



FILM AND CINEMA STUDIES IN REVIEW

Changing Lives Through Hip-Hop in *Casablanca Beats*: Interview with Nabil Ayouch and review of the film

Nevine Abraham 

Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh
Email: nabrah@andrew.cmu.edu

The following interview took place via Zoom with Moroccan film director, producer, and writer Nabil Ayouch on Tuesday, March 22, 2022 at 11:00 AM EST. Lightly edited for ease of comprehension.

Nevine Abraham: *Casablanca Beats* is not the first film that you shot in Sidi Moumen: you filmed *Ali Zaoua* and *Horses of God* there. Why Sidi Moumen? How involved are you in the arts center there or in the city in general?

Nabil Ayouch: I came across the neighborhood of Sidi Moumen, which is very close to Casablanca and 20 minutes away from where I'm talking to you right now, in the mid 1990s, when I shot some documentary films. It reminds me of where I grew up in Sarcelles, a suburb of Paris, until the age of 15. I felt a link between people's experiences there and what I was experiencing when I was young. And this is probably the reason why I decided to shoot my first feature film *Ali Zaoua* in Sidi Moumen. It is also where you can see the ocean. It is like Rio de Janeiro. I have seen Sidi Moumen transform itself through the first decade of 2000s, after the Casablanca suicide attacks on May 16, 2003, carried out by young men who came from this city. Those attacks were a tremendous shock to Moroccans, who grew up in a certain peace between religions and cultures, so it was a trial of the country's unity. At first, we thought that those suicide bombers would come from a foreign country. I was so shocked that I didn't go back to this neighborhood for years as if I felt betrayed at that time by the people that I knew, although I should not have thought this way. I was blind. . . Then I went back to prepare with the youngsters of Sidi Moumen for my then-new film *Horses of God*, which shows how 10-year-old boys can turn into suicide bombers. I tried to understand how we could have avoided that disaster. During my two years of work on the ground before the shooting of the film, it became obvious to me that those youngsters felt cut off from the rest of the world.

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They felt abandoned. It is not a question of happiness: they are not more or less happy than you or me, it is rather a question of feeling like second-class citizens. So I had the idea to create some arts centers, and this is where I began my foundation Ali Zaoua in order to establish a link through arts and culture. If we talk only about Casablanca, more than a thousand young girls and boys come every day to learn how to change the world through arts and culture.

You used non-professional actors in *Ali Zaoua* and *Casablanca Beats*. How did you choose the youngsters in *Casablanca Beats*? Who wrote the lyrics of their rap? Did any of the characters face any problem after or because of the film whether from their family or society?

I definitely wanted to show in the film the result of what we experience daily. It is hard to convince the parents to let their children, especially girls, attend places where they do not know what we are teaching them. To them, Western hip-hop is subversive to their beliefs. Still today, there are some young girls who are forced to abandon their curriculum in the center, which is sad, and that is the reason why I wanted to include this in the film. As president and founder of this foundation, I spent some time in the center to witness the changes there. And, believe me, it is changing the destinies and lives of lots of young boys and girls every day. They would probably not be the same today if they had not had a place like that. They would only have the street to express or not express themselves. So, by observing them and going there very often, I met this class called “The positive school of hip-hop” that you see in the film. I also met Anas the teacher, who was a former rapper and had this idea of teaching hip-hop, which for me seemed a bit weird at the time because, in the neighborhood where I grew up, hip-hop was not something that could be taught. It was a culture of the street that one does not learn in school, but rather experiences. Anas said to me “believe me, you can transform anger and rage into positive energy,” so I gave him a kind of a wild card. That is what he did. Every day, I was fascinated by the lyrics, and I wanted to know what was behind those words, where they came from. So, I sat with them and heard the background. They opened to me the doors of their hearts, of their personal history, and showed me where they lived. Some lived in the shantytowns 100 meters away from the cultural center. They touched me a lot, so I decided this will be my next film and that it would happen with them and not with other actors. As for the lyrics in the film, I guided them through prompts but they composed them themselves.

The film was well received internationally. How was it received in Morocco? Did it face any criticism? Is there censorship in Morocco that controls approval of film scripts? How difficult was it to find Moroccan producers for your films?

First, about the producers, it is hard but important to stay independent. It is a question of how a filmmaker is going to lay the foundation of the film while keeping the independence of their project and point of view. I found producers

who agreed to deal with this project in Morocco and abroad. Sometimes we have to deal with the obstacles. With censorship, we do not have to say everything, but rather be smart enough to know how to express our message correctly so that it passes through the censorship commission. After *Much Loved* was censored in Morocco in 2015, it was not until 2017 that I made *Razzia*, where I addressed the important topic of education. I did not want to censor myself because that is probably the biggest mistake that a filmmaker can make. So it all begins with how you set up your film and its foundations.

About the reception, it was beautiful to observe because a film ticket costs approximately six dollars, which is costly for Moroccan youth, especially those who live in poor neighborhoods. So, we showed a preview of the film in those areas where the youngsters attended and were singing, dancing, and clapping. They told me that for the first time they could see themselves on the screen. It was moving to see their reaction. For the rest of the audience, they were attracted to the lyrics and the music in Arabic. It was rewarding to see the movement created by the film upon its release. The youngsters in the film took flights for the first time of their lives from Sidi Moumen to the red carpet, and I will let you imagine how powerful their emotions were.

Anas sets off his first lesson with a reminder of the African Americans' fight to establish civil rights. Why did you choose this opening lesson? Black Lives Matter has echoed through many Arab countries and around the world. Has the movement impacted awareness of issues of inequality in Morocco?

The first lesson of the class was important to give context to hip-hop. Hip-hop has influenced music in many Arab countries. However, many do not know exactly where it comes from and why rap has been invented. In our younger years, we saw those rap tracks come to our neighborhood in France like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash and how they changed our lives and spoke about us and our reality. So it was crucial for the class attendees to know why they were learning hip-hop and why it was their responsibility to choose their lyrics. The first thing that a Moroccan youngster did when George Floyd was killed was paint a wall with his face. Many black youths in Morocco's neighborhoods felt shocked by his death as we all did. I would not say there was a big movement in Morocco after Black Lives Matter happened in the United States, but I felt that it impacted Moroccan society and certain areas somehow, especially where there is consciousness of diversity and of the fact that Moroccans have some black blood. The African part of Morocco is present: Many blacks have come to Morocco from Sudan, Ghana, and other African countries since the sixteenth century, and they have faced racism. However, I would say that for the last two or three years there has been more consciousness of such diversity issues, which is good.

In my opinion, one of the most evocative cinematographic effects of *Casablanca Beats* is the close-up shots focused on the characters' faces and their emotional struggle and hip-hop scenes in the foreground versus mass prayers or the call to prayer in the background. Is the film suggesting

that the problem is in society's misinterpretation of religion and its belief that Islam and hip-hop are incongruous?

This is a very important question. The problem to me is not in religion itself but in the way it is taught to those youngsters by those who claim day after day that religion cannot go with art and that they have to choose between one or the other. This is what they hear whether from their parents or from so-called religious figures. To me, it is important that their *esprit critique* work in the right direction and that they form their own beliefs. In the film, Meryem and Amina rap while wearing a hijab. I wanted them to know that religion can be part of everyday life just like art, culture, and hip-hop, and that there is no evil culture. When *Much Loved* was censored in Morocco, some argued that there was clean art and dirty art. This reminds me of the second world war and frightens me.

Coming back to the second part of your question, my intention was to make everyone visible and to make their voices heard especially those whose voices one does not hear. Those people were selling them some silly stories trying to bring them to be part of the mass where the individual disappears. In the film, I wanted to show that the individual is important to be seen and heard apart from the mass.

True. Arab society has a collective trait where members have to respect social norms, which makes the individual invisible. In *Casablanca Beats*, the characters rap about their concerns and struggles. Is the film intervening into the debate of freedom of expression in Morocco?

Yes, and especially in regard to girls, because society has ways to easily erase a girl much more so than a boy. The goal is to instill in them the belief that they exist.

How would you respond to critics who claim that because you were raised in France that you are bringing a Western lens in presenting Moroccan society?

The fact that I was born far away from the country where I do my films today allows me a certain distance and objectivity and gives me some naiveté and consciousness of the mountains ahead of me. This does not mean that I bring Western culture into my films. I would probably not be the same director I am today if I were born here in Morocco. But I take it as an opportunity. My identity is multiple, which shapes the films I make. Those who do not understand that and view it as a message from the West – then it is more a problem of their ego, of them not wanting to face themselves in the mirror. And, cinema is a mirror, like it or not. So, that is the critics' problem.

How difficult is it to bring up criticism of the regime in the film? The characters in *Casablanca Beats* rap using "they" as an unspecified, undefined subject, such as: "they want to hold me back/ To tame me they clipped my wings like a swallow / They can't shut me," "They curse me cos I sing with my veil," "if you insult them, talk about, they will lock you up,

will arrest you,” “If you don’t go to prison, they’ll make you disappear.” Referring to the ruling regime and politicians is a challenge: how did you approach this?

It all depends on the way I bring it up. It is art, a song, rap. It is much easier to express this criticism this way than to be blunt about it. Filmmakers deal with this issue every day. It is part of the game; of the way you win or lose territory. As a filmmaker, I have a duty in helping my society to progress. If I do not, it will slowly evolve. The regime is also playing its part. That is why it is crucial for the film to be seen in major film festivals like Cannes, for example, and to be released in such a prominent place. This provides a sort of protection for the filmmaker, actors, and the crew.

Ayouch had the following final thoughts on the film. . . .

About Ali Zaoua foundation, since we began shooting *Casablanca Beats* in 2017, we had two centers at that time, one in Sidi Moumen, the other in Tangier. Today, we have reached five centers: with new ones in Agadir, Fez, and Marrakesh as well. I am also proud to share that at the beginning attendees in those centers were 10 percent girls and 90 percent boys. Today, we have an almost equal number of boys and girls. What is happening inside those centers every day gives me hope to see change in this region’s future. The center’s crew assumes the responsibility of changing those youngsters’ lives, especially encouraging the girls to carry out their dreams, believe in themselves, and know that there is a future for them in their land, not abroad, and not by taking a boat to die in the Mediterranean. We tell them that they are who they are and that they have dreams to carry out where they grew up, even if it is difficult.

NABIL AYOUCHE. ‘Alli Ṣotak or Casablanca Beats. 2021. 101 minutes. Arabic with English Subtitles. Ali n’ Productions (Morocco), Les Films du Nouveau Monde, Unité de Production, Canal+, Ciné+ (France).

Nabil Ayouch’s vibrant *Casablanca Beats*, a quasi-documentary about a group of students taking a class on hip-hop at a local art center, gives voice to the frustrations of a diverse set of Moroccan youth. The cast comprises real attendees at the art center featured in the film. They appear under their real names, which lends the film a strong element of social realism and “blur[s] the borders between film and documentary to make it very close to reality,” as Ayouch revealed in an interview with this author, transcribed below. The film was a submission at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, the first Moroccan film to

compete for the Palme d'Or since 1962, and the Moroccan entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 94th Academy Awards.

The film opens with Anas, a rapper-turned-teacher in real life, driving his car painted with the word *Huriya*, Arabic for “freedom,” on his way to the impoverished neighborhood of Sidi Moumen to start his first day of work at an arts center. He starts his first lesson with a reminder of the African American’s fight for civil rights in the United States, raising awareness of citizens’ rights to equality and contextualizing the history and significance of the birth of hip-hop as a mode of self-expression. Similarly, Anas’s hip-hop class turns into a space that empowers the youths to speak up against the pressing issues of gender inequality, social justice, economic disparity, societal misinterpretation of Islam, the clash between religion and change, and the oppressiveness and cronyism of the ruling power.

His students’ lyrics nuance their belief in the power of music as a dissenting medium that challenges social and political taboos:

How powerful rap can be? Rap was seen as anti-system. At first, it was boycotted. It’s rap that speaks our problems. No subject is taboo. In the past, when we talked about the King, it was “Hush! Be quiet.” Today, people can express themselves. We’ve gained greater freedom of expression.

The social limitations on individual freedom reach their peak when their musical performance antagonizes the parents, who erupt in anger at their daughters’ singing on stage, calling it “shameful” and “sinful.” They ultimately put a stop to the public performance. Two refrains heard during the movie, “Speak up! Raise your voice!” and “You have to change it because you didn’t choose it,” encapsulate the power of hip-hop in unleashing the youths’ activism against the conservative social atmosphere of Morocco.

One of the film’s most evocative effects, which Ayouch shares was of utmost importance to him, is its close-up cinematographic shots that focus on the characters’ faces. These shots capture their emotional struggle. Their love of hip-hop is shown in the foreground, in stark contrast to the background that discloses the confines of religious public presence and looming calls to prayers. This juxtaposition reflects the presumed incongruity between Islam and hip hop and evokes some youths’ struggle with the issue. In one scene, a close-up shot epitomizes Idris’s skepticism of organized mass religion, as he turns his pensive face away from the popular street prayers that fill the background. In the subsequent scene, Amina, a young female who wears a hijab, comments on this conflation: “Religion is sacred to me, I cannot rap about religion. Society will tell us it [rap] is ‘ayb [shameful] – we cannot cross the limits set by society because it will react. . . . They curse me cos I sing with my veil / Do I need to undress to tell my tale?” Her outcry echoes Meryem’s, another female who wears the hijab, who explains her frustration with her brother’s paternalism: “I’m myself when I rap, just try to accept that. It’s enough I wear the veil.” Another class debate pinpoints the way “tradition gnaws at society” in grounding women’s secular clothing as the reason for street harassment.

Ayouch’s choice of Sidi Moumen as a setting holds a particular importance to him: He founded and presides over the arts center in the film, motivated by his

interest in “chang[ing] the youths’ lives” and “transforming their anger and rage into positive energy” (interview with the author). It is in this center that he met this class called “The Positive school of hip-hop” and was touched by the creativity of their lyrics. The bleak reality of the city invokes some of the issues raised in the film. Two of his previous films, *Ali Zaoua* (2000) and *Horses of God* (2014), which shine a light on the abuse of abandoned street boys and the radicalization of unemployed, economically-struggling young men, respectively, also take place in Sidi Moumen. *Casablanca Beats* revisits the reasons for the Casablanca attacks in 2003, which were carried out by suicide bombers native to the city and recruited by Al Qaeda. The attack targeted Jews and Westerners and changed Morocco’s political landscape. As seen through the morose stillness inside their homes located in shantytowns, the film highlights socioeconomic struggle as the underlying reason for jihadism, domestic abuse, stagnation, and resistance to change. The youth’s condemnation of the misuse of the Qur’an to preach violence against infidels offers a refreshing outlook at their tolerant attitude, which appears to embrace diversity and difference.

Ayouch excels at creating an upbeat rhythm in *Casablanca Beats* thanks to the youths’ vibrant resilience coupled with free dance and beatbox, despite the burdensome issues that weigh down on them.

NEVINE ABRAHAM 
Carnegie Mellon University

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