works of Tangerian literature is the activation of the space of dialogue, from which something different and unforeseen might emerge.¹¹

This essay will argue that a similar “different and unforeseen” quality attaches to Smihi’s Tangerian practice, not a form of literature exactly as Edwards addresses it but instead a related form of cultural production—a *cine-écriture* of filmmaking and writing about film—that is equally caught up and shaped by the realities of Tangier. Moreover, Smihi’s cinema partakes of the dialogic qualities that Edwards identifies in that it draws heavily on local popular tradition while still referencing histories of Arab, European, Japanese, and American cinema. Similarly, just as Edwards’s proposition of a Tangerian literature is formulated as a direct challenge to literary critical taxonomies like “national literature” and “postcolonial literature” (such terms, he argues, exhaust themselves when confronted with examples he addresses in his book), Smihi’s Tangerian cinema is precisely one that escapes the reductive categories of “national cinema,” “postcolonial cinema,” or “Arab cinema.” While the entirety of Smihi’s critical and creative practice exhibits these tendencies, one can see them come sharply into focus in his first two features, which are

¹¹ Edwards, *op cit.*, p.242-43. See also his later essay “The Moroccan Paul Bowles,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol 50, no. 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 191-209.

instructive here not only for their formal innovation but for the way in which that innovation has been situated by others and by Smihi's own writing. Rather than these films being, by nature, inaccessible and thus divorced from a public, this paper will show how their relationship to the popular is rendered in a complex cinematic and rhetorical discourse that embeds itself in the dominant Arabo-Islamic culture the better to also think simultaneously outside it. Attention to the films at the level of image and sound will help us understand how their construction is not incidental to but rather deeply bound up with local cultural practices, cinematic traditions, politics, and aesthetics in the context of a post-colonial Moroccan social space.

El Chergui was Smihi's first feature film and his first work after returning to Tangier after his time in Paris. It retains a remarkable urgency and energy due in large measure to the radical nature of its film language and the incendiary aspect of its social critique. 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 maraboutism: taking 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 Sīdī Qāsim, she is swept away in the sea during the inundation ritual in what could either be an accident or an act of suicide. Around this scaffold of a story is built a much more intricate narrative made of elements that cohere to this plot line and some that digress from it; a system of signs that, on one level, produces a critique of the place of women within a

patriarchal domestic arrangement, but which equally produces a far-reaching interrogation of the wider social formation. As such, the film's critique is both internal to Moroccan and Arab society but is also focused outward to implicate the destructive effects of colonialism in both its public forms of violence—the battles for control over Morocco—and the incipient violence of a colonial-protectorate education system (the film, as we shall see, closes with a scene in a French lycée, where Aïcha's son is shown to us again). There is no redemption by the end of the film and, even as it situates the viewer in Tangier at the eve of independence (a dramatic sequence of newsreel stills is included), it does not promise liberation; its mood is anti-triumphalist.

The film achieves a sense of alienation through its deployment of cinematic images and sound so as to assert their independence from one another and to challenge the viewer across the interface between the diegetic and non-diegetic. The film's opening sequence, for example, begins with a single voice singing a Berber song that is untranslated by subtitles and otherwise unexplained in the narrative. It gives way to a second, in counterpoint, and over them has begun a montage of Tangier which concentrates in large part on near-empty spaces, architectural volumes and details within the frame, and life in the medina streets. Visually, the sequence creates something like an ambiance of the medina, a city-tone,¹² but its disjunctive qualities signal from the outset the non-linear and fragmented nature of the film and of the spaces it represents. In this way the film's discourse responds to the realities of Tangier itself. During the period of the French Protectorate (1912-56), throughout Morocco, the French preserved the original Arab medinas while building *villes nouvelles* or new towns alongside, and the

¹² Smihi has discussed his use of sound montage techniques in "La mémoire clandestine," where he also uses the word *ambiance* to describe (with a different example) his technique of situating sound and image. *Écrire sur le cinéma*, pp. 126-27.

history of Tangier as an international city is produced here in a juxtaposition of sites that includes the Jewish cemetery, the English church, the Italian palace, the French consulate, the American Legation, and so on. Rather than grounding the viewer with clear spatial coordinates to allow a visual apprehension of these sites in relation to one another, or building them temporally into a logical sequence of events, the film often uses combinations of image, sound, and text to distance or even de-authenticate our apprehension of what occurs. In a method that often obeys an Eisensteinian logic of montage, editing relations between shots are often violent and jarring and we experience meaning here through the collision of looks, intensities of light and dark, and graphic conflict between shots.

Here, then, as in his later *44: ou, les récits de la nuit* (44: or Bedtime Tales), Smihi experiments not just with a politics but with an aesthetics of Morocco in its colonial state at the verge of independence. The dichotomous logic of the film—counterposing interior space to exterior—is built upon an intensely detailed exploration of the relationship between bodies and space. Here the oppressive nature of the interior space that Aïcha inhabits is contrasted to the exterior space of the medina, the *ville nouvelle*, the coastal environment, and (at the end of the film) the docks. Within her home, Aïcha is shot in such a way that stresses her confinement through walls, grilles, and interior obstacles; as she moves freely around the city, echoes of that entrapment appear in the places she passes and visits (gates, fences, a prison). But before this confinement is spatialized outside the body or, we might even say, before alienation and desperation are inscribed in and *as* the body of a city (in sequences that show a homeless man, a prostitute, a slave amidst the built spaces of Tangier), the film's aesthetics of

costume signify in a complex way the relationship between a woman's body and her social place. The film uses the presence and absence of Aïcha's veil as part of the system of meaning that signifies both her confinement and her agency. Here the veil is neither romanticized nor made to over-signify as an index of religious oppression; it is, rather and more simply, an article of clothing for its character and a detail of *mise-en-scène* for the film. The film allows it to first register as a piece of clothing that signifies her role and place within a religious and social context of a Muslim society (heavily critiqued here, without sensationalism or vilification). As an element of the film's setting, however, Aïcha's clothing also offers the viewer an understanding of her agency and control over her environment (not an "answer" to her confinement and oppressive situation, but yet part of the complexity of her place within the medina). In several scenes, framings of Aïcha's face and body allow the film to exploit the contrasting black and white of her *jalāba* and veil and to use their volumes and shapes to create a scenic quality that registers visually as dramatic and beautiful but that still carries a weight of history and even critique. One is reminded here of Chadi Abdel-Salam's radical *mise-en-scène* in *Al Mūmia* (1969) which created a cinematic modernism with costume and setting that rejected romanticization but embraced aesthetic qualities built up over time within a culture. Similarly, in Smihi's case, to construct an aesthetic engagement with images of the sacred, or with the dress of and trappings of modesty and piety in the *jalāba* and veil that Aïcha wears, is neither to endorse a religious practice, to condemn the character to abjection, nor (as one writer has suggested) to capitulate to "orientalist ideology" or "the Western audience."¹³ Rather, the strategy furthers Smihi's stated aim to find a cinematic

¹³ Simour, *op. cit.*, 18.

practice fitting and appropriate, at the level of filmic discourse, to the society in which he lives and works.

Such a practice is readily illuminated in Smihi's published interviews and writing which function not (only) as supplements to his work but as their own interventions into the situation of Arab cinema, Arab modernisms, Arab intellectual traditions, and the relationships between all these and the West. In many places, Smihi speaks of the importance of language and, in particular, what he refers to as idiolect. At one level, this is manifest in his decision to actually employ certain kinds of dialect—Berber language, Moroccan *dārija*—in the soundtrack of the film. But it also marks his way of presenting a Tangier that is itself constituted from a mix of local languages and practices. In his 1976 essay, "Maghrébitude," Smihi notes that for Maghrebian cinema to adopt either classical Arabic or French as the dominant language of its spoken discourse is to participate in its own alienation, something for which he criticizes television and theatre. Against such a self-alienation, he argues, "There remains the idiolect: each 'agent' speaks his language (ethnic, regional, biographic or historical) even in his wandering, his stumbling, his failures. Idiolect: it finally signals a value which is anti-hegemonic and thus authentic."¹⁴ It is based upon this observation about the role of idiolects that Smihi reaches the statement about heterogeneity offered as an epigraph above, in which he calls for: "A practice (an illumination) of heterogeneity: I am neither/and this; nor/and that. Both here and not here, neither elsewhere and elsewhere. Meaning is always a matter of indistinguishable ambiguities. And the work is precisely that which troubles itself, repels

¹⁴ Smihi, "Maghrébitude," in *Écrire sur le cinéma*, p. 45.

itself, stubbornly persists (but doesn't butt its head; it is headless) and blows (itself) up."¹⁵

In this declaration of contingency, ambiguity, and diffusion, Smihi's text refuses the idea that there is a singular authenticity that can be expressed through an official language of identity or place. Instead, the embrace of idiolects in his work makes possible heterogeneity within both the narrative and the image itself. The montage of local languages and popular customs in this film include the frequent visual references to maraboutism and are also evident, for example, in the sequence in which Aïcha's family see the face of exiled sultan Mohammed V in the moon; during the years of the protectorate, this popular belief was one aspect of an anti-colonial structure of feeling. Moreover, Smihi's actors in *Chergui* 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. His and his actors' method of direction and performance was thus, by his description, sociological or anthropological rather than industrial or professional.¹⁶ In Smihi's conception of the spatial relationship between the actor's body, the space of the diegesis, and the space of the frame, actors became no more or less important than a shot of a building or a long take of a train; all are rendered as part of a *mise-en-scène* in which elements work upon each other—setting on individual, individual on setting. In constructing this visual and narrative frame for his film, Smihi thus follows in the tradition of a director like Michelangelo Antonioni, whose films (*L'eclisse* (1962) being one prominent example) create an interplay between figure and

¹⁵ Ibid., p 45-46. The original French (see epigraph above) is purposely ambiguous and in translation one misses the pun embedded in the phrase that I have translated as "but doesn't butt its head." In spoken French, "s'entête" is homonymous with "sans tête," or "without a head." Here the emphasis on not having a head stresses the refusal of identity and singularity in his conception of artistic heterogeneity.

¹⁶ Smihi, *Ḥadīth al-Sīnīmā*, p 32.

architecture that is radically different from that of classical Hollywood cinema (which tends to subordinate space to character).¹⁷ But Smihi's reference points here are appropriately wider than Europe and are (contra Carter, who sees his reference points as French or European) conceptualized within an Arabic linguistic and historical tradition. The relationship between bodies and space that Smihi embraces works across the demarcation of documentary and fictional worlds typically inhabited by Euro-American cinema in an attempt to find a style that is more located within a Tanjawi reality, reflecting a heterogeneous cluster of traditions. In *Ḥadīth al-Sīnīmā*, Smihi suggests that the dichotomy of fiction/non-fiction and the subsequent generic types that follow from those dichotomies reflect a Western conceptual framework. Instead, he observes, an Arab cultural perspective could yield the digressive, non-linear structure typified in the work of the ninth-century Arab scholar Al Jahīz, resulting in what Smihi describes as a “dance” of script and argument that follows its own logic in different directions.¹⁸

This dance of main plot and digressions is evident throughout the film as characters and settings rise and fall in prominence and are set together in ambiguous (or non-existent) causal relation. For example, the extended sequence in which Aïcha walks through the city to buy a chicken (acting on the advice of a marabout she has just consulted, she intends to sacrifice it to the “men of the sea”) is further evidence of the film's tendency to combine “documentary” footage with diegetic action and to loosen the borders of the main story. The sequence, several minutes long, begins in the medina at the Bab Merican (near the site of the American Legation) and we move quickly from a long shot of Aïcha walking there to a series that includes the Cervantes Theater, a street

¹⁷ In fact, Smihi has written about Antonioni concerning this and related issues: see “Antonioni, la ville sans l'homme” in *Écritures sur le cinéma*, 71-74.

¹⁸ Smihi, *Ḥadīth al-Sīnīmā*, p. 14.

vendor bundling sticks, and the tower of Sidi Bou Abib mosque on the Grand Socco. Interspersed with these shots we follow her progress around the town and into the suqs where there begins a succession of close ups with mismatched framing, creating a dynamic dissonance in the film: movement in one shot opposes that from the preceding and following shots, and the visual content and framing of the shots differs too: a European woman at the suq; a Berber or Arab shopper; a close up of produce; a long shot of the market; and so on. As others have noted, this sequence sets up complex looking relations that (supported by the play between silence and noise on the soundtrack) intensify the film's contrast between Aïcha's claustrophobic oppression within the home and her mobility outside of it.¹⁹ But they also demonstrate the film's ability to cobble together the social strata of Tanjawi realities across the borders of fiction and non-fiction.

As Aïcha continues her walk through the spaces of the city (edited so as to be discontiguous from each other, even as they are faithful to actual locations) we cut to the garden and driveway of an ornate mansion where a group of aristocratic British drink gin and chat in English. Superimposed on them appears a nondiegetic title in French, acting as a kind of anonymous omniscient commentary on the action that removes us further from the diegesis: "Potins de la colonie," it reads, or "colonial gossip." Much later, after Aïcha's death, the film cuts abruptly to the area of the Tangier port, presenting documentary footage of port workers leaving their jobs (we cannot but think of Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895)), fishermen repairing their nets, and the unnaturally loud sound of the *chergui*, the east wind, which is accompanied by sirens or foghorns from the port, adding to a dissonant sound mix. This port sequence, unsupported

¹⁹ Simour, *op. cit.*, p. 15; Meddeb, Abdelwahab, "L'oeil feminine de la ville (*Chergui*)", *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 262-263, Jan. 1976, pp. 103-108.]

by dialogue, titles, or further narrative explanation, cuts to a French school where, in a brief sequence in which sound and image combine in slightly retarded synchronization, a schoolmaster has the children recite the words “feu—flamme—fou” (fire—flame—mad). The film cuts to outside the school as their incantation continues, the gates close unprompted with a metallic squeak, and the film comes to an abrupt end. One might say that in this final sequence we return to the main narrative line of action since we recognize one of the school children as Aïcha’s son. But there is less continuity here than a succession of jumps and one has the impression, as in other parts of the film, that the spatial relation between these different places is the more pressing issue. When asked about the sequence of Aïcha’s walk through Tangier, Smihi said to an interviewer: “Maybe this is the core content of the movie: the relation of a human body with a spatial body and the movement of the first through the second. It’s not, as they say, ‘a movie about a woman’s situation,’ because I’m not precisely a woman and I’m definitely not a sociologist.”²⁰

Smihi’s embrace of idiolect and the logic of heterogeneity are executed not just in *El Chergui* and its Tangier setting but also in films set outside of the city: affirming the first epigram above, one might say that Tangier informs even those films beyond Tangier. *44, ou les rêçits de la nuit* is an investigation of Moroccan society during the forty-four years of the French Protectorate. Refusing a rigidly chronological history or the sweep of a historically detailed account, this film, too, is constructed in a fragmented structure of digression, vignette, and diversified point of view that is all the more noticeable given the potential promise of an historical narrative. The film follows two families living in

²⁰ *Hadīth al-Sīnīmā*, p. 27.

Chaouen and Fez and, in the course of tracing the forty-four years of its title, depicts the resistance movements in the areas of the Middle-Atlas, Rif, High-Atlas, and the Sahara, as well as the Nationalist resistance based in the cities. It does so by moving between a series of characters and scenes that are visually juxtaposed but conceptually linked.

Mūsa, a young man from a poor family in Chaouen sets out to study at the university at Qarawiyyīn. There he becomes an assistant and personal tutor to the family of El Ḥajj, a professor at Qarawiyyīn and a devout, reformist Muslim and nationalist wedded to tradition even as his household dabbles in the trappings of modernity (represented in the arrival of a radio, roller skates, and a telephone). Yaqūt, a slave, attends to the other women in the household who include El Ḥajj's first and second wives. Other characters of note include a Fassi storyteller in the popular oral tradition, and Abdelḥaq, El Ḥajj's eldest son, whom we follow through his childhood and teenage years as his circumcision and humiliation at his father's second marriage (both presented in flashback), function as wounds to his aspirations for modernity. He ends the film as an alienated young postcolonial, educated in France but lacking a secure place there or in Morocco. Mūsa, similarly lost by the end of the film, has failed at his studies, unable to register his feelings in the poetry that he tries unsuccessfully to write, and unsettled by his forays into theater and singing. By the end of the film he is homeless and begging in the streets; as Smihi puts it, he is "swallowed up by history."²¹

In its narrative structure, the film borrows both from the tradition of the *1001 Nights* and equally from the model of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the opening title of his film (rendered in Moroccan Arabic calligraphy and in French), Smihi quotes Joyce

²¹ "Les récits de la nuit" (press materials for the film), *Écrire sur le cinéma*, 130.

scholar Frank Budgen (translated into French for this title), who describes the novel's point of view:

The viewpoint changes from one sentence to another so that the reader must be continually on the alert to follow the variations of scale and angle. The view constantly changes from a close-up to a bird's eye view. A character is introduced to us at close-up range, and suddenly, without warning, the movement of another character a mile distant is described. [The scale suddenly changes.] Bodies become small in relation to the vast space around them. The persons look like moving specks. It is a town seen from the top of a tower.²²

In Budgen's extraordinarily cinematic rendering of Joyce, Smihi finds the inspiration for a method that renounces the clarity of linear narrative for the beauty and political significance of montage and fragmentation. His film experiments constantly with these changes of location and scale so as to juxtapose divergent worlds and realities within the film. For example, in one early sequence, we move from the Berber world of the Atlas Mountains to the city of Fez and the university. Between the two spaces, compared across the space of two unmotivated cuts, there is an intertitle that quotes the French general Lyautey (who supervised the first phase of the Protectorate) recounting the Atlas mountain tribes' resistance to the French. The sequence thereafter concerns the actions of a girl named Itto and her resistance, yet this story itself is recounted in a kind of impossible flashback by a *saltimbanque* or troubador figure (who himself was never there). In the space of a few shots, we move to the aftermath of her death, then forward in time to another scene of rebellion with another leader, and back to the time of the telling

²² Budgen, Frank, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960, p.124. The sentence in brackets, from Budgen's original text, is omitted in Smihi's on-screen quotation.

as the *saltimbanque* describes the history of anti-French rebellion to a group of village children. Thus between the action of the main characters are significant digressions which, untied to the principal characters, nonetheless take the viewer across a complex register of time and space that corresponds to the conflicting discourses of Arab, Berber, and French colonial life that Smihi's film puts in juxtaposition. In this construction of narrative space, then, Smihi draws not only on Joyce but on the films of Hungarian director Miklos Jansco (such as *The Red and the White*, 1968) with their use of long take and wide shot—a history of conflict and opposing historical forces held within the frame—all the while attempting to shape a discursive system of signs that reflected his understanding and deep love for a structuralist tradition of theoretical and critical writing.

In keeping with his self-described structuralist method, Smihi's film enacts what he proposes as a “signs and science” approach to the presentation of sumptuousness and misery in the film, resisting both the triumphalism of a nationalist approach to history and the positivism of a historical approach concerned with dates, figures, and definitive events. Instead, writes Smihi, what a film makes possible is the chance to “de-note, that is, to describe, to work, to unfold, to articulate, and to combine all the signs—historical, cultural, economic, formal, etc— which are proper to produce a ‘discourse of analysis’ of a society and its culture, its contradictions, its ruptures. To produce the image of a society at a critical moment in its history, to allow it to see itself, is to some degree to present what we might call its ‘mirror stage.’²³ In this sense, his method is (as in *Chergui*) to develop a heterogeneous combination of popular elements of the society—maraboutism, linguistic dialect, poetry, song, and histories of resistant popular movements—but also to

²³ “Les récits de la nuit,” in *Écrire sur le cinéma*, 128.

present images of the culture to itself, an exercise in a kind of militant narcissism.²⁴ The images in this film, created in intensity of light and detail by cinematographer Pierre Lhomme, create a sumptuousness that evokes the beautiful forms and aesthetic styles of an Arabo-Islamic tradition together with the aural beauty of Berber song and *dārija* poetry,²⁵ but towards a cause that is neither folkloric, exoticist, or Orientalist. Rather, by showing (in a similarly sumptuous cinematography) the slavery and misery upon which such riches depended, Smihi creates critique rather than mystification. While the brutality of colonial presence and military campaigns are revealed throughout the film, its response does not rest upon a heroic nationalism or a recovery of an authentic Muslim or Arab self that might be counter-posed to it. Instead, Smihi's critique extends across the range of social and political structures identifiable within Morocco over this crucial forty-four years: those that pre-existed colonialism, arrived with and as colonialism, those that are transformed as a result of it, and even those forms of nationalism and communism that emerged to counter and defeat it. Bound up with his desire for analysis, experimentation, and juxtaposition, the pursuit of aesthetically beautiful images (reminiscent here of Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963) with its exquisitely-rendered critique of a social class in decline; Smihi even used one of Visconti's actors, Pierre Clémenti, to play Mūsa) is a form of critique rather than straightforward celebration. Whereas Moroccan distributors ignored his first film on the excuse that the audience would not have an appetite for black and white in an age of color, this color film did screen in Morocco but was criticized by some on the grounds that it was too concerned with

²⁴ In person, he has described the political contours of this approach as his version of the "Black is beautiful" slogan of the US civil rights movement in the 1960s. Interview with the author, 5 July, 2010.

²⁵ Many of the poems that Mūsa is heard to recite are taken from the famous chants, songs, and poetry by women of Fez. See Mohammad al-Fasi, *Chants anciens des femmes de Fès*, Paris: Seghers 1967; and Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *La femme arabe dans le livre des chants* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

“ideas” and “intellectual issues.” Censorship authorities and police questioned why Moroccans needed to remember issues or events like those of slavery, social misery, or those defeats suffered under colonialism, in a moment (still under the “years of lead” of King Hassan II) when the official discourse celebrated a newly prosperous country with a successful monarchy.²⁶

Smihi’s method in both films discussed here (and the many that have followed) is to articulate questions and problems in a discourse that is distinctively Tangerian, shaking together Arab (both Muslim and non-Muslim) and non-Arab influences, languages, and cultural histories. Like the scholar Taha Hussein, whom Smihi constantly invokes in his writing and filmmaking, his engagement with history and philosophy takes place on terms that embrace non-Arab systems of thought precisely to enrich, unsettle, or extend the purview of philosophy and culture written and practiced in Arabic.²⁷ Smihi paraphrases such an approach in his essay “Cinima [sic] Arabiyya,” where he writes: “For the first time, with Taha Hussein someone says: ‘The Arab world is composite, Arab knowledge is not only the Arabic language but is also Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Literary criticism is a science which is built on historical facts and a rereading of the entirety of literature.’”²⁸ A similar critique of an Arab exclusionism is also vigorously addressed in Samir Kassir’s long essay, *Being Arab*. In refuting an Arab historiography built upon a

²⁶ Moumen Smihi, interview with the author, 5 July 2010.

²⁷ One of Smihi’s own preferred metaphors for this process is “phagocytage” rather than synthesis, the idea of cells ingesting and incorporating foreign organisms. See “Choc de cultures,” *Écrire sur le cinéma*, 136. Taha Hussein (1889-1973) studied at Al Azhar mosque in the first decade of the twentieth century, in conditions similar to the young Mūsa from 44. Becoming disillusioned with the conformity of Islamic instruction at there, he went on to the then-new University of Cairo before winning a scholarship to the Sorbonne. Fluent in several languages, trained in Greek, French, and Arabic history, Hussein wrote his doctoral dissertation on the poetry of Al Maʿarri, thereby enacting for later intellectuals like Smihi a way of re-situating Arab philosophy and criticism in a turn away from ethnic or religious exclusivism and towards a polyvalent philosophical approach.

²⁸ Smihi, “Cinima Arabiyya,” p. 95.

tripartite structure of a now-inaccessible Arab “golden age” followed only by decadence and a failed renaissance, Kassir argues that one must develop a history in which “the glories of Arab civilization under the Umayyad and first ‘Abbasid dynasties” might be better contextualized “by situating them in a history stripped of religious predestination, on the one hand, and nationalist teleology, on the other.”²⁹ Thus challenging what he refers to as the “endemic lack of historical memory”³⁰ within Arab societies, and showing how there was a tradition of worldliness before (as well as after) Islam, Kassir advocates a radical shift in how Arab history is narrativized and how the identities that construct and are constructed by such history are fashioned: “Freeing Arab history from the grip of religious predestination, therefore, requires de-islamizing its beginnings; refuting nationalist teleology, on the other hand, involves recognizing how much more important Islam was than ethnicity as a unifying bond in its subsequent phases.”³¹

With such historiographic complexities in mind, we are in a better position to understand the radical nature of Smihi’s critical practice of filmmaking and writing and the way in which it inhabits Tangiers as a local and densely layered space within an “Arab world” that is never reducible to any singularity of identity, be it religious, national, ethnic, or linguistic. The inter-cultural interrogations exemplified by the life and work of Hussein (and other Arab modernists like Al Ṭaḥṭāwī)³² are amplified and enacted in Smihi’s cinema as a practice that is embedded within the material and conceptual realities of Tangier.

²⁹ Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*, p. 33.

³⁰ Kassir, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³¹ Kassir, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³² Rifā‘a Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭawī, *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)*, introd. and trans. by Daniel Newman, London, Saqi, 2004.