

Introducing Giants: Moumen Smihi, Influences, Writing, Form and Discursivity

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze Moumen Smihi's contributions to redefining cinema as an intellectual and social critique medium. It focuses on Smihi's cinematic approach, which integrates narrative, visual, and discursive writing to explore themes of culture, identity, and resistance, particularly within the context of post-colonial cinema. This research employs a qualitative method with a case study approach, analyzing the film *Chergi* (1975) as a primary representation of Smihi's work. Data were gathered through literature reviews, film analysis, and the application of post-structuralist theories. The findings reveal that Smihi innovatively combines documentary and fictional elements, employs silence as a form of resistance, and explores the tension between tradition and modernity. This approach not only expands the boundaries of conventional cinema but also makes a significant contribution to the discourse of cinema as a medium for social and cultural reflection.

Keywords: Moumen Smihi, Cinematic Writing, Post-Colonial Cinema, Discursivity in Film

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Introduction

Moumen Smihi, a seminal figure in the realm of Moroccan cinema, has been influential in shaping not just the cinematic landscape in his native country but also in pioneering new approaches to film as an art form. As a director and intellectual, Smihi's work transcends mere storytelling, delving deeply into the theoretical and aesthetic realms of cinematic discourse. His films are distinguished by a synthesis of narrative and visual experimentation, challenging both conventional forms of filmmaking and the boundaries between fiction and documentary. Smihi's early exposure to a culturally rich environment in Tangier, along with his academic influences from French and Arab intellectual traditions, heavily shaped his unique approach to filmmaking. His works often navigate the complex intersections of culture, identity, and resistance, making his films both a social critique and a cinematic exploration of form.

At the heart of Smihi's films is a deep intellectual engagement with cinematic writing a concept he emphasizes as central to the filmmaking process. Drawing from theoretical giants like Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and other post-structuralist thinkers, Smihi views cinema not merely as a visual medium but as a form of textual expression. In this sense, his films function as a kind of 'writing' in which images, sounds, and narrative structures all contribute to a broader discourse. For Smihi, the process of creating a film begins with writing whether in the form of a script, idea, or thematic outline which then evolves into the final cinematic form. This approach places the conceptual and intellectual aspects of filmmaking on equal footing with the technical and aesthetic aspects, thus highlighting his rejection of purely commercial, profit-driven cinema. His films often engage with abstract concepts and fragmented storytelling techniques, reflecting a broader concern with the limits of representation and the possibilities of cinematic language.

Smihi's auteur-style filmmaking is evident in his frequent blending of documentary and fictional elements, a technique that allows him to explore social and political issues in a nuanced way. His 1975 film *Chergi* (or *The Violent Silence*) is a prime example of this approach. The film, which examines both the personal struggles of a Moroccan woman and the broader context of Morocco's quest for independence, is marked by its innovative use of form and content. Rather than adhering to a linear narrative, Smihi utilizes wide camera shots, fragmented dialogues, and layered visual symbols to create a sense of fluidity and open-ended meaning. This non-traditional structure invites the audience to engage critically with the film, encouraging them to interpret the multiplicity of meanings that arise from the juxtaposition of images, sounds, and silences. Smihi's films often resist offering clear-cut conclusions or moral lessons, instead presenting a complex interplay of voices, perspectives, and discourses that reflect the diverse realities of Moroccan life.

One of the key themes in Smihi's films is the tension between tradition and modernity, a subject that is central to much of post-colonial cinema. In his works, Smihi often explores the ways in which individuals, particularly women, navigate these opposing forces within a patriarchal and colonial context. His female characters, such as Aisha in *Chergi*, are frequently depicted as caught between the demands of traditional Moroccan society and their own desires for autonomy and freedom. The cinematic form itself mirrors this struggle, as Smihi employs silence, long-shots, and fragmented dialogue to convey the internal and external conflicts faced by his characters. By focusing on silence as a form of resistance, Smihi not only critiques the oppressive social structures that limit individual freedom but also highlights the power of non-verbal expression in cinema. The juxtaposition of traditional symbols, such as the veil, with modern elements, such as urban landscapes, further emphasizes the complexities of cultural identity and the ongoing negotiation between the past and the present.

In addition to his thematic concerns, Smihi's films are also notable for their formal innovations. He frequently experiments with camera angles, lighting, and sound to create a unique cinematic language that reflects his intellectual influences. Smihi's use of long takes and wide shots, for example, serves to slow down the pace of his films, allowing the viewer to contemplate the visual and emotional weight of each scene. This technique is particularly effective in *Chergi*, where the protagonist's silent rebellion against patriarchal authority is underscored by the stillness and isolation of the cinematic frame. The viewer is drawn into the character's emotional world through Smihi's careful manipulation of form, which conveys meaning not just through dialogue or action but through the arrangement of images and sounds. This approach reflects Smihi's belief in the inseparability of form and content in cinema, a philosophy that he has consistently applied throughout his career.

Moumen Smihi's contribution to cinema extends beyond Morocco, as his films engage with universal themes of power, identity, and resistance while also remaining deeply rooted in the specific historical and cultural context of North Africa. His work represents a form of intellectual resistance to both the commercial pressures of the global film industry and the political constraints of post-colonial states. Through his unique fusion of cinematic writing, theoretical inquiry, and artistic experimentation, Smihi has created a body of work that challenges audiences to think critically about the role of cinema in representing and shaping reality. His films are not merely narratives to be consumed but are intellectual texts to be deciphered, offering multiple layers of meaning and interpretation. As a result, Smihi's cinema stands as a powerful example of how film can be both a medium of artistic expression and a tool for social and political critique.

Writing as the Dress of Form

Before discussing the form, constants and motifs in the cinema of Moumen Smihi, let us first develop, a little bit further, the idea of cinema as writing, which immediately hooked me on, hearing a chunk of Smihi's discourse. So, I like to *s'attarder* like he said on the question of writing as I think the dress of form. As it seems, writing with Smihi is the epicenter of his creative work. Cinema as such is a form that requires the stuffing with life, with discourse, with dialogue and characters, and, with writing, life, and many nuanced meanings. Then, the features, decorations and techniques that constitute form come in later with creative depth, which tells the viewer a lot about the *realisateur* of the film, his life and intellectual influences. In a word, one first needs the conception of an idea or a vision; then, as it unfolds, form molds that idea into esthetic contours; but, as others may think, it could be that form which molds writing instead.

Be it as it may, form and content are inseparable in Smihi, because writing is very much important in the making of a long process happen. I mean, it can be just the simplest of all ideas that is not even put into a well-structured essay or script, but just scribbled on a wall or a slip of paper, irrespective of formal rules. As a general example, it always strikes me as something intriguing and unusual, when I see Tom Sawyer scrawling a mutual agreement with Huck Finn, and signed with blood, to keep mum about a clandestine crime, out of and committed by/fear of the villain Injun Joe. So, he writes on a pine shingle but in an unusual line curved upwards, not keeping with horizontal writing. To symbolize what exactly? I still marvel at the idea that I can only hazard a guess: Writing as resistance to the schooling of the past and its stifling moralization and didacticism, which coincides with the hidden meanings of the film *Washma* (1958), but that is just an interpretation I have concocted from reading the narrative line as a whole and is liable to change (Twain, 2007).

Moreover, I think that Smihi is first and foremost an artist with a theoretical vision that gets enunciated through the simple/artsy act of writing. It seems to me that his call for creative writing is a seminal start in the production process. For me, it is significant in as much as it highlights the poetic power of the word over logistics, over production. But sometimes these two can be antithetical, namely the creative work and the production machine, and, oftentimes, production gets the upper hand in "a horrible form of global entertainment" and circulation to borrow the phrase of Bryan Edwards.

But when it is composed and produced in relation to other words and discourses of difference, the very difficult/simple act of writing becomes like a symphony so to speak, and this symphony is also a cacophony of voices, which means that it is based on the principle of difference, the suspension/breaking of meaning, and the multiplicity of it thereof, that do not get elided, i.e. in the production process, but highlighted and enunciated therein, despite contending ideologies. As a result, this creates, I think, an organic unity that yokes and lubricates the form together, whether be it an amalgam of writing, wide or close up shots, lighting, or *mise en scène*. In a word, writing predates form and technique and is a highly esthetic, intellectual exercise with Smihi.

In a book called *The Cinema of Moumen Smihi: Experimentation Anxiety and the Effectability of Theoretic Genesis* (Lewis, 1980), critic Ahmed Sijlmassi states that Smihi synthesizes both creative writing and intellectual writing in the outlets of both newspapers and cinema magazines, and that he is a major contributor in the field of cinematic writings. This writing, Sijlmassi resumes, is marked by his oscillation between western culture and Arabic culture, in terms of both writing and discourse. The critic also praises the distinctive style of Smihi in

filming and his constants that combine two dimensions called narration and documentation as in the documentary, with the historical context as leitmotif; his reliance on foreign technicians and professional and nonprofessional actors alike (Ali Ben Saoud in “The Cinema of Moumen Smihi”). For example, these techniques are combined in *Shergi: or the violent silence* (1975), his first *longue metrage* to highlight the workings of discourse or discourses.

Form and Content in *Chergi* (1975)

Moving (arguably) from writing as the dress of cinematic form to the latter, so many things could be discussed with respect to the cinema of Smihi. For instance, film critic Hamid Tbatou points to cinema as an analysis with Smihi in what is called “analytical cinema,” which is a tirade against the profit-oriented cinema with its flagrant commercialism and banal rendering of reality. However, being part of what is called “auteur cinema” means that the director is the sole creator of a film according to his own philosophy on life, vision and trending theories. In short, it is unpopular. Or, in a way, highly artistic and intellectual in terms of both form and content. Consequently, the viewer is challenged in order to make sense of an otherwise highly complex film that represents reality side by side with fiction. So, as the critic puts it, and as I concur, it confuses the moviegoer because it denies him the clear and comfortable story line that could be found in the profit-oriented cinema (Ali Ben Saoud in “The Cinema of Moumen Smihi”) that boasts of a clear form or structure, i.e. beginning, middle and end, as if to claim representing reality at large, and truth in a very reductionist way.

Instead of simplicity and clear messages, the form is riddled with technique and enigmatic images that correlates to the slippery, implied meaning(s). For instance, the multiplicity of voices and the ‘scattering’ of signification and the movement of the camera and music makes the meaning non-essential because the process of signification is infinite and meaning is deferred to include as many layers of it and possibilities as possible, partly because of post-modernism. Music in this regard can be manipulated to distort the structure of the film and give it a shattered meaning; to give it a signified that is not clear or one dimensional, because the relationship between the sign and the signified is not clear anymore but is an infinite process where meaning is only deferred. In this regard, music operates unconsciously to affect the viewer and to add layered meaning.

Moreover, dialogue contributes to this so called scattering of meaning. Talks are usually petty talks with one-sided unclear vision or perspective in the case of commercial cinema; and, often than not, in the case of the collective unconscious talk is just talk, empty and hollow. But, with Smihi,, talk is not talk at all. It is much more than that in terms of meaning: It loses its meaning and becomes not talk at all but symbols and signs and half-uttered truths. In a word, it is discourse altogether and it is a Barthesian cultural ‘text’ to decipher, but it is very hard for an artist to make the dialogue threadbare of meaning even if s/he intended to: For symbols, signs, allusions and intertextuality and half-uttered truths intercede to serve the function of intellectual sensibility; that of showing diversity, and, in effect, the unity is in the shape of a diversified dialogue. Even the juxtaposed images are put in a dialogue of difference to one another.

Gazing from without, in creating the scenario/dialogue he is trying his best to distance himself from the diegesis of the film, but only hesitantly and it does not work absolutely like in the “objective camera” that Mohamed Abderehman Tazi talks about in relation to *Badis*. So, to create a sort of balance, he indulges in both the dominant discourse/truths to try and dilute its strengths; and the progressive discourse to try and highlight its merits via the silence of a character for instance, in a manner of half-uttered truth. So, the dominant system of truth, or

what Foucault calls the regimes of truths, is challenged and disrupted, perhaps for a moment or just in the diagenesis of the film. The aim, however, is not to critique for criticism's sake, but, rather, to show and leave it at that, not for popular consumption of course, but for the sake of nuances and the diversifying of discourse in the shape of dialogue, 'text', sign and meanings and to stay true to one's vision.

As it seems, dialogue itself shatters the plot, the diegesis, through its malleability and off-handed affiliation to this *it* that so many artists talk about and durst not imply flagrantly. Ergo, the form of the film becomes malleable to writing, to interpretation and to the cacophony of voices; and as such, there can only be the *unreality of reality* to use an expression from Scott Fitzgerald, and realities that are represented but never captured as simply this or that in what is previously called Realism or "the very slice of life."

Discussing the shape of form instead of themes, Smihi states in a rather interesting interview (Smihi's talk on Youtube) the following theoretical idea in relation to *Chergi: or al-samt al-anif* (1975). He maintains that there is an interconnection between the genres of fiction and documentary in his films *Shergi* as a specimen and that genre no longer has that traditional definition that delineates its shape. Instead, he deploys the concept of *lecture* and text that Barthes put forward to saddle the form of the film:

Le texte est un travail que ça soit par les mot ou en convoque des voix ; en convoque des signes ; en convoque des témoignages ; en convoque ; en fait marcher des sciences et cetera en fonction de cet idée de déchiffrement ...

Je pense que le texte dans la théorie modern fait osciller les genres et le documentaire et la fiction en devient très relative à ce qui est en gestation dans le texte par Example a ce terme de documentaire personnellement je préfère de parler du documentariste parce que dans la fiction il Ya effectivement on a dit que Goddard utilise cette expression que toute fiction et le documentaire le documentaire de film [de son tournage] toute fi [ction]. . . toute fiction (Smihi's talk on Youtube).

Here I think that the treatment of image as text by Smihi has made the genre lose its age-old definition that is closely related with genre and the old cinematic schools that classified genres into specific forms; but, as I understood from the interviewer, this creates a sort of an amalgam between what is fictitious and what is documentary, because the approach now to reality is in its unrealistic, in its blend of fiction and the documentary. This is the case and the form of Smihi's first *longue metrage*, *Shergi* (1975), and the Barthian concepts that he attached to its images (Smihi's talk on Youtube).

Besides, the camera shots in *Shergi: or the violent silence* (1975) relies on the wide/long shots to help the viewer focus his mind and gather his thoughts from the discursivity of the camera (Ali Ben Saoud, "The Cinema of Moumen Smihi") as these wide and close-up shots freeze the principal character Aisha in a silent way to represent her dissatisfaction with her condition, serving as a punctuating comma in this discursively- and non-genre oriented film, and to highlight human emotion from without as the camera observes. This also creates a sort of connection vis-à-vis the viewer because it, too, freezes him to the foregrounded character, Aisha. By showing her eyes, the most important physical trait in the human body, it forces the viewer to enter her soul and identify, albeit momentarily, with her plight and un-pleasurable situation. But the male gaze could sometimes disrupt this viewer-protagonist connection and be downright possessive of the female character instead. In the language of Laura Mulvey (Penley, 2013), the female body is more susceptible to the male gaze unlike the male

protagonist. Even the male protagonist possesses the female with his gaze in the diegesis of the film. This creates a double male-gaze possession of the female character from both the viewer and the hero of the film, and a desire to penetrate her with their gaze gets intensified which is derived from the “symbolic order” and the superiority of the phallus in Lacanian terms. Consequently, Aicha’s role in the film becomes one-dimensional and is depicted as a flat character with clear characteristics and roles to fulfill.

When those roles and functions expire, Aicha gets relegated to oblivion and ostracization. In a way, the female protagonist Aisha can be said to be possessed by the male gaze, because she is predominantly suppressed by her own physical traits like submissiveness and docility and the culture of *h’shuma*. Therefore, her silent and tragic revolt in a way is only textual and esthetic and remains in the realm of the diegesis. In the psychological patriarchal terms of Freud and his disciples, she is the symbol of castration and the symbolic order prevents her from achieving a freedom outside of this deterministic, patriarchal culture; but, the film and especially its tragic ending, aspires to change this reductionist rendering of human roles and functions. In a word, it calls for changing the structures of traditional thinking to a more reason and freedom-oriented culture, where every human ‘type’ is dignified and given agency over his/her actions.

In relation to the film’s form and how it is structurally organized, Lhoussine Simour believes that silence is a variable that “structures and fractures the events of the film,” and that it operates both ways: “as a powerful language and a discursive formation ... to protest and to revolt ... and as a passive esthetic device...” (Simour, 2022) Further, Simour stresses the importance of silence as “a cinematic language, or as a code endowed with a specific function within the whole system of images.” Following Roland Barthes, this he believes to be a “verbal device” that voices out what is muted and unsaid in the diegesis of the film that relates discursively to the patriarchal culture, colonialism and the individual in between.

The author also states that “the unsaid, the repressed or even the camouflaged are visually projected by silence in a complex and more delightful ways.” Also, the author mentions auteur cinema as a form whereby filmmakers such as Smihi “critique social and political developments in Morocco without being censored.” (Carter, 1999) Then he zooms down on his notion of “the narrative of silence as a subversive esthetic ... which is symbolically loaded to free the protagonist from repressive authority.” (Simour, 2009) In a word, the silence which he interpreted as a means of resistance creates ‘tangible’ rifts in the symbolic order with Smihi’s auteur cinema. Hence, the violent silence, which is the sub-title of *Chergi*.

Reviewing this film, Bouchra Badaoui describes the film’s opening long shot of the city, and the Berber song that accompanies it. This she explains as culture specific to the city which is framed by the image, along with other historical monuments, buildings, houses, streets and flags that the camera discourses with and through to reflect different represented realities. The author states that the viewer “gets a feel for the city's diversity and crisscrossed histories in this swift opening. These spatial icons (foreign names, buildings, tourist sites, and so on) thread through the film, with the shots being held long enough for us to notice them.” In a way, Smihi’s film represents a material inscription of history with the movement of the camera and its frame as Tangiers history becomes embedded into the film “visually and spatially” to mark the historical multi-cultural/international character of the city. In the words of the reviewer, this film represents Tangier “as a site of multiple, crisscrossed histories,” (Badaoui, 2017) that are represented in the shape of a series of connected discourses, one that is informed by the multiplicity of images.

The wide shots have another function. They are instrumental to parallel description in the case of said film, and, to parallel as well the voice-over in the case of the documentary or *documentarite* as Smihi would like to label the miscegenation of fiction and documentary. So, the concept writing lends itself to infinite possibilities at level of form and experimentation, the instances above a case in point. Because I think that with no writing and influences; that first springing idea begotten from elsewhere via intertextuality of previous books or the “sacred wood” of Eliot, is at the heart of cinematic form. I mean, what is the use of logistics and technique if there is no life to it, no expression and no nuances and juxtaposed forms and entities. Yes, form is important, the shape and inner-workings of anything, but it should be stuffed with content, with life and text and discourse, to animate it and represent it and give it lives and meanings.

Moreover, there is a contrastive camera shot when Aisha moves alongside the French villa with all its symbols and cultural traits. In a sense, we see the camera creating a relationship of difference between two types of women, the traditional (marked with veil) and the modern free and mobile; and, between the two implicitly juxtaposed cultures to show similarities and differences at the same time. The implication of course could be that independence is a two-way street: the liberation of women from patriarchal and superstitious practices by critical practices, and the independence of Morocco from France and its cultural superiority. Besides, it is as if Smihi is trying to suggest another way to independence, which foregrounds Arabic language and culture by building “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,” (Limbrick, 2012) hence the imperative of his juxtaposed images, to show the Moroccan side of the story too, not just the dominant, high-brow French culture that allowed colonialism to take place in the name of civilization, or, rather, in the name of Manicheanism, be it religious, moral or downright snobbish vis-à-vis other cultures. And here western humanism and human nature is essentially evil if we consider the philosophy on human nature.

In any event, the relationship which he makes by his camera makes the form looks constructed in binary opposites, tradition vs. modernism and independence vs. domination. And although these binaries hamper the possibility for a fluid meaning, it nonetheless points out to the structural disjuncture between the two cultures and how can this duality be seen and perhaps trespassed. If this be the case, then I would argue that he adopts the perspective of Claude Levi Strauss, who stresses the idea of structural anthropology to understand different cultures, with the belief that humans are governed by the structure of their own minds, and that cultures in terms of mental behaviors and needs are more similar than dissimilar, because the patters can be discerned at level of structure and mental needs, hence the technique of juxtaposition. For instance, although the structure of production is different in two distant factories, one Moroccan, and the other Australian, the structural pattern that makes them similar is the need to make profits, and although both live in different sides of the world, all humans need to reconcile the inevitability of life and death (Becker & Wheater, 2017), although most mortal minds rather live forever or get an extension mentally speaking.

In somewhat similitude with this idea, Peter Limbrick argues that Smihi’s films “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.” As Levi Strauss said, cultures share more commonalities than differences at level of mental needs, one being *The Search for Freedom*. Therefore, to

essentialize a culture into one category of thought is to disregard the cultural specificity of far-flung cultures or native custom and deny that humans share similar mental structures and needs. In a word, the aim should be to highlight that traditional culture but at the same time speak of difference and similitude at level of filmic form. So, I can safely say that form is highly diversified in the shape of signs, discourses and cultural theories in this film.

Additionally, the film is constructed at level of both the house and the public space. This public space is captured by a long, wide camera angle to make it in context and establish the setting. It also serves as a means by which to document the public market place and to endow it with credibility. This credibility I think is achieved by mixing the genre of fiction because after all it is a story within a larger story and documentary making. Not to mention that the place which Aisha escapes to is inaccessible to authority, which makes her visits to the marabout and the beach another space that falls within this desire to be free from the structure of well-to-do and the *hchem*-minded culture and its structural constraints over the individual freedom and curious spirit that learns by mistakes, mistakes and more mistakes, and, by down and falls and ups and then development.

Concerning the human-specific feat resistance, Judy Moore states that “Its protagonist, Aicha, uses magical practices in her effort to prevent her husband from taking a second wife. Around her, a society of women creates its own form of active resistance.” (Judy Moore, “*Renowned Moroccan director Moumen Smihi to visit campus and speak April 10-15*”) In a word, the construction of the place within this film makes the form two and three dimensional and allows for the expression of dissent/resistance within by these forms of alternative places and practices that are not to be simply negated as this or that as the marabout sanctuary and the beach. In consequence, sorcery and the escape to isolated places like the harbor / beach is another form of resistance Not to mention the form of silence as language, as resistance as well to the structural determinacy of a highly conservative and contradictory culture, that, unless all people are same they risk the insults and ready-made judgements of this black-and-white spectacted culture. A reasonable way would be to see the varying degrees between in all colors, shapes and forms, and, to recognize difference, and not to assume. This much should be revealed and compartmentalized by different peoples.

In connection with the setting of this film, Limbrick states that “*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*”. The author resumes that Smihi’s “critical practice” is based on this heterogeneity of voices by ‘layering’ Berber, French, Arab, Spanish, Andalusian, American and African languages, individuals, institutions, and cultural practices; but sadly enough, his work is almost absent from the English canon, except Roy Armes’s significant chapter on Smihi’s film *El Chergui* (1975) in *Postcolonial Images* (Armes, 2005) and a recent essay in a film Journal (Simour, 2010). Although the filmic form in Smihi is highly influenced by the diversity and similarities of cultures, rather than with presenting them as irreconcilable opposites, the Western scholar fails to give it critical heed and attention.

Thematically speaking, even the characters stand for something that makes the meaning in a relational bond with form and structure. In a way, meaning is definitely a cacophony of voices and I can list not just the cinema of Smihi here because it repeats this formal technique, but Hamid Bnani’s foundational work *Washma* (1958) as well. Hence, this technique is highly symptomatic of a break with traditionalist paradigms like Realism and general linguistics. Instead, it is a paradigm shift in the making and receiving of meaning. Tbatou states: Smihi’s

early films seem to be saturated with theory and this allows the prospect of infinite experimentation to rid Moroccan cinema of its silly simplicity/straightforwardness and its naïve ‘realism’ (Ali Ben Saoud, “The Cinema of Moumen Smihi”).

Traditionally, Language is a system of signs according to Saussure. For example, in a context like the zebra lines the red light is a sign that we can only understand negatively as ‘stop’; the *washma* is a sign that we can understand as meaning only one thing, which was intended by its *auteur de film*, Bnani. Moreover, the props/objects in a movie are signs that require a certain meaning given by a context or a filmmaker as Moumen Smihi, who is part of what is called *cinema d’auteur*. I think his movies, primarily *shergi or samt al-anif* 1975 and *44 or ostorat al-llayl* 1982, are part of what Saussure calls language as a system of signs, each word/image in associational relationship to the other. And that one scene could be juxtaposed with another one to show difference and the other discourses; so, inside discourse there is other discourses, which Smihi is trying to enunciate as ‘nuances’ as he says in his speech. Hence, the prime aim of this modest article is to show how discursivity functions in Smihi’s cinema in relation to influences of thought, form and content.

Most of the ‘60s and ‘70s intellectuals were influenced by this persuasion because Saussure is considered the father of general linguistics, the theoretician of language after Aristotle; but still, meaning is not one as other deconstructive theory will later have it. The meaning is given by its context, true, but is in an ongoing process that even the audience can take part in (or can they? Its Moumen Smihi we are talking about here, a giant, that introduces himself as *Auteur de film* (Smihi’s talk on Youtube)).

Meaning becomes too difficult to pinpoint either as this or that. Some films require the preferred reading or even the ideal reader to decipher, but other films are impenetrable as they are, and even if one spent a lifetime obsessed with meaning it will only be a cul-de-sac. For example, the adaptation of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Waiting for Godot* itself. Interpretation is a reasonable thing instead, because these films disallow the direct flow of meaning. Meaning becomes almost fragmented/shattered and the sign loses its traditional one-way signified. As a result, this form of expression might mean that the filmmaker is anxious to rebel against the ready-made signified and myths that the cultural unconscious and cultural hegemony fosters, iterates and reiterates in a didactic and static manner. Nonetheless. I think discursivity is a way out of this dilemma.

Discursivity in the Diegesis of Chergi and 44 or Ostorat al-llayl

Discursivity as Collins online dictionary defines it is passing from one topic to another, usually in an unmethodical way; digressive. And yes, it is a bit chaotic. An outstanding example of this can be Terrence Malick’s film *The Tree of Life*. And yet a more outstanding example of discursivity as a recurrent way in filming is to be found in Smihi’s challenging film, *shergi or samt al-anif* 1975. But first who is Smihi and what are the influences that have shaped his cinema, his form, and technique?

Smihi is a Moroccan *Auteur de film* for more than four decades, from 1975 to this day. Born in Tangier in 1945, Smihi is one of the founders of Moroccan cinema, which had flourished in the 70s as the “new Arab Cinema.” He was born into a religious family but enrolled in a secular French school that taught in Arabic and French. He spent his childhood in a Tangier that was teeming with artists, expats such as Paul Bowels, William s. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, whom drank tea and smoked kif. He says that he met Paul Bowels when he was still at high school. Bowels later on introduced him to screen writer Cavin Lambert, who helped him put Mrabet’s

The Big Mirror into *Kaftan al-Hob mnaket bil Hawa* (1988). So, we can see the influence of Tangier and Paul Bowels on his formative years.

As a youth, Smihi was a fervent movie-goer. Later on, in college years, he was influenced by Marxism. In 1964, the years of lead, he took part in the political student uprising in Rabat. Shortly after that he left for Paris on a scholarship to study filmmaking at ADHEC (*Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographique*). In Paris, he was influenced by the vogue intellectual trends of Lacan, Foucault, Levy-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Later on, as auteur de film, he will put these influences into motion pictures and his thought-provoking films will bear his stamp, that of an Auteur de film.

Smihi also states that he is influenced by Italian Neorealism, Japanese movies, Taha Hussein, psychoanalysis and human sciences. Also, he says that he does not make films for general public but for his friends, adding as justification that he prefers life-long audiences rather than one-week audiences. This means that his films are not for general consumption. This means that his films are not entertained by laymen; this means that his films are esoteric, highly intellectual, requiring the ideal reader.

Discursivity, as a style of filming, is carried out by the movement of the camera from one place to another, or from one sign to another, or from one theme to the other, or from one character to the other. For example, in *44 or Ostorat al-Illyl*, the camera takes us from Tangier with its harbor and fishers to Shefshaouen to Fez, with all its history, architecture and city walls, with focus on the history, culture and splendor of the place, a rich history pregnant with meanings. It is as if he is telling us that we should be proud of our cultural heritage, but at the same time use tradition logically, consistently and not just repeat things that are nonsensical. Most importantly, he shows his fictional characters, the Arab culture and its history in interdependent relationship corrupted by decadence and colonial rule. So, discursivity serves another function in Smihi, namely that of deconstructing both colonial and traditional legacy. In the opening title of his film, Smihi quotes Joyce scholar Frank Budgen who describes Ulysses point of view as changing 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. 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 (Budgen, 1934).

As a result, this Joyce-esque effect on him created a non-linear narrative by the means of montage and fragmentation. For instance, to juxtapose divergent worlds and realities within the film, Smihi moves from the Berber world of the Atlas Mountains to Fez city and its famous university (Limbrick, 2012). Although named as fragmentation here in terms of Joyce novel Ulysses, the discursivity of the camera that carries his ideas are expressed in terms of juxtaposed images highlighting the movement and connecting different scenes and shots digressively and technically to fracture the story line and its traditional structure, that there seems to be no spatial sequence, only shots that are relational to one another that needs to be deciphered and interpreted.

Behind discursivity, there is a driving force which is what he calls *Al-Tha9afat Al-Jadidat*. Basically, it is a concept he coined together with other filmmaker intellects that means cinema is a culture. It starts from the past and evaluates it towards progressivity, glorifying aspects of Moroccan culture like magic in the case of Aisha, Moorish architecture and superstition because he was influenced by the father of anthropology C. Levi Strauss that says that each

culture is unique in itself and that the patterns of similarities across cultures is what matters. Hence, cultural relativity and the need to mark cultures by the structures of underlying similarities rather than differences.

As he is taking us by his camera from one city to another, that is discursivity in motion. Another thing which is discursive is to be found in his film *Shergi or al-samt al-anif*. In this particular film, there is two themes he treats discursively: A woman called Aisha seeks freedom from tradition but at the same time uses superstitious practices to dissuade her husband from marrying another woman, and the other theme is Tangier prior to independence. So, we see him zap from one theme to another, but with connection making. He puts Aisha and Moroccan independence side by side, like he is saying that true independence would have been complete if these two were recognized both. Not to mention the silence. I mean, it is a language in itself, a discourse that is also used discursively to show resistance rather than placidity. Sadly enough, Aisha fails, and by implication the so-called independence. Because of superstition she dies. A marabout tells her to sacrifice a rooster near the brink of the shore; and so, she slips and falls and dies tragically. The camera then moves on to show a man standing alone in the harbor as if he is saying man will always be supreme, as if her death did not change anything. Hence, the 'violent' silence.

Discursively enough, I think he is linking female suppression and patriarchy, the gap that must be bridged if true independence, not just nationalistic, was to take place. As it seems, he is discursively showing us a Morocco lusting after a social, economic and political independence that is unattainable.

Conclusion

In tentative conclusion, Smihi puts high value on cinematic writing be it theoretic or artistic. From this we can safely deduce that the first step into perfecting the art of auteur cinema is by putting life discursively into shape. So, by writing the form gets animated, and by form, art is made and life is represented with differing realities. Moreover, the form and techniques that smihi adopts are drawn from his experiences of the world and from the intellectual trends of the sixties and early seventies that informed his analytical auteur cinema to help create his filmic form, style and vision, and, to help hone and sharpen his critical practices. For example, one seminal technique in his films is the merging of the documentary with the fictional and the related shots that are signs to be decoded. In a way, he managed to produce highly artistic films that are formally and thematically shaped. Therefore, I think that form and content is inextricably linked in Smihi and are to be savored inseparably. The explanation of Chergi in relation to its form can yield many meanings and textual interpretations. One of which could be the multiplicity of discourses it harbors and the shattering of the plot by slowing the roll of meaning down to a minimum. Hence, one interpretation of Chergi or the violent silence could be yearning for freedom in a uniform culture that rather stick to rules and traditions even though they hamper the possibility for a revolution at level of thinking, and are momentarily suspended giving the situation at hand, and there is no better way to criticize it than in the form of a tragedy.

In this regard, to be free is not only to resist silently at level of film esthetics and/or auteur's intention, but to free one's mind from the dogma of one-sided definitions and constants that are produced and reproduced in the manufacture of culture, popular cinema and in the collective unconscious as an ultimate truth. However, there is no absolute truth. There are dominant truths that seek legitimacy by constant indoctrination and surveillance thus normalizing human thought an action into a one block, one category of thought, and that is

dangerous to humanism, to intellectual and mental growth, and, to the culture that man and woman make in a constant flow of change and timeliness, to filter what is good and let it pass and stop what is useless and let it sink as residue. In a word, man and woman should make culture, not the other way around, and this needs a malleable artistic form not to enshrine it but to give it sense and direction towards a better present. The aforementioned is one possible way to see Chergi or the Violent Silent, not as a fixed construction but as a multivocal one that rages against popular consent by carving different ways and juxtaposed discourses to raise awareness of nuances and differences at level of juxtaposed and contrasted images; because, after all, the image is always changing, always moving discursively, like a film reel on a projector.

In short, the meaning should be seen as a film reel to detract essentialist tendencies in this mad culture and denude its malfunctions in a subtle way like Smihi did following auteur cinema. And even if his films do not get an impact as the gaudy soap operas and commercial films disseminated by nationalist media, it at least exists and is a historic document constructed to give us a sense not only of the 'realities' or signs of the times it sought to represent, but an insight into the mind of its realisateur as well.

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