ANIMATION IN MOROCCO: NEW GENERATIONS

Whilst it is possible to catch a glimpse of animation in the Moroccan film *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (2000) by Nabil Ayouch, the popularity that this film garnered with international audiences is not true for most of contemporary Moroccan animation. Where there has been attention and discussion directed at Moroccan film (Orlando, 2013, 2011, Carter, 2009, Dwyer, 2007, Hennebelle, 1976), it was hard to come by evidence of discourses in academic literature on Moroccan animation.[1] Filmmaking in Morocco occurred as far back as the early 1900's, with the establishment of the *Centre Cinematographique Marocain* in 1944 and the production of two Moroccan post-colonial feature-length films made in 1968 (Carter, 2009). This history has contributed to the visibility and support that Moroccan cinema has garnered on local and international platforms. Nevertheless the same was not visible in the case of animation, resulting here in a sporadic collection of accounts that are by no means a comprehensive narrative of the existence and development of this form in Morocco. As other accounts of the animated form have demonstrated (Wells, 1997, Pilling, 1998), this peripheral status is not unique to Moroccan animation. The outlying position of animation in relation to film, for example, has resulted in the tardy establishment of the field of animation studies within discourses on the moving image in Europe and America. However, in the case of animations produced outside of these geographies (Bendazzi, 1994) the condition is compounded further and animation studies scholars can only offer piecemeal narratives and brief glimpses of animations from further afield. There are few notable exceptions to this (Edera, 1996, Bazzoli, 2003, Bendazzi, 2004, Callus, 2012, Convents, 2014) that offer an important albeit sporadic account of African animation with a range of different emphasis on specific countries or regions, within these Moroccan animation. Bazzoli's *African Cartoon* (2003) for example provided one of the first examples of a wider discussion of animation on the African continent, and included case studies from the North African region of neighboring Algeria, and Egypt. With this in mind, this chapter aims to draw light upon the glimpses of animation within Morocco. It will suggest that whilst appearing to be peripheral to the cultural space that film occupies in Morocco, Moroccan animation has circulated within different spaces on television and more recently on the Internet and mobile platforms. As artists adopt new technologies in their practices digital animation pervades different genres and Moroccan animators can be found contributing to games and visual effects.

OTHER MOVING IMAGES

The establishment of the *Centre Cinematographique Marocain* (CCM) suggests a long historical engagement with film practices and film culture within Morocco. The organization acted as one of the key local institutional bodies that sought to actively promote and preserve Moroccan film, through the establishment of a film library and affiliation with bodies such as IFFA and UNESCO. In the 1980's CCM established a public film fund (initially stemming from a 10% tax on cinema tickets sales) to support local productions, and whilst this model subsequently changed, CCM continued its support through investments with a portfolio of 124 feature length films between 2004 and 2012 (Graiouid & Belghazi, 2013, Bakrim, 2013). Even so the Moroccan animated form did not appear to be produced with similar vigour as film production and rarely benefitted from this active investment. Where film and the arts have been framed and

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[1] For example Bendazzi's historical overview of world animation in *Cartoons; One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (1994) does not include Morocco within the section on African Animation.

contextualized within discussions of patronage and cultural heritage (Graiouid & Belghazi, 2013: 265), the marginalization of animation from these categories would suggest that animation was not considered or recognized as carrying the same cultural value. Moreover whilst Morocco is not short of film festivals, animation festivals are less prominent. The CCM identified a total of eighteen different film festivals running across various cities in Morocco but only one of these was listed as a festival for animation, the Meknes International Animation Festival (FICAM)[2].

The Meknes International Animation Festival (FICAM) has a long-standing presence in Morocco. It was launched in 2000 and has historically showcased a range of animations from the international circuit. Mohammed Beyoud, was FICAM's creative director responsible for starting the festival and promoting the art of animation not only through the screenings of animated films but also by the inclusion of educational workshops. Beyoud invited a range of well-established international animators from commercial studios or as independent filmmakers, such as Bill Plympton, Michel Ocelot, Peter Lord, Isao Takahata, as speakers to showcase their work and provide valuable knowledge of a range of animation practices. Typically the FICAM would run over five days at the French Institute in Meknes showcasing a range of animations from the international platform presented within thematic segments. On occasion this would include the screenings of local productions, such as, for example, in 2002 Hamid Semlali's L'oiseau de l'Atlas (2002). Semlali's ten-minute short film was exceptional at the time on two accounts; firstly as a rare example of a local animation screened at an international festival, and secondly as a case of Moroccan animated film receiving funding from the CCM for production (100,000,00 dinars). This was unusual in a context where animation was not typically considered as part of Moroccan film culture. As the Moroccan newspaper *Liberation* reported in 2010,

> 'The professionals are unanimous: The development of a national animation is penalized by the lack of financial and technical resources as well as by the lack of adequate training. 'We greatly lack the funds and an animated film requires huge budgets. Worse, few Moroccan producers are willing to invest in this sector. They show little interest in this kind of cinema. I think that in Morocco we have not yet grasped the economic and social challenges of such a film', said Rachid Zakie, critic and journalist for 2M.' (Bentaleb, Oct 28th 2010)

EARLY PIONEERS

Semlali is cited as one of the first pioneers of Moroccan animation and an auteur in the field. In 1984 he created *Didi, La poule* (1984), later the animations *Bobo, Le Sauvuer* (1988), and *Bobo et le Fromage* (1990) (Carter, 2009, Maroc, Hebdo International, 2002:35). Bazzoli's (2003) filmography for African animation lists only one example of Moroccan animation, citing Semlali's animation, *L'oiseau de l'Atlas* (2002). Semlali's background in fine art and filmmaking as a graduate from the Ecole des Beaux Arts of Baghdad in sculpture, informed his passion for animation. In 1978 once he returned to Morocco, he taught sculpture for a short while before returning to running film production workshops at the Kratiki Institute (L'economiste, 23/01/2002). Later in 2010, Semlali participated in the FICAM as part of a roundtable discussion on animation in the

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[2] FICAM is listed on the CCM website however another animation festival Animaroc that has been running in Casablanca from 2010, was not included in the official listing.

Magreb, alongside the Tunisian animator Zouhaier Mahjoub. However Semlali's contributions were those of a single auteur and it wasn't until the early nineties that a collective of artists emerged in Morocco to form one of the earliest animation studios in Morocco, noted not only for its animated productions but its didactic function within a community of emergent animation artists.

> 'It is important also to note that there was a pioneering organization which in a sense was the first organization in Morocco to work with animation notwithstanding the lack of means and materials, and this did not stop the artists working there from giving their best and expressing their various artistic sensibilities motivated by their love of the area.' (Personal Communication, Maaqoul, 19/08/2014)

The association CASAPremiere was setup in 1996 in Casablanca and is considered to be one of the earliest examples of an organization with a focus on the animated genre within Morocco. Initially the organization was setup by four key figures and also fine art graduates, Said Bouftass, Lachguar Mohamed, Said Bouchmar, Khalid Ghalib (Personal Communication, Bouchmar, 16/03/2014). The artists were all graduates from the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, in Casablanca and shared a keen interest in painting, design and the graphic and plastic arts. However they lacked any formal education in animation, and self-taught the practices and processes required to produce animated shorts whilst taking on live projects. These artists are often cited by their peers as seminal figures of 2D animation in Morocco, whose entrepreneurial efforts spurred on a range of artists that followed in their footsteps. In 1998, the company began taking on new artists that would continue to work in this field, these included Aziz Maaqoul and Youssef El Aakouchi and Youssef Boukany. The company CASAPremiere was responsible for the foundational education of Morocco's emergent animators, described by its members as a key formative part of their professional development (Personal Communication, Boukany, 2014). Whilst it was commissioned to work upon various commercial projects, notably as advertising for television, the studio also had a wider educational impact within the artistic community. As Said Bouftass recollects, CASApremiere was created to 'offer an intellectual and artistic space for young people who wished to make animation' and this was exemplified by the studio's weekly Saturday morning animation workshops that were offered for free to the general public (Personal Communication, Bouftass, 2014). Between 1998 and 1999, the company was also responsible for the production and publication of three issues of a comic magazine aimed at children called BOOM-Magazine that drew upon the skills of different local cartoonists and included a treatment of the Persian fables of *Kalila and Dimna*. It is not surprising that a connection was made between animation and cartooning, as these two forms have historically shared similar aesthetic devices.

At its start, the artists at CASAPremiere studio used a traditional method of the celluloid strip and gauche paint, however later with the introduction of the scanner and computer their methods adapted to these new technologies. In a 'hacker-maker' approach to animation, they fixed their peg-bars to the scanner in order to align the images (Personal Communication, Bouchmar, 07/08/2014). A lack of proprietary animation software meant that the images that were scanned were retouched in Photoshop and then composited in Premiere. This multilayered approach to the animated process whilst not unique to the digital format alludes to the versatility of artistic practice that the animated

form draws upon. The artists at CASAPremiere adopted the use of different pieces of software that were designed for digital image manipulation or compositing, rather than animation per se, to create their own animations. It was only in 2006 that the company transitioned to using proprietary animation software Toonz that worked with vectors (as opposed to bitmapped images). This early exposure to different tools perhaps preempted and enabled the movement of these artists across different fields of image-making practices.

Whilst pitching many ideas for animated series, the company only managed to see two series to fruition for broadcast in 2002, called *Allo Mamman Bobo*. These consisted of two series of 26 episodes per series. The animations were one-minute shorts and broadcast on local state-owned television station 2M TV. They were aimed at a children's audience with predominantly didactic content. The series was co-directed by Said Bouchmar and Kalid Ghalib. In 2002 Said Bouftass sold his share of the company and left to pursue a career in fine art education and philosophy focusing upon the phenomenology of anatomy in artistic practice. The company worked on early 2D animated shorts mostly as advertising for broadcast television. In 2006 the company was dissolved as the early practitioners moved on to further their profession across different fields. This movement and mobility was not restricted to national boundaries and Youssef El Aakouchi, for example, secured a job with the successful computer games company Ubisoft in Montreal, Canada. This circumstance is not unique to Moroccan animators, but rather a symptom of the contemporary economic climate within the transnational industries in computer generated animation and the rise of the games as a separate sector.

IMPACTS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

The transition from traditional 2D animation techniques to 3D computer animation tended to have a necessary consequence of a wider engagement with computer related technologies. This use of computers and the internet did not only change the ideas and practices around production but also the means of exhibition, dissemination and viewership. Moroccan animation artists that transitioned to these digital practices were able to move across different genres of animation with professional interactions with the related industries such as games development and visual effects for film (albeit with limitation). Aziz Maaqoul, for example, who began by working 1998 as a cell animator for CASAPremiere, moved on to work on a range of related professions from graphic design to matte-painter in post-production for the company SIGMA Technologies in 2013. Maaqoul's professional trajectory across these disparate strands is testament to the versatility that animation offers to the artist. The animation artist has the ability to draw upon a range of different artistic practices, whether painterly, photographic, dramatic, or sculptural and apply combinations of these in the animated form. These alongside the additional tools made available on the computer, facilitate a movement across different media. For example, as in the case of Maaquol, one is able to move seamlessly between animating cartoons or creating animated images in the service of 'film' in the sense of computer generated imagery (CGI) and visual effects. Maaqoul's portfolio of digital paintings and matte-paintings span different genres from scfi-fi to fantasy and are evidence of the pervasive practices that are present within animation. Maaqoul's discovery of matte-painting was not incidentally related to his use of the computer; 'my passion for matte-painting began with my discovery on the internet of different artists in the digital painting domain...Their exceptional work opened the door for me to the art of matte-painting'. (Personal Communication, Maaqoul, 2014).

Furthermore these digital artists were also independently promoting their animated work, now in digital format, alongside knowledge of techniques and practices through online platforms. In 2008 El Aakouchi, for example, created a blog specifically dedicated to animation published in Arabic with a view to illustrate his work and different animation techniques. The blog Harakatoon[3] includes YouTube embedded videos linked from the artists own YouTube channel that include examples of a range of techniques in animation, from traditional drawn animation to 3D computer generated animation. Amongst the videos one can see his own custom-built zoetropes illustrating an animated cycle of an anthropomorphised Tagine character as it runs, and other experiments with clay[4], small flipbooks of the same character jumping, informative videos on 3D clay modelling of the character for stop-motion, and tutorials for various techniques within 3D computer animation software in Arabic. Similarly, even though the pioneering Moroccan artist Said Bouftass subsequently developed his career in a different field, his contribution to Moroccan animation continued through the various online interjections on social networking sites, distribution platforms such as YouTube, and blogs. Bouftass for example created his own YouTube channel that included documentation of his work in art pedagogy and also examples of earlier animations that were made whilst involved with CASAPremiere. Bouftass digitized and uploaded a collection of commercial shorts and examples from CASAPremiere. Amongst this selection he included also a short experimental surrealist animation entitled, *j'ai bu un café dans un café* (2005). The animated short by Bouftass was screened at FICAM in 2005, and depicts a series of metamorphic transitions and musings in a simple black and white line drawing of a man sipping on his coffee.

Adallah el Fakir is another prominent Moroccan animator with a string of various short animations, all of which are computer generated. His introduction to this field was through an education in the arts for three years at the School of Design and Communication, Art'COM in Casablanca. In 1998 he obtained a Diploma from the school. He then furthered his studies in Belgium, in 2000, obtaining specialized certification for *Maya*, a 3D software package from Alias Wavefront, in character animation. He continued his training in the same software package in 2002 when he moved to Canada obtaining certification for dynamics (the simulation of systems such as crowds, smoke, particles, fluids, etc.) in *Maya* by the same company Alias Wavefront[5]. In large -scale productions the specialized nature of computer animation is reflected in the specialization of roles and departments, however, in Fakir's case, one person undertook all these different roles. Therefore whilst Fakir has made commercial work for the advertising industry, the bread and butter of most animators, his process in fact reflects more that of an independent animator as opposed to the commercial or industrial model that follows strict division of labor. Between 2001 and 2009, Fakir produced personal and commercial 3D computer animations that were screened at FICAM and the MultiClic Festival in Casablanca as well as on television.

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[3] El Aakouchi, Hamid, *Harakatoon Blog*, http://7arakatoon.blogspot.co.uk/, Accessed 20/09/2014.

[4] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcbKYufGsCY#t=226, Accessed 25/10/2014.

[5] It is worth noting here that each of these processes require a degree of specialization that would typically be reflected in a production pipeline with the inclusion of separate departments responsible for the character animation and the simulations and dynamics, amongst others such as Modelling or Rendering and Lighting.

Fakir was notably featured on in a number of interviews on Morrocan television and online articles that covered the news of the launch of the 3D computer animated feature film *The Companions of the Elephants*. The film went in to production in 2009 and aimed to be completed for 2016. It was intended to be Morocco's first feature-length 3D computer generated animation entirely produced in Morocco. It was intended to be an adaptation of a story in the Koran that tells of a King in the south of Arabia who took 60,000 troops and 13 elephants, and set his army to destroy the holy city of Mecca. The story tells of this ply to re-route the pilgrimage and commerce of the Arabs towards San'a, the capital of Yemen, where the King had built a magnificent Cathedral. When the King gave the order to attack, a cloud of birds appeared in the sky. The birds stoned the aggressors with thousands of little stones and thus defeated the troops of the Yemen King. The narrative of this animation called for a production of ambitious proportion and scale typically requiring a large team and budget to match. The concept art that was developed at the start for the film by Aziz Maaqoul, Benali Abdel Hamid and Micheal Paolinetti, illustrated large armies with a range of characters in different environments evocative of Morocco. The images conjured a sense of an epic narrative with an impressive cast of characters. However contrary to conventional industrial practice in Europe or the US, Fakir's entire production team dedicated to the film included only fifteen people that included two matte-painters, ten 3D computer animators, and three programmers. The film was self-financed by the director and the animation and postproduction company SIGMA Technologies. Whilst the company works across a range of fields including documentary, broadcast programs and commercial work, it also includes an animation department that included a team of fifteen 3D computer animation artists (Personal Communication, Fakir, 08/08/2014).

SIGMA-Toons, an ancillary studio and part of the company SIGMA Technologies, was also responsible for a portfolio of other productions and co-productions in computer animation. The animated series *Ramzi and Adam* (2009) that was written and co-directed by Eviline Fouche with creative director Abdelhamid Benali, is one example of this. The animated series was intended for a children's audience and ran over three series in Arabic. It was purchased by Al-Jazeera Children (for production and distribution rights) but was never aired on Moroccan television. The story revolves around two central young characters that are brothers, Ramzi and Adam and their different daily adventures. The collaboration between Fouche and Benali nurtured at SIGMA-Toons between 2006 and 2009 resulted in the development of other pilot animations to develop as a children's series *Les Aventures De ZeZe Le Bourdon, Casa Street,* and *La Boite a Histoires*.

EMERGING COMMUNITIES

Whilst FICAM has made some important contributions to the dissemination and exhibition of animation, its international remit had the inevitable consequence of sidelining local artists and their productions. In response to this the CASANIM festival was setup in 2010 in Casablanca. The director of the festival Younes Mouslih and chair of the Moroccan Association for Animated Film and Games (Animaroc), positioned the festival as an opportunity to showcase Moroccan animation and with an emphasis on digital animation and specific training. The festival offered a range of workshops and master classes in animation techniques with an emphasis on the digital. In 2014, for example, the CASANIM festival ran a series of workshops showcasing open-source 3D

animation software *Blender*, it curated an exhibition of computer art, *Art Digit* that included matte-painting and pixel art (Medias24, 2014). CASAANIM collaborated with a new generation of animation artists such as Salim Ljabli, a freelance Moroccan 3D CGI character artist, Rachid Jadir of *Rass Derb* fame*,* Abedlkader Behloul from games company UbiSoft (Casablanca), Basti Salaheddine, Abdelah el Fakir from SIGMA, and others, that illustrate the sudden surge in Morrocan computer animation. These emerging communities are mostly visible online, through interest groups that are setup in social networking sites or blogs, Moroccan computer animation enthusiasts are cohering to showcase their work and share their knowledge of different computer animation techniques.

Typically when animations were produced they tended to circulate within the peripheral spaces of popular culture. It is possible to speculate that this positioning allowed a degree of subversion from the cultural gatekeepers that controlled state fund allocation in the arts and that, it has been argued, have supported projects that promoted their own agenda (Graiouid & Belghazi, 2013:267).

http://www.leconomiste.com/article/le-cinema-danimation-en-fete-meknes#sthash.LcB2ifs0.dpuf

The first Manga comic convention in Tangier was setup up in 2008 and responded to the growing community of manga enthusiasts in Morocco (http://www.dragontanger.com/, Accessed 10/09/2014). In a similar vein to most European broadcast animation series on television in the late 1970s and 1980s a spate of imported Manga anime from studios such as Nippon Animation with animated series like the 1975 animated series *Maya The Bee,* or … inspired a generation of animation enthusiasts albeit with a specific aesthetic slant.

In its earliest forms, Moroccan animation was produced by a handful of artists in the mid-nineties, and limited to local broadcasting. However the computer and the onset of digital media has dramatically changed this condition and has ushered a renewed interest and favored attention in animation and related techniques and practices (Manovich, 2000, Merrin, 2014). Critically the impact of these technologies is felt not only through the new practices that emerge in the West, but also further afield with the possibilities and economies these offer in production, dissemination and distribution to countries on the African continent. Whilst Moroccan animation is hardly visible at European animation festivals, its presence online, the following it has garnered and the number of specialist web-based social networking groups for Moroccan animation artists, would suggest that there is a new generation of digital artists afoot. This article will focus on these dexterous emergent animators that are capitalizing on the use of the computer to create moving images that straddle different aesthetic practices as they mobilize themselves through expert use of Web related technologies. Furthermore it will present examples of specific artists that have moved across different moving image practices during the span of their careers. This movement alludes to the versatility that animated form presents drawing upon a range of artistic practices that constitute an assemblage that at times can appear painterly, pictorial, performative, sculptural, photographic and so on.

Amine Beckouri est l'exemple même des vocations que peuvent entraîner le FICAM. Ayant participé au premier workshop story-board puis à un atelier de réalisation avec Luis Briceno dans lequel il fabriqua avec d'autres étudiants la bande-annonce 2006 du festival, il découvre une autre facette de l'animation. En effet, au Maroc les jeunes ne connaissent presque que les dessin animé japonais et les séries étrangères, qui passent à la télévision. Faire de l'animation en volume avec peu de moyens, en utilisant du bric à brac, lui donne des idées et il décide de poursuivre dans cette voie en faisant de l'animation pour son projet de fin d'étude. Il co-réalisera avec des camarades un clip pour la chanson Blad Skizo de Hoba Hoba Spirit. Pour en savoir plus sur la construction de marionnettes et autres problèmes techniques, il s'est beaucoup aidé de tutoriels trouvés sur Internet et du site Fous d'Anim, à qui il a rendu hommage. Le plus difficile dans ce projet était de tenir les délais car il voulait projeter le film en avant-première pour le FICAM 2007. Ce qu'il réussit à faire. Le film gagna un prix l'année suivante et connu un petit succès dans la presse et les médias. Amine fut engagé rapidement après sa sortie de l'école, pour travailler sur des séries TV et des publicités. Il commença également à animer des ateliers pour enfants. Pendant le FICAM 2008, il reçu une proposition de Franck Petita? directeur de de l'école Méliès, pour poursuivre exceptionnellement ses études en France sans avoir à payer l'école. Amine finit donc actuellement cette école qui lui permet de se former à l'animation 3D et travaille sur le film de fin d'étude, dont il nous a montré quelques extraits. Il compte ensuite chercher du travail en France pour gagner sa vie mais n'abandonne pas l'idée de revenir plus tard au Maroc, pourquoi pas pour monter une boîte de production. Le terrain est vierge et il y a pleins de choses à faire.

http://www.fousdanim.org/festivals/index.php?Meknes-2010
http://www.fousdanim.org/festivals/index.php?2010/05/12/142-la-creation-marocaine
Cobayanim, Wed 12th May, 2010.

MOROCCO Animation CONTACTS

3D CGI ANIMATION

- Abdel Hamid Benali – Director for Children's animation series in 3D exported to Dubai

- Alaoui Belghiti

- Tufan Sezer – Modelling/Compositing

- Michael Paolinetti

- Aziz Maaqoul Matte Painter

- Adallah el Fakir – The Companions of the Elephants **

- Youssef Rhanem – 3D animator - https://vimeo.com/66235169

- Rachid Jadir - Rass Derb (SIGMA)

- Farid Yazami ?

- Salim Ljabli – 3D Character Design and Modelling

- Issam Mohammed Hanine – Al-Hikma (2010) CG Integration in Film (Over 50% of the scenes that are created in CG)

STOPMOTION

- Amine Beckoury – Stopmotion Blad Skizo / Also supported by CFI and MAARIFA (an organization with objective to support and promote Arab audiovisual (educational) content for distribution in Arab region and Mediterranean (see article)

CASAPREMIERE – Society of Animation

- Said Bouchmar – 2D Animation Agi Ngoulik TV Series
- Ghalib Khalid
- Said Bouftass
- Youssef Elaakouchi
- Youssef Boukany (Email Interview)

SIGMA Technologies

- Aziz Maaqoul Matte Painter
- Rachid Jadir 2D/3D artist - rachid3d@sigmatechno.com

Rass Derb (Meaning: Corner of the Street) 3D Animated Humorous Shorts /
Hassan Youns – hassanimation@gmail.com / Big youtube/online following
Sponsored by MarocTelecom

Description of Episode: Recharge Moi STP
This movie 2 min, tells the naivety of some young men who are trapped by the contempt
of some girls. And also illustrates the phenomenon of "Moroccan-Oriento" prostitution
and the exploitation of young girls in interest careerists, who bears the title of sex maniac

FACEBOOK GROUPS

AMDA
AMCA – L'Association Marocaine du Cinema d'Animation
ArtCom Sup
ZMorocco – Members 200
La 3D au Maroc – Members 1,033
la 3D Marocaine- 876 Members
Institut National des Beaux-Arts de Tétouan
3D Marocaine – Members 7,535
CasaPremiere

Youtube –
Mohammed Nassib
https://www.youtube.com/user/NassibMohammed 3 million views

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