

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Exeter		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 26 Modern Languages and Linguistics		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Creating a Transnational Attitude in Moroccan Cinema through widening cultural access, international festival distribution and talent development.		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> January 2012 – November 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Will Higbee	Principle Investigator	July 2002 – present
Dr Stefanie Van de Peer	Postdoctoral research fellow	December 2015 – July 2020
Dr Jamal Bahmad	Postdoctoral research fellow	December 2017 – Dec 2018
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> December 2015 – November 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>A focus on inward investment from international productions and deference to a traditional canon had stymied new, more diverse Moroccan filmmakers and diminished the significance of Moroccan cultural influence on world cinema.</p> <p>The Transnational Moroccan Cinema (TMC) project generated new ways of thinking and has changed film cultural policy among Moroccan film industry professionals and academics. TMC brought together 100 Moroccan cineastes at a debate in 2016 which led key industry figures to develop a new film cultural strategy. It has enabled diverse filmmakers, particularly women, to be accepted into the canon. A pioneering feminist film, preserved by TMC, has been accepted as one of 25 films key to Moroccan history and internationally exhibited. Emerging filmmakers have been supported with professional development and routes to international markets. Throughout the project 70 young Moroccan filmmakers have benefited from workshops and opportunities for collaborations including residencies in London for two emerging talents to develop new projects.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>The underpinning research for this case study builds on Higbee's work on transnational cinema. The key findings of this research [see 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 &amp; 3.6], propose that an exclusive focus on the national, or (in the case of Moroccan cinema) the francophone, is detrimental to the understanding of the production, distribution and exhibition of films. Further insights and findings emerged from the AHRC-funded "Transnational Moroccan Cinema" project (TMC) (December 2015 – December 2018) and the follow-on project "An Alternative Distribution Network for Moroccan Cinema: Online Audiences, Festival Networks and Transnational Talent Development" (November 2019 – November 2020). The TMC research project was led by Higbee (PI), with Prof Florence Martin (international CI) and Dr Jamal Bahmad and Dr Stefanie Van de Peer as Research Fellows.</p> <p>While existing research, critical discourse and audience reception display a deference for the older generation of cineastes and the 'canon' of Moroccan cinema, there is a distinct lack of access to the history of Moroccan cinema for aspiring filmmakers both in Morocco and internationally. [3.4] While the Moroccan Film Council (Centre Cinématographique Marocain – CCM) has the space to store old films on 35mm format, the facility is not future-proofed. Furthermore, women's films were specifically at risk of being lost through patriarchal canon formation and neglect. Higbee's project has restored, subtitled and digitised one historically important woman's film, <i>A Door to the Sky</i> by Farida Benlyazid (1989), and made it newly available for global screenings. <i>La Falaise</i> (Besaïdi, 1997) an artistically significant short film by one of Morocco's most important contemporary directors, will be restored and digitised in 2021.</p> <p>The CCM's strategic focus had prioritised inward investment from international productions, to the detriment of Moroccan filmmakers [3.3]. There was no network of support between</p>		

different levels of the industry: funders, producers and filmmakers did not enter into meaningful dialogue and were not sufficiently supported by the CCM in realising international co-production or exposure for their films. Meanwhile, younger Moroccan filmmakers looked outward, towards Europe and America, rather than exploring their own cinematic heritage [3.4] and existing film education did not translate into viable career opportunities. Morocco's main film festivals [see 3.5] in Marrakech and Tangiers lacked opportunities for Moroccan filmmakers. Marrakech was criticised in 2016 for not including a single Moroccan filmmaker, while the Tangiers festival's invite-only format excludes those filmmakers who are not yet established.

The key findings outlined above have been disseminated by the TMC research team on the project website and via social media, in articles and book chapters, as well as a monograph and edited collection. Two international conferences (in Marrakech in December 2016 and Edinburgh in October 2018) for academics and industry professionals, offered a key space for knowledge exchange. Higbee was invited to present his research in Morocco (Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, in November 2019) and internationally (at HKU/CUHK, Hong Kong, in April 2018 and at HKBU in December 2018). In November 2018 he served as president of the jury at the International Film School Festival, Tetouan.

### 3. References to the research

- 3.1 Higbee, W. and Lim S.H. (2010), 'Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies,' in: *Transnational Cinemas*, 1.1, pp. 7-21.\*
- 3.2 Higbee, W. and Bâ, S. M. (eds) (2012), *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, London/New York: Routledge, 298 pages. *Submitted to REF2014*.
- 3.3 Higbee, W. (2012), 'Le Cinéma maghrébin vu de l'autre côté de la Méditerranée: cinéma national/transnational/diasporique', in *Les Cinémas du Maghreb et Leurs Publics, Africultures No. 89-90*, Martin, F. and Caillé, P. (ed.) Paris: Harmattan, pp. 102-116. \*
- 3.4 Van de Peer, S., (2013), 'Young Transnational Cinema in the Maghreb', in: *Journal of African Cinemas, 40 Years of Women Filmmaking in Francophone Africa* (pp.175-190) \*
- 3.5 Bahmad, J. (2014), 'Between Tangier and Marrakech: A Short History of Moroccan Cinema through its Festivals,' in: Jordanova, D. and Van de Peer, S. *Film Festival Yearbook 6: Film Festivals and the Middle East*. St Andrews: STAFS, pp. 306-317\*
- 3.6 Higbee, W. (2018), 'Cinéma-monde and the transnational,' in: Gott. M. and Schilt, (eds.) *Cinéma-monde: decentred perspectives on global filmmaking in French*, Edinburgh: EUP, pp.341-56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1tqxvbd>

AHRC project: "Transnational Moroccan Cinema" project (TMC) (December 2015 – December 2018), £478,302 (Grant ref: AH/M00970X/1)

AHRC follow-on project: "An Alternative Distribution Network for Moroccan Cinema: Online Audiences, Festival Networks and Transnational Talent Development" (November 2019 – November 2020), £99,202 (Grant ref: AH/T001038/1)

\* Available on request.

### 4. Details of the impact

Higbee's work has increased access to the archives of Moroccan cinema globally; created opportunities for emerging filmmakers in Morocco; and changed awareness of, and interest in, Moroccan films on an international level for both audiences and industry professionals. Specifically, the following impacts have been achieved:

#### 1. Safeguarding and promoting works of historical significance

At the TMC conference 'Morocco in Motion: the global reach of Moroccan Cinema' (Edinburgh, October 26-28, 2018), writer and director Farida Benlyazid revealed that her pioneering feminist

film *A Door to the Sky* was stored at the CCM. The film had been considered “lost” as it did not have English subtitles and the French subtitles needed review, and the original 35mm film had deteriorated. Determined to make it available to a Moroccan and international audience, Higbee’s team shipped the film to the UK, where it was restored, subtitled in English and French, and digitised. It was then donated to the filmmaker and placed in the CCM archive in Rabat. [5.1]

Higbee then persuaded the CCM to celebrate a world premiere of the restored film at the National Film Festival in Tangiers, for an audience of almost 300. [5.2] It has since played at a number of international online festivals during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the Africa in Motion Festival (28/11/20, 57 views) and the Being Human national festival of the humanities (21/11/2020, 44 views). Clear evidence of the film’s new lease of life as a result of Higbee’s work can be seen in its inclusion by the CCM in a selection of 25 films key to Moroccan film history that were streamed free online during March and April 2020 – viewed by 2,220 people in Morocco.[5.2]

## 2. Changing attitudes within and about Moroccan cinema

In December 2016, as part of the Marrakech International Film Festival (MIFF), in collaboration with the Moroccan Chamber of Film Producers (MCFP), Higbee organised a round-table discussion about the state of the Moroccan film industry. The event was attended by more than 100 industry professionals and academics, including CCM director Sarim Fassi Fihri [5.3]. At a time of perceived crisis for the Moroccan film industry (with no Moroccan films having been selected for the MIFF), it provided an opportunity to formulate a collective strategy. Key industry figures present committed to meeting twice a year in a forum that continues the initiatives begun by TMC.

*“After the Marrakech debates, we created a ‘National Coordination’, involving trade unions and professional organisations in the sector, aimed to set new priorities, and [meet] challenges such as the great one of winning back our own audiences and defining a cultural policy. We will continue this work and hope to bring more attention and confidence to Moroccan filmmakers.” – Ahmed El-Maanouni, former president of the MCFP [5.4]*

At the Morocco in Motion conference, TMC invited a diverse selection of 15 Moroccan artists and industry practitioners to participate in a series of round-table discussions in Edinburgh. Those who attended described how it had allowed a constructive debate to flourish:

*“Today I met people I did not have the opportunity to meet in Morocco. Thank you for having made this meeting possible, because I find this event priceless. It’s really exceptional to have the time and the opportunity to speak intelligently with so many people [about Moroccan cinema], to meet some of you for the first time.” – film producer Lamia Chraïbi [5.5]*

Higbee’s research has led directly to greater international collaborations for the Moroccan film industry. Between 2017 and 2019, he consulted for UK production company Hurricane Films for a commercial feature film, *Beatrice and Her Father*, set in Morocco, advising how to navigate funding and co-production and brokering meetings with their eventual co-producer, Lamai Chraïbi. Shooting is due to commence in spring 2021. Hurricane Films have described Higbee’s contribution as ‘invaluable’. [5.6]

## 3. Creating opportunities for emerging talent

Higbee’s research team organised debates at international film festivals between young and established professionals, enabling for the first-time interactions between these different generations of Moroccan cinema. In addition, working in collaboration with the LFS (2017-2019), Higbee delivered a series of pitching and cinematography workshops in Tetouan, as well as two residencies for emerging Moroccan filmmakers in London [5.7]. Activist filmmaker Nadir Bouhmouch participated in both TMC conferences, and Higbee’s research team has promoted his work through online interviews and research publications.

*“It gave me the opportunity to meet filmmakers whose films have been influential and dear to me for so long. ... This has given me a renewed determination at a time when I was beginning to feel hopeless and isolated.”*

– Nadir Bouhmouch, after the 2016 conference in Marrakech [5.7]

Bouhmouch has since participated in the prestigious Venice Final Cut development programme and his latest documentary was selected for leading documentary festival Hot Docs (Toronto). Higbee has also introduced Bouhmouch’s work to a wider range of film festivals and filmmakers. As a direct result of Higbee’s recommendation to the festival, The Folk Film Gathering (Edinburgh) screened Bouhmouch’s latest documentary at the 2020 online edition of the festival, inviting the filmmaker to participate in a filmmaker roundtable, where Bouhmouch established a collaboration with renowned British documentary collective Amber. [5.9]

French-Moroccan filmmaker Sofia el Khyari found participation in the Edinburgh conference and the screening of her film *Ayam* at the AiM film festival (see photo [5.1]) a similarly transformative experience: *“I returned to Paris, with my head full of projects, inspiration and ambition!! ... I can’t thank you enough for inviting me and promoting my young work to everyone.”* [5.7]

Higbee’s project promoted further transnational talent development through collaboration with the London Film School (LFS) and the International Film School Film Festival in Tetouan (FIDEC). Two Moroccan documentary-makers spent a term in residence at the LFS in spring 2017, developing new projects (see Janjague and El Hachadi testimonies [5.7]), while Higbee and a delegation of LFS staff and students were invited by Abdelmalek Essaadi University to participate in the third FIDEC festival in November that same year. They returned in 2018 and 2019 to deliver three further pitching and filmmaking workshops for around 70 young Moroccan filmmakers, providing significant support and feedback to those seeking national and international funding for projects. In 2018, Higbee presided over the festival jury [5.1].

#### **4. Extending audience reach and challenging perceptions of Moroccan cinema**

By collaborating with the UK’s leading African film festival, Africa in Motion (AiM), and its partner organisations over the past four years, Higbee has increased understanding of the significance of Moroccan cinema in an African context. More than 500 people saw Moroccan films programmed at the festival as a result of TMC’s involvement. AiM producer Justine Atkinson’s testimony explains that TMC’s influence on curatorial practices enabled *“audiences to navigate a carefully curated programme of film screenings and events, therefore increasing their knowledge and access to Moroccan cinema at a time of disproportionately low levels of public exposure to Moroccan films”*. [5.9]

The number of Moroccan events programmed at AiM rose from two in 2016 to nine in 2018, while the Moroccan film *Transes* (El Maanouni, 1981) was picked up by two other UK festivals: Watch Africa Cymru, in Wales (November 2017), and Open Colour, in Bristol (April 2019). TMC also delivered masterclasses with Moroccan filmmakers and panel discussions following screenings, which introduced new audiences to Moroccan film culture, and positively changed attitudes towards North African cinema, which has often been seen as separate from sub-Saharan African cinema. [5.9, 5.10]

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

**5.1** Photographs including FIDEC film festival and assorted press coverage.

**5.2** CCM evidence including: CCM Online Film Festival media coverage; Email testimony Myriam Mouflih (Africa in Motion) attendance at screening (Nov 2020) of *Door to the Sky*.

**5.3** Recorded round-table discussion – transcript November 2016.

**5.4** Testimony from former president of the Moroccan Chamber of Film Producers, Ahmed El-Maanouni.

- 5.5** Transcribed video testimony from Moroccan Participants at the Edinburgh conference (Benlyazid, Belabbes, Aidouni, Bouhmouch, Charibi, Benlyazid).
- 5.6** Written testimony by Roy Boulter co-founder and film producer, Hurricane Films
- 5.7** Written email testimonies from emerging Moroccan filmmakers Nadir Bouhmouch and Sofia el Khyari + image of Sofia El Khyari at AiM in Edinburgh + Testimonies from Mahassine El Hachadi and Saida Janjague, two documentary makers who spent a semester at the London Film School.
- 5.8** Written testimony by Jamie Chambers, Folk Film Gathering,
- 5.9** Written testimony by Justine Atkinson, producer of the Africa in Motion Film Festival.
- 5.10** Audience feedback forms from screenings of Moroccan films 2016-2018 (scanned copies of feedback forms), illustrating how they changed attitudes in audience members' perceptions of African cinema, and of Moroccan films and society.