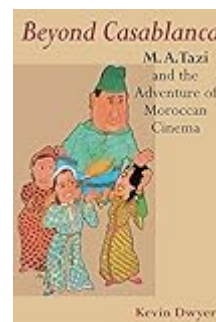


Kevin Dwyer. *Beyond Casablanca: M. A. Tazi and the Adventure of Moroccan Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 433 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34462-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21719-6.



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Portrait of the Artist as a North African Man

Describing the conditions of filmmaking in the Maghreb, the Moroccan director M. A. Tazi tells the following anecdote:

“A bumblebee weighs 40 grams, the surface of its wings is 2.2 square centimeters, the wings are inclined at an angle of 30 degrees—well, according to the laws of aeronautics, it’s impossible for that insect to fly... But bumblebees fly just the same! That’s just the way it is for our cinema: there’s no infrastructure, minimal financial aid, no public, no encouragement—there’s nothing! So we can’t make films, but, just the same, we make films!” (p. 103).

Like Ulysses, who miraculously returns to Ithaca after twenty years of perilous adventures, North African films, beating all imaginable odds, continue to “fly.” It is from this paradoxical perspective that Kevin Dwyer embarks on his anthropological study of Third World artistic creation in *Beyond Casablanca*. In this breakthrough study, Dwyer attempts to create a dialectical anthropology of Maghrebian cinema in lieu of those Eurocentric or monologic paradigms which have previously characterized Western knowledge of the “Third World.” The book’s

format is that of an interview either preceded or followed by the author’s commentary. In the relaxed atmosphere of Tazi’s home, the American anthropologist and his Moroccan host engage in a discussion about the status of the Third World creative artist (in filmmaking), and the various national and international impediments he encounters such as financing, distribution, consumption, censorship, bureaucracy, co-production, video piracy, etc. In this “freewheeling conversation” (p. 15), Tazi and Dwyer discuss Tazi’s biography and career, particular themes in his films, “filmmaking in Morocco” vs. “Moroccan filmmaking,” Third World film production in a global economy, free trade vs. cultural exception, Moroccan history, the impact of 9/11 on Moroccan filmmaking, etc.

Addressing the criticism that anthropology is a Western hegemonic and biased discourse, Dwyer counters, in a self-reflexive mode, that his book is grounded in a triple partiality: a) he chose the format and content of the book, b) selected the “perspective of one particular Moroccan filmmaker,” c) and subjectively constructed in his work the “individuals and specific domains of human activity” (p. 17). Refuting the Eurocentric notion

of “ethnographic present” (p. 305), and constructing the narrative frameworks of “story-time,” “discourse-time,” and “research time” as “fictions” (p. 306), he argues that all “attempts to generalize about creative activity in the Third World are no doubt bound to fail” (p. 313).

Each of the six chapters in the book focuses on a particular phase in Tazi’s career with special emphasis on the historical context of the period. While all chapters follow the interview and commentary format, only four of them are followed by an interlude. In chapter 1, “The Most Successful Moroccan Film Ever,” Tazi discusses the production of his hit film, *Looking for My Wife’s Husband* (1993) from its conception to the big screen. In contrast with his previous films, which did not attract huge audiences because of the preference of the local distributors for foreign films, in the early 1990s, *Looking* turned out to be a huge success thanks to a Moroccan distributor who showed interest in local films. Another reason Tazi gives for the unprecedented success of this film is that it is a cinema of “proximity,” i.e. a film “embedded” in Moroccan culture and society (p. 31). It is in his own childhood and Fassi bourgeois background that Tazi found inspiration for his new film about Moroccan traditions, polygamy, repudiation and divorce. In response to specific questions raised by Dwyer, Tazi comes to clarify in this chapter his position on a variety of subjects such as Egyptian cinema, native vs. imported humor, Moroccan identity and heritage, Orientalism, and the function of cinema.

In the second chapter, “Building the National Cinema, Building a Career,” Tazi discusses his career, starting with his high school education, his decision to study film in France’s Institut des hautes Études cinématographiques (IDHEC), and subsequent training in the United States. This covers a long period which extends from the colonial era when the French created Le Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM) in 1944, until the emergence of a National Moroccan cinema in the 1970s, and the beginning of state funding of Moroccan filmmaking in 1980. It was during this period that Tazi produced his first feature film, *The Big Trip* (1981). In the interlude that follows this chapter, Tazi discusses both the theme of communication in his film and the problems he encountered during the shooting and distribution process.

In chapter 3, “Huston, Wise, Coppola, Camus ... and Pasolini, Scorsese ... and Some Others,” Tazi recalls his experience working for foreign films in Morocco. Upon his return from the United States, he came to create his

own production company, and made various documentaries for the government, “socio-clips,” and commercial clips for private companies. During the 1970s and 1980s, he came to know world-renowned directors like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, John Huston, Oliver Stone, Ridley Scott, Pier Paolo Pasolini, but he soon grew dissatisfied with the Orientalist vision conveyed in these foreign films, and particularly of the condescending attitude of French filmmakers who come to their former colony only to exploit its cheap labor. Because of the negative impact of these foreign productions on the local film industry, Tazi decided to turn his back on this “mercenary activity” (p. 143) and to engage in the artistic activity of “Moroccan filmmaking.”

The fourth chapter, “*Badis* (1989)” examines Tazi’s critically acclaimed second film, which he co-produced with Spanish television, at the moment when the State Aid Fund was being “restructured” (p. 158). Despite its flaws, this government support led to an increase in the number of films produced in Morocco. One of the questions this chapter raises is: How does a filmmaker approach the inhabitants of a village compared to an anthropologist? In an ad hoc fashion, Tazi and Dwyer discuss several motifs in the film, such as mixed marriages, women’s situation, female lapidation, the legacy of colonialism, symbolic sacrifice, cinematographic voyeurism, Western and Oriental narrative forms, Oriental vs. Mediterranean identity, etc.

Chapter 5, “The Other Side of the Wind, Almost,” looks at a “Third World” filmmaker’s experience in the “First World.” In Tazi’s fourth feature film, *Lalla Hobbi* (1997), the central character al Hajji goes to Belgium to look for his wife’s husband to annul the wedding and take her back as his spouse. In this reverse gaze of the camera, the Moroccan filmmaker goes through a series of tragic-comic adventures, first with the Belgian authorities who deny him permission to shoot in Antwerp’s diamond district and public transportation facilities, and second, when he gets cheated by foreign co-producers and distributors.

In the last chapter, “Reflections and Projections,” Tazi starts by assessing his career and the major changes in the history of Moroccan cinema on the level of organization, state funding, technology, and the audience’s taste. In the second movement, Dwyer discusses the impact of 9/11 and the May 2003 Casablanca bombings on Tazi’s last film, *Abu Moussa’s Women Neighbors* (2003). In the final section, Tazi speculates on his future career within the future of Moroccan filmmaking. In the book’s con-

clusion, Dwyer assesses the contribution of his work to the study of cinema and raises questions about the viability of Moroccan cinema in the context of globalization, free trade agreements, and the debate over “cultural diversity” and the “cultural exception” (p. 18).

In this brilliant and humorous book, Dwyer inaugurates a new approach to studying Maghrebian cinema in particular and the artistic creations of the “Third World” in general. In this innovative line of research, the Western anthropologist looks not only at the final cultural artifacts, but also at the process of production, i.e., the hurdles and impediments which transform, shape, and even sharpen the vision of the Third World artist in the various stages of her/his cultural creation. Another merit of Dwyer’s dialectic anthropology is that it creates an active and independent reader. Even though in the conclusion Dwyer “flies” to the rescue of Tazi and defends him against the charges of Orientalism and conservatism, the reader has already caught a glimpse of Tazi’s patriarchal mind-set, through his interaction with his female collaborators and his adamant resolve to punish his transgressive female characters. As long as they are his own dotting mothers and grandmothers, Tazi “listen[s]” (p. 36) to women’s stories, but as soon as Farida Benlyazid or Fatima Mernissi protests a scene which condones violence against women—namely, Houda’s horrible experience outside the harem in *Looking* and the stoning of

Moira and Touria in *Badis*—he dismisses their voice by invoking the principle of realism in the first scene and the noble cause of fighting “obscurantism” (p. 191) in the second. Irony reaches its peak when, after silencing Benlyazid and Mernissi, he compares his solo “artistic creation” to the “suffering” and “pain” of women during childbirth (p. 275).

One of the many questions Dwyer’s book opens for future investigation is the role of gender in the production and consumption of Third World cultural artifacts. A second venue of research would be an anthropological study of bureaucracy in North Africa—which is humorously but briefly discussed in *Beyond Casablanca*. How would then the Western anthropologist negotiate the tensions between the real and the fictitious or the local and the global? Contrary to Dwyer’s reading of “story time,” i.e., Tazi’s adventures with Moroccan cinema as fiction—quite understandable in view of the postcolonial criticism of Western anthropology in the recent years—for the millions of people living in the Maghreb, their stories and adventures with the local bureaucracy are grounded in a daily painful reality.

Finally, given the important and complex issues Dwyer’s new masterpiece raises, I highly recommend *Beyond Casablanca* for advanced undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology, world cinema, Francophone, Middle Eastern, and African studies.

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