

## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Locating the Lost Archive of Arab Cinema

# CROSSINGS OF HERITAGE, MEMORY AND ARCHIVES: A HISTORY OF MOROCCAN CINEMA IN THE BOUANANI ARCHIVES

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**Abstract** | This article interrogates archival forms and practices in relation to remembering “lost archives” of Moroccan cinematographic history. It presents the Bouanani Archives – a private, fragmented, still largely uncatalogued collection in the Bouanani family apartment in Rabat comprising a variety of texts, visuals, and objects which connect to Morocco’s cinematographic and cultural memory. The archive is the personal legacy of the filmmaker, writer, and artist Ahmed Bouanani (1938-2011), his wife Naïma Saoudi (1947-2012), and his daughter Batoul Bouanani (1969-2003), who all worked for the Moroccan cinema. Today it is preserved and cared for by his daughter Touda Bouanani and a group of researchers, curators, and filmmakers. By describing different approaches to this legacy, the article moves back and forth between the metaphor of the lost archive and the material and conceptual work carried out with the Bouanani Archives in order to expand on critical archive theory within the particular context of Moroccan cinematographic memory.

**Keywords** | Ahmed Bouanani – Morocco – film archives – history of cinema – memory – art – archival practice.

**Abstract** | Cet article interroge les formes et les pratiques d’archive, en relation avec la mémoire des « archives perdues » de l’histoire cinématographique marocaine. Il parle des « Archives Bouanani » – une collection privée, fragmentée, encore largement non cataloguée qui se trouve dans l’appartement de la famille Bouanani à Rabat. Cette collection comprend une variété de textes, de visuels et d’objets qui sont l’héritage personnel du cinéaste, écrivain et artiste Ahmed Bouanani (1938-2011), de sa femme Naïma Saoudi (1947-2012) et de sa fille Batoul Bouanani (1969-2003), qui ont tous travaillé pour le cinéma marocain. Aujourd’hui, ce travail est repris par Touda Bouanani, une autre de ses filles, et un groupe de chercheurs, de curateurs et de cinéastes. Cet article présente différentes approches de cet héritage en faisant des allers-retours entre la

métaphore de l'archive perdue et le travail matériel et conceptuel réalisé avec les « Archives Bouanani ». Il se propose d'élargir ainsi la théorie critique de l'archive dans le contexte particulier de la mémoire cinématographique marocaine.

**Mots-clés** | Ahmed Bouanani – Morocco – archives cinématographiques – histoire du cinéma – mémoire – art – pratique archivistique.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“A memorialist of a cinema without memory” this is how Mohamed Jibril addressed Ahmed Bouanani (1938-2011) in an interview for the magazine *Vision* in 1991<sup>2</sup>. What could a cinema without memory be and how could it possibly be remembered? How can we imagine an archive for a cinema without memory and who might be its memorialists today? How might memory retrieve images and narratives for an archive of lost cinema and what kind of images and objects are able to unleash memories of lost cinematographic times?

In the vast terrain opened up by these questions, Ahmed Bouanani represents a point of reference where issues of heritage, memory, and cinema connect with the archive in conceptual, practical, and poetic ways. Besides being a memorialist of a cinema without memory, Ahmed Bouanani is also and better known as a filmmaker, writer, and artist. He was part of a generation who experienced transitions from colonial to postcolonial governance in Morocco, and from a post-independence spirit of new political and cultural beginnings to the establishment of new national restrictions and repressions. Being aware of the manipulation and loss of memory relating to these moments and transitions, Bouanani’s work significantly contributed to assembling documents and, as it were, turning the lost or vanishing archives of Moroccan cultural history into poetic and cinematographic narratives of memory and imagination.

In various respects, Ahmed Bouanani’s life and work connects to questions around the nature of the archive and its place between forgetting and remembering. In his lifetime he worked with different sorts of archive: institutional and non-institutional ones; ones devoted to popular culture and to the cinema. Moulay Driss Jaidi cites Bouanani in speaking about his grandmother Yamna as his first authority in the field, the person who had nourished his imaginary. She was his library and she transmitted traditions, myths, beliefs, superstitions. (Jaidi 2012, p. 21) The archive, for Bouanani, seems to have been all around him, in the legends, songs, gestures, and secrets remembered through telling and retelling. Writing about traditional storytelling in Morocco, he observed that its purpose was not merely to transmit a story as conceived by the elders, but mainly to enrich the story with new elements. The storyteller is also a poet (Bouanani 2014, p. 166). And cinema, for Ahmed Bouanani, was a kind of storytelling, a reviving of inherited images, legends, and traditions in new ways, moving between the archive of an oral and visual legacy and new poetic, artistic creation.

Achille Mbembe, applying abstract theory to the archive, sees its status and power in the “entanglement of building and document” in its materiality and resulting role as an “instituting imaginary” (Mbembe 2002, p. 19). For Michel

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1 - I would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback as well as Touda Bouanani for commenting on the text and providing visuals from the Bouanani archives.

2- “*Mémorialiste d’un cinéma sans mémoire*” (T. Bouanani 2020, p. 5). The Interview with Ahmed Bouanani by Mohamed Jibril was reprinted in *Nejma*, Numéro 9 (Ahmed Bouanani), Spring 2014, pp. 91-98.

Foucault, the “archive is first the law of what can be said, the system which governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (Foucault 1972, p. 145) and what determines distinct figures, relations, and regularities in the visibility of things and in “the formation and transformation of statements” (*ibid.*, p. 146). Both authors connect present history with previous material, architectural, technological, and discursive rules that have been forming the archive through acts of selection, exclusion, and destruction. The turn to archives and archiving within artistic and literary practice, on the other hand, tends to draw attention to what is excluded or erased by the archive, what cannot be said or perceived as a result of archival regimes, and what lives on or can be created in parallel spaces and gaps, through different connections and utopian ambitions (Foster 2004), through critical fabulation (Hartman 2008), potential histories (Azoulay 2019), or ephemeral archives (Muñoz 1996).

The Bouanani Archives allow both strands of thinking about the archive to merge: a critical consideration of the power of institutional archives to condition cultural identities, imaginaries, and discourse on the one hand, and a creative re-assembling or re-ordering of narratives, images, and things into future memories on the other. To begin with, this archive is a private collection of documents which relate to Morocco’s cinematographic culture from colonial times until the late 1980s. At the same time, these documents resist the institutional archival order and accessibility on which the power of an archive also relies. They are documents that were close to being forgotten and destroyed. As a medium, the Bouanani Archives also testify to the potential loss and the fragility of material traces, and can thus be rightly described as “memorializing a cinema without memory” and searching for the “lost archive” of Moroccan cinematographic history.

In this article I look at different ways to inherit and transmit the legacy of the Bouanani Archives, to revive, retell, or rethink the archive, the potential histories of its documents (see Azoulay 2019), and the transformation of documents into images or fictions of contemporary art and film<sup>3</sup>. I first situate the “memorialization of a cinema without memory” in the Moroccan context. Then I focus on the archival work of reconstituting Ahmed Bouanani’s book *La*

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3- In this article I basically follow a description and interpretation of the Bouanani Archives without going into detail about different theoretical approaches to archives and their uses in film studies and contemporary artistic practices. Among the vast literature on the relation between art and archives see, for example, Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse”, *October*, 110, Fall 2004, pp. 3-22; Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive. art from bureaucracy*, The MIT Press, 2008; or the edited volumes *The Archive*, edited by Charles Merewether, MIT Press, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art, 2008, or *Dissonant Archives. Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, edited by Anthony Downey, I.B. Tauris, 2015. On the uses of archives in film and film studies see, for example, “Attrait de l’archive”, numéro double de *CINÉMAS*, Vol. 24, n° 2-3, Spring 2014, edited by Christa Blümlinger, or “archiver/archiving”, *Intermédialités/Intermediality. History and Theory of the Arts, Literature, and Technologies*, Number 18, Fall 2011, guest-edited by Éric Méchoulan; “The Long Path to Audio-visual History” (Special Issue), *Research in Film and History*, Issue 1, 2018, <https://film-history.org/>; or *Archiveology. Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practice* by Catherine Russell, Duke University Press, 2018.

*Septième Porte. Une Histoire du Cinéma au Maroc de 1907 à 1986* (The Seventh Door: A History of Cinema in Morocco from 1907 to 1986), published in 2020, more than thirty years after the manuscript was finished. In a final section, I look at specific cinematographic, artistic, and curatorial works carried out with the Bouanani Archives, interpreting these contemporary creations as different modes to reflect, conceptualize, and visualize the archive and the doors it potentially opens to cultural and cinematographic memory. These different literary, cinematographic, and artistic practices work against the disappearance and forgetting of the archive: they not only render it visible and eventually become part of it, but they also modify the status of the archive by decentering its place and accessibility, by questioning its documentary evidence, through visualizing, fabulating, accounting, or retelling stories rather than merely writing history.

### **Beyond the “Lost Archive”**

The “search for the lost archives of Arab cinema” first draws attention to the loss, ignorance, and poor preservation of national cinematographic heritage in many Arab countries, Morocco being no exception. The central stage of Morocco’s film history is the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM), founded in 1944 under the French Protectorate. Its mission includes preserving the archive of the country’s film heritage, even if this is the last item on a list ranging from regulation and inspection to support and promotion for film production and distribution<sup>4</sup>. In 1995, the Cinémathèque Marocaine, attached to the CCM, opened in Rabat<sup>5</sup> with a remit to preserve the national heritage, to acquire films reflecting the world’s cinematographic heritage, to program screenings, to preserve visual and sound archives related to cinema, and to create a cinematographic library (Oudrhiri 2018). Ahmed Fertat, in a speech to the 57<sup>th</sup> congress of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP) in April 2001 in Rabat, praises the remarkable work performed by the institution, despite its meagre budget, in acquiring hundreds of film copies and titles for the library, in creating a documentary system, and in organizing events. But he also makes it very clear that the tasks of preserving and disseminating cinematographic culture cannot be accomplished without the appropriate resources. He appeals to the Moroccan state as well as to the FIAP to take responsibility for helping the Cinémathèque to achieve the legal status and autonomy it requires in order to pursue its mission and to envision the future (Fertat 2020, p. 231). The problem of precarious status and lack of resources does not seem to have changed. Substantial sections of the archives are still lost, poorly preserved, and of no major interest in the eyes of many CCM

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4- <https://www.ccm.ma/en/missions.php>

5- There were precursor initiatives, including a Cinémathèque Marocaine set up by French military officers and diplomatic representatives in Morocco in 1953, which had a considerable collection, but which turned out to be nothing more than military archives. In the 1960s, the Fédération Nationale des Ciné-clubs au Maroc in particular (with over 60 active groups in the country) and some private individuals made efforts to preserve film heritage (Ahmed Fertat, *À propos du cinéma*, 2020: p. 226).

departments (see Oudrhiri 2018). Since 2016, work has focused mainly on the digitization and restoration of the CCM archives, which date from 1945 onwards. In collaboration with an Italian laboratory, 19,500 minutes of documentary films, feature films and newsreels had been digitized by 2018 (*ibid.*). Up until this point, however, there was no published inventory of archive holdings, not to speak of research into what lay in private hands or with companies that had closed down or sold off their stock. (*ibid.*)

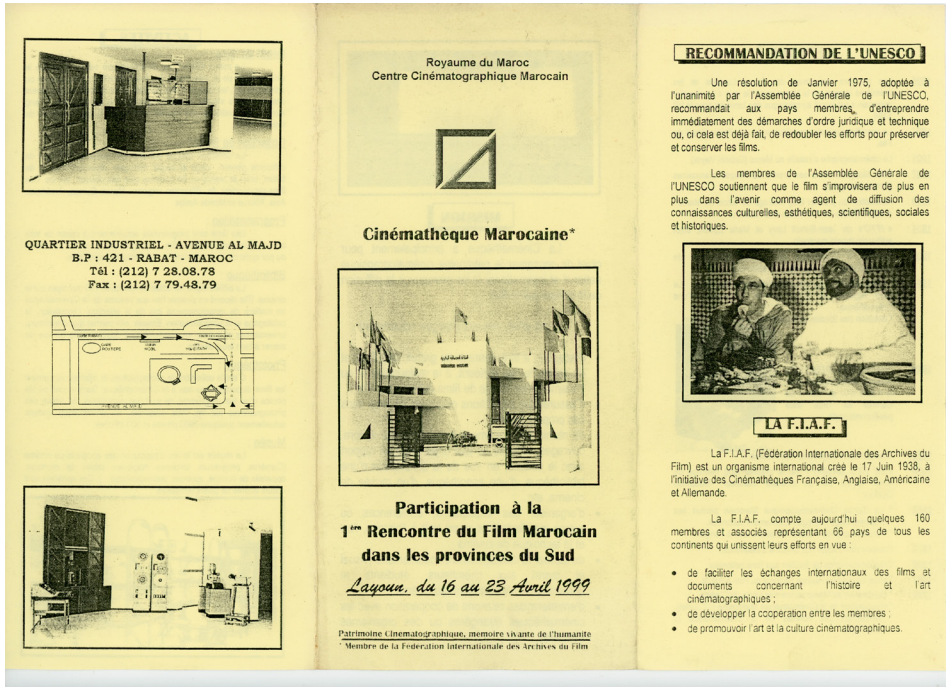


Figure 1, Flyer of the Cinémathèque Marocaine 1999, ©Bouanani Archives

In structural terms, the CCM illustrates how disinterest and neglect of a cultural heritage can be constitutive elements in a lost archive. More a torso than a body, more a ruin than a place, such an archive exists as a fragment and in symbolic form. Of course, no archive is ever more than an accumulation of remnants and fragments, but the extent to which a state institution like the CCM struggles with its role as a cinema archive points to a lack of responsibility for a significant aspect of cultural memory. The cultural memories captured by a cinematographic archive go beyond the idea of an inherited culture. They incite individual and collective efforts to shape, tell, and otherwise transmit memories, to create visual documents, sensory testimonies, cinematographic narratives, fictions, and imaginaries. A cinematographic archive is a place where ideas and technologies of modernity, colonialism, and bio-power in a Foucauldian sense interrelate and create images of social, racial, and gendered categories. Access to the archives,

to their collections of historical records, is therefore all the more important as it allows an understanding of historical contexts, as well as encouraging reflexive and transformative work around collective memory, enabling it to become a living, poetic, and cinematographic memory.

Cinematographic memory and film history, on the other hand, are not confined to state archives, however deficient these may be. The CCM archives contain much of the cinematographic heritage, especially film copies, to the extent that they have not been destroyed or lost, and the hope remains that better care will be taken of these in the near future. But the material collected by private initiatives is no less significant. The problems faced by these collections are in some respects similar, in that they are hardly known, difficult to access and usually too underresourced to turn their private holdings into public archives. Nevertheless, they often harbor material that has been excluded or erased from official records. They are frequently motivated at the outset by a sense that the present is already a history that might be lost, censored, or ignored, coupled with a sense of resistance to the predictable erasure of these histories by keeping records of them, witnessing their significance from a personal point of view, and passing them on to future generations. Ahmed Bouanani can rightly be called a memorialist of a cinema without memory because, through his films, writings, and collectings, he resisted the likelihood that his own time and its cinematographic imaginary worlds might fade into oblivion.

### **The Bouanani Archives**

The holdings in the family apartment in Rabat constitute a private archive of this kind. They are in the process of becoming public and they are contributing in their own way to transforming the material and conceptual potential for cultural archives. Their genesis as an archive took shape at moments of disappearance. In 2006, the apartment caught fire and many objects, books, papers, and documents were destroyed or damaged. Ahmed Bouanani had not entered the apartment since the fatal accident of his younger daughter Batoul in 2003. After the fire it was his wife, Naïma Saoudi, who dried, sorted, and rearranged all the damaged objects with the help of friends and assistants. Ahmed Bouanani died in 2011, after leading a secluded life in the mountains of Aït Oumghar for several years, certain that most of his writings and collections, including the manuscript of his history of Moroccan cinema, *La Septième Porte*, had disappeared forever (T. Bouanani 2020, p. 5).



Figure 2: The Bouanani apartment after the fire in 2006, ©Touda Bouanani

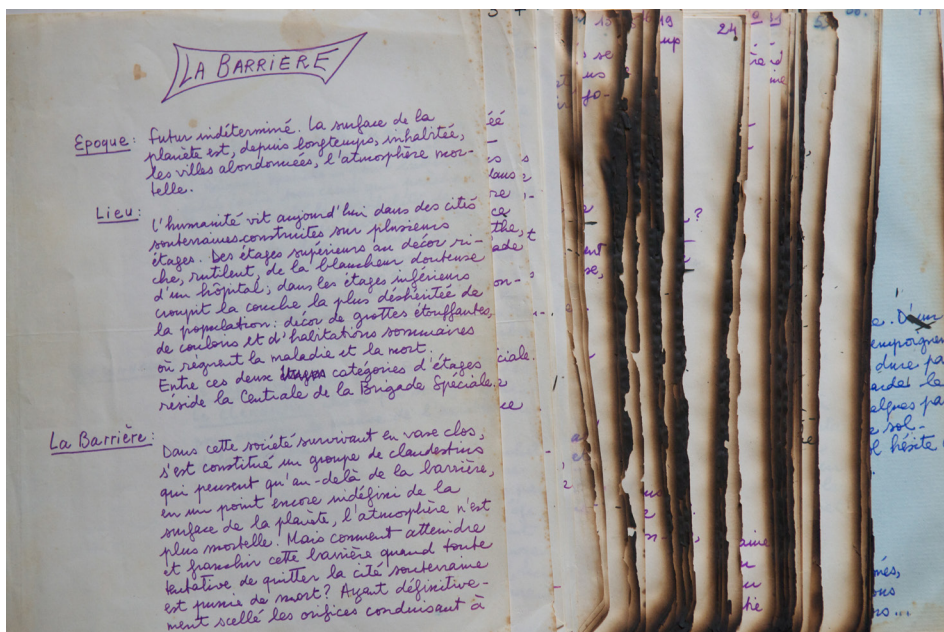


Figure 3: Damaged storyboard script "La barrière", ©Touda Bouanani



After the death of Ahmed Bouanani in 2011, his daughter Touda began the archival task of sorting manuscripts, writings, photos, and other items, putting fragments together and reconstructing missing material. This work on Ahmed Bouanani's heritage became a collective endeavor, involving friends, filmmakers, researchers, curators, and artists. It has resulted in the publication of Bouanani's manuscript of *La Septième Porte. Une histoire du cinéma au Maroc de 1907 à 1986* (2020), in poetic documentaries, in art works and exhibitions, in the creation of an association (Les Archives Bouanani), and in research and digitization projects<sup>6</sup>. These activities can be understood not only as opening different doors on memory, but also as lending different formats to transforming the "lost archives" of Moroccan cinema, creating perceptible, accessible, and tangible material that allows for reconstitutions, re-creations, and re-imaginings of what has been lost. The Bouanani Archives do not hold copies and rarely store footage, but they provide keys to the history of cinema in Morocco through scripts, notes, photographs, correspondence, costumes, sets, etc. They thus invite further historical research and the discovery and circulation of films, but they also encourage creative work to imagine what might have been lost and what might eventually be re-found, turning the "lost archive" into an archive of search. The work on the book *La Septième Porte* has been central to combining the history and memory of cinema in Morocco in a manner related directly to the Bouanani Archives.

### **An Archive of Cinema History and a Book of Memory**

In the book *La Septième Porte* Ahmed Bouanani tells a history of lost film archives, interweaving it with multiple histories of cinematographic creations as doors that offer a broader perspective on cultural memory. A number of drafts were written between 1966 and 1987, during the period when Bouanani worked for the CCM while making and contributing to a number of films.

Born in Casablanca in 1938, Bouanani studied cinema and film editing at the IDHEC in Paris (1961-63) before returning to Morocco in the mid-1960s. He made a number of short films, including *Tarfaya ou La Marche d'un poète* (1966); *6 et 12* (1968); *Mémoire 14* (1971); *Petite histoire en marge du cinématographe* (1973); *Les Quatres Sources* (1977); the feature film *Le Mirage* (1980). He also played a significant role, as a member of the collective Sigma 3, in making the experimental feature film *Wechma (Traces)* (1970). After his return to Morocco, Ahmed Bouanani soon found a job with the CCM, but his output was constrained by bureaucratic hurdles, a lack of resources, and censorship. During the early years of his employment, Bouanani was banned from directing films and relegated to the CCM archive.

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6- The ongoing digitization of the archive and related research activities, presentations, and workshops can be followed at: <http://cerclearchives.org>; texts around the Bouanani Archives are published at: <https://archivesbouanani.wordpress.com/>.

Here, he made his film *Mémoire 14* (1971), a montage of newsreels and other archive footage, including images of the Protectorate, in particular of the resistance and war in the Rif (1921-1926). This film was heavily censored before it could be distributed, so that its original length of 108 minutes was cut to 25 minutes, above all by removing archive footage of the Rif War and other uprisings (Bouanani 2020: p. 105). The outtakes had to be burned (Della Subin) and so there is no trace of the original version. The film, based on a poem, sought to recover the memory of the time when Morocco was a French Protectorate, a memory that had been forcibly repressed or smothered by amnesia. The film was not meant to be a historical reconstruction of events, but a cinematographic translation of the poem “Mémoire 14” written by Bouanani in 1969. In *La Septième Porte*, Bouanani describes this process of cinematographic translation as follows:

“It took months of viewing French newsreels, propaganda documentaries, and silent film colored in the manner of the time about the cities of Rabat, Meknès, Salé, Fez, and Kenitra; it was also necessary to enlarge photographs so as to recreate the right framing, to shoot close-ups of old pensioners who had taken part in the war of the Rif, of old women with distinctive and striking faces, of alleyways in Chaouen resembling stage sets, etc. The main idea was expressed in the poem” (Bouanani 2020: p. 106<sup>7</sup>):

No more

song,

no more

history,

no more apathy.

The ancestors on the luggage racks,

the ancestors light-years away from my words.

(...)

Now,

Now the 14 generation

learning curses<sup>8</sup>.

(extract from Ahmed Bouanani’s poem “Memory 14”, translated by Emma Ramadan, in: *The Shutters* 2018, p. 28-29)

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7- « Il fallut pour cela visionner, pendant des mois, des actualités françaises, des documentaires de propagande, des bandes muettes et colorées selon un procédé de l’époque sur les villes de Rabat, Meknès, Salé, Fès et Kénitra; il fallut aussi agrandir des photographies afin de recréer des cadrages adéquats, filmer en gros plans de vieux retraités qui avaient participé à la guerre du Rif, des vieilles femmes au visage marqué et bouleversant, des ruelles de Chaouen ressemblant à des décors de théâtre, etc. L’idée maîtresse était exprimée dans le poème » (Bouanani 2020: p. 106). All translations from French originals are my own unless otherwise indicated.

8- « Plus / de chanson, / Plus / d’histoire, / plus / la tête à rien. / Les ancêtres sur des portes bagages, / les ancêtres à des années-lumière de mes paroles. / (...) / Voici / Voici la génération 14 / À l’apprentissage des malédictions » (extrait de poème *Mémoire 14*, Bouanani 2020 : p. 106)

These citations give us some idea about the film, *Mémoire 14*, about its imagery and how it translates not only the poem but also the silent memories of faces, hands, streets, and walls as well as the fading memories of colonization and resistance, captured by the cameras of French newsreel and documentary productions under the Protectorate in Morocco. It also offers an insight into the narrative structure of *La Septième Porte*. By describing plots and aesthetics but also conditions of production, distribution, and reception, political shifts, and conceptions of culture in colonial and postcolonial, national and transnational terms, the book interweaves translations of political culture into cinematographic imaginaries with translations of cinematographic creation into political culture and cultural memory. Commenting on the relationship between images, history, and memory in his film, Bouanani writes:

“History as seen by *Memory 14* is subdivided into the year of the grasshopper, the year of the sword and the cannon, the year of the good season...; the men and women who remember do not have a precise vision of History, and certain metaphors in cinematographic language are only translations of spoken language. ...The end of the film, which may seem ambiguous, cannot be clearly understood if we forget that it is through popular memories, individual wounds, dreams or nightmares, that ‘the good old days’ are exposed. *Memory 14* is a painting, in several sections, about the disarray of the popular memory which tries in vain to remember a painful and violent break, and which finds before it at the end of the course only the silence of oblivion and anguish...” (A. Bouanani 2020, p. 107)<sup>9</sup>.

History is seen rather than told. Instead of being spun into a thread that weaves together events and heroes, it becomes a visual narrative that connects images, metaphors, allegories so that they can translate into memory, transferring the forgotten and repressed into the realm of figurative and imaginary language. This interest in memory, popular narratives, and archival imagery permeates Bouanani’s work: his films, writings, drawings, and collections. *La Septième Porte* was certainly inspired by his employment at the CCM, and in particular in its archive. Moreover, Bouanani must have been well aware of the mechanisms for forgetting and effacing memory established through this institution. Bouanani’s urge, since the late 1960s, to write a history of Moroccan cinema perhaps derived from an anticipation that this history was already getting lost as history, combined with a sense of responsibility for preserving it in another form, narration, and place.

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9- « L’Histoire vue par *Mémoire 14* se subdivise en année des sauterelles, année du sabre et du canon, année de la bonne saison... ; les hommes et les femmes qui se souviennent n’ont pas une vision précise de l’Histoire, et certaines métaphores du langage cinématographique ne sont que des traductions du langage parlé. ...La fin du film, qui peut paraître ambiguë, ne peut être clairement appréhendée si l’on oublie que c’est à travers des mémoires populaires, des souvenirs, des blessures individuelles, des rêves ou des cauchemars, que « le bon vieux temps » est exposé. *Mémoire 14* est un tableau, en plusieurs volets, sur les désarrois de la mémoire populaire qui cherche vainement à se souvenir d’une brisure douloureuse et violente, et qui ne trouve devant elle en fin de parcours que le silence de l’oubli et de l’angoisse... » (A. Bouanani 2020, p. 107).

## Opening the Seventh Door

*La Septième Porte* references a film by André Zwobada, made in Morocco in 1946/47. This film is based on a popular Moroccan legend in which a rich old man offers all his possessions to a beggar on the street. He takes him to his palace, which he bequeaths to him, and allows him access to all the doors except the seventh, which he advises him not to open, nevertheless pressing him to take the keys. The beggar, Ali, does not resist for long and opens the seventh door, behind which he discovers a mysterious, enchanting world. A little girl with a white horse welcomes him and together they go on a journey. Leila, the girl, turns into a beautiful young woman, and the two fall in love. While time seems to stand still for Ali, years go by. Leila grows old and leaves him. Alone, Ali returns to the starting point of the journey and finds himself back in the palace. A glance in the mirror shows him his aged face, which is the face of the rich old man who left him the palace and the keys to the forbidden seventh door. At the end, the opening scene is repeated, the old man inviting a beggar to take his property, but this time the beggar refuses to go with him (see description by A. Bouanani 2020, p. 40).

The reasons why Ahmed Bouanani refers to this early film made during the Protectorate are manifold. It is a film that his generation has seen many times, a film made by “the hands of a master”, “without pretensions”, and with a “deep sincerity”, “a film halfway between everyday realism, in this case the framework of popular Moroccan life, and the supernatural, the fantastic” (A. Bouanani 2020, p. 40)<sup>10</sup>. The forbidden yet tempting seventh door opening onto a mysterious world where time runs differently, spanning a lifetime and more during which only a brief moment passes, is apparently a metaphor for the seventh art, and thus for cinema. It can equally be a metaphor for memory with its cyclic repetition and retelling.

Zwobada made this film in two versions, one in French featuring Georges Marchal, Maria Casarès and Jean Servais, and one in classical Arabic, featuring Mohamed Gabsi et Keltoum (A. Bouanani 2020, p. 40). Bouanani dwells for a moment on the phenomenon of making the same film in two different versions, in different languages, with different actors, and thus for different audiences. Bouanani saw the problem of language, in particular, as central within the history of cinema in Morocco. In Zwobada’s films he found it not easily resolved, complicated by the effects of choosing classical or dialectal Arabic in cinemas where people did not yet see Moroccan films but Egyptian, French, American or Indian productions and were therefore accustomed to hearing French, Egyptian, English, or Hindu.

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10- « Ce sont deux films (*La Septième Porte*, 1947, et *Noces de sable*, 1948)... (qui) ont été conçus et réalisés de mains de maître. Sans prétentions. Avec une profonde sincérité »... (*La Septième Porte* est) « à mi-chemin entre le réalisme quotidien, en l’occurrence le cadre de la vie populaire marocaine, et le surnaturel, le fantastique. » (A. Bouanani 2020, p. 40).



Figure 4: Photo from *La Septième Porte* (the book by Ahmed Bouanani, pp. 46-47 and the film by André Swoboda showing stills from the French and Arab version)

Relations between the film and the book *La Septième Porte* can be seen on different levels. Both are based on popular narratives translated in different ways into a cinematographic language. Both are concerned with coded images, scenes, and languages able to evoke memories of Moroccan culture, using the metaphor of the mysterious door as the threshold behind which lies another world: another time, other promises, other possibilities. Furthermore, both the film and the book acknowledge the entanglements of French and Moroccan imageries in the early history of cinema in Morocco, one by experimenting with two versions of a film, doubling and separating the cinematographic space; the other by tracing this history back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the beginnings of colonialism in Morocco, thus creating a cinematographic contact zone where different visual worlds and cultural technologies interrelate.

A major difference lies in the use of temporality in the cinematographic and written narration. The film tells a popular legend, and its narration follows a cyclical time organized around places, or more exactly around doors: the gate to the old city of Fez, the entrance to the palace, the forbidden seventh door. The narrative structure of the book *La Septième Porte* resembles more a documentary montage, following a chronological order, but cutting the linear narrative thread by inserting different temporal units. Each chapter begins with key dates for each year, major moments in politics, culture, and the cinema. The

chapters fill these dates by recounting film plots, production conditions and impressions of the general cultural and political situation. Text blogs are inserted between chapters, the first about the importance of film credits for researching the history of actors and the roles they played in films of the colonial and early independence period. The second tells the story of Mohamed Osfour, the first Moroccan who, in 1941, at the age of fourteen, got himself a camera and, with his friends as actors and crew, made his own Tarzan and Robin Hood movies in the forests around Casablanca. Another blog looks at the history of newsreels and the last turns back to the actors and technicians, this time in films from the 1960-80s. The book ends with an appendix of more than a hundred pages, including a chronology of films made in Morocco, a dictionary of Moroccan filmmakers, indexes of cited films, names, and illustrations, and historical documents.



Figure 5: Image of the credits of *Petite histoire en marge du cinématographe* (A short history on the fringe of the cinematograph), drawn by Ahmed Bouanani. The film is a short documentary about Mohamed Osfour, made by Ahmed Bouanani for the weekly newsreel program “Vu pour vous” (Seen for you) in 1973, ©Archives Bouanani.

## Heritage of a Scattered Archive

Touda Bouanani, who worked for years on collecting, rearranging, and editing the book manuscript and its iconography, as well as Ali Essafi who, in 2017, finished his film *En quête de la Septième Porte* (In Search of the Seventh Door) based on documentary material from the archives and interviews with Ahmed Bouanani, both underline that the book was always a participatory venture to which the family, filmmakers and researchers contributed by reading chapters or collecting photographs and other documents (Sefrioui 2020). The same can be said for the Bouanani Archives, which are constituted, conceptualized, and transformed by a variety of approaches and uses. Unlike most institutional archives, where the options and limitations for users are determined by architecture, cataloguing systems, safety rules, and legal regimes, the Bouanani Archives develop in a decentralized and collective manner through different methods of access and working. The archives begin as a memory in fragments, shattered and scattered pieces, and documents which can be differently arranged and assembled into stories, histories, or images.

In his preface to *La Septième Porte*, Ahmed Bouanani describes the book as “(a) small door opened on a distant and recent past which risked not being forgotten completely, but undergoing the tragic destiny of a manuscript of numerous faded, illegible, if not completely white, sheets.” (Bouanani 2020: 14)<sup>11</sup> In an almost literary sense, the manuscript itself evoked a distant and recent past not to be forgotten, but at risk of disappearing, for it took the form of numerous illegible sheets and washed-out pages. Touda Bouanani worked for years, with the help of other people – especially Léa Morin, Marie Pierre-Bouthier, Omar Berrada, Yasmina Naji and her team at Kulte Gallery and Editions, and Ali Essafi – to locate, sort, transcribe, and compare several versions of the manuscript, editing and supplementing the book with photos so that it could be published in 2020, 36 years after it was completed by its author.

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11- “Une petite porte ouverte sur un passé lointain et récent qui risque fort, non d’être oublié complètement, mais de subir le destin tragique du manuscrit aux nombreuses feuilles délavées, illisibles, quand elles ne sont pas tout à fait blanches” (Bouanani 2020: 14)

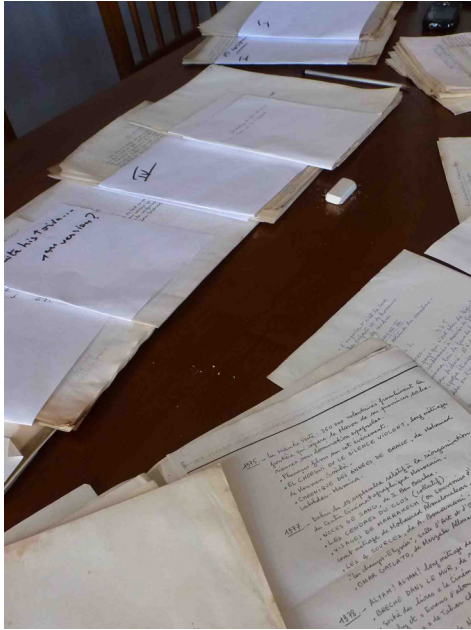


Figure 6: Sorting and arranging the manuscripts of *La Septième Porte*. ©Ali Essafi

The book *La Septième Porte* is a history of cinema told not by a historian but by a filmmaker, poet and writer, a collector and memorialist of visual and oral histories of Morocco. In a double and repeated way, the book is both based on the Bouanani Archives and has helped to constitute them. The first time was when Ahmed Bouanani collected materials that would allow him to write his book, anticipating that otherwise the memory of the early years of Moroccan cinema might fade away. The second time, it was Naïma Saoudi, Touda Bouanani and the group of people around her who saved the damaged materials and collections after fire had devastated parts of the apartment. The manuscript of *La Septième Porte* in its multiple and scattered versions guided the effort to reassemble and order scripts, images, objects, and notes which finally led to the reconstitution of the archive as well as to the belated publication of the book. As far as work with the archive – documents or missing pieces – is legible in the book, the narration opens with memories transmitted by films and legends; memories of the Protectorate and resistance against it, of Morocco's independence and the search in its aftermath for new artistic and cinematographic language, of stagnation and continuation. The book provides dates and documents as historical evidence, but the essential tone follows that of a storyteller who captivates the imagination of the audience with vivid and visual narration. We are drawn into film history and film plots, we learn about actors and technicians, institutions and events – all of that in the absence of films and with very little visual material. Most of the films mentioned are not easily accessible, if they are accessible at all. There is no memory without forgetting; no archive without ghosts.



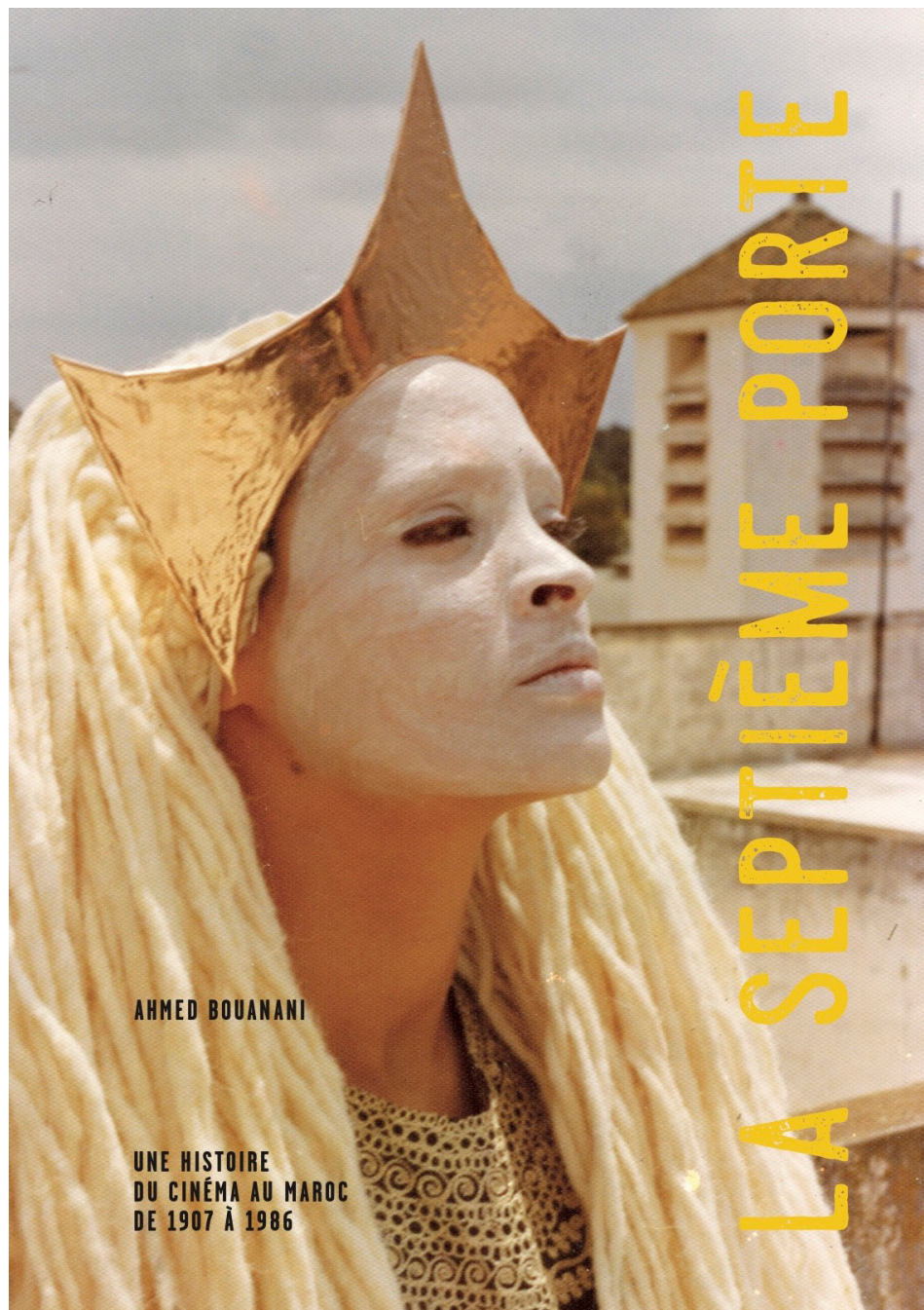


Figure 7: Cover of *La Septième Porte* showing Naïma Saoudi with a costume design for the film *Les Quatres Sources* made in 1977 by Ahmed Bouanani, ©Bouanani Archives

Other ways to remember the Bouanani Archives can be seen in works based on their materials which reached out from the original place and medium towards different interlocutors and new, more associative assemblages. An early public interaction between the archive and artistic practice goes back to Touda Bouanani's exhibition "Il était une fois" (Once upon a time) at the Fatma Jellal Gallery in Casablanca in 2014, curated by Léa Morin. It presented works by Touda Bouanani (videos, installations, and drawings), works by invited artists, and a selection of manuscripts, drawings, sets, and other objects from the holdings<sup>12</sup>. The exhibition sparked a reflection about the objects, about what each object – removed from its place and context in the archive and displayed in a gallery space – could tell about film history and contemporary culture, personal and collective remembrance, heritage and transmission, past and future memories.

Also in 2014, Touda Bouanani finished the video *Fragments de mémoires*, a video in which personal memories of her parents intersect with a heritage of cultural memory left behind in fragments. The video is another door that opens onto the archive. The spectator is drawn into it through various sensations, as if able to feel and touch the objects: music plays on an old gramophone, photographs of her family and of film shoots are picked up, we see sketches, posters, drawings, notebooks and handwritten manuscripts found in the apartment, atmospheric images of the damage caused by the fire and of the restoration that followed, the sheer quantity of manuscripts, of pages and documents sorted and stowed in boxes. We hear Touda Bouanani's voice-off, telling the story of the archive, of its devastation and repair. The memory of her father is also conveyed through an RTM television interview extract from 1991<sup>13</sup>, in which Ahmed Bouanani speaks of *La Septième Porte*, then still unpublished. Touda Bouanani takes up the trail of the different versions and iconography; she reads the table of contents while turning page by page of the loose manuscript.

This memorialist perspective on the archive, the constellation of places, objects, labor, and time, was also addressed in an exhibition which Touda Bouanani presented in 2016 at Kulte Galerie in Rabat. Titled "RE-monter le temps", the exhibition featured a series of photographs showing Touda Bouanani in a number of settings charged with history: Volubilis, Rome, Rabat, and Casablanca. The scene of each photograph is centered around her bodily presence. At the same time, she seems to be detached from her surroundings, her bright blue dress and ephemeral, almost flying presence contrasting with the stone architecture around her. In the exhibition space, these photos were accompanied by sheets of manuscript and historical photographs; reproduced and recolored drawings

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12- See program and description of the exhibition at L'Atelier de l'Observatoire <https://www.atelierobservatoire.com/etait-une-fois> (accessed 3 April 2020).

13- Interview with Ahmed Bouanani by Ali Hassan, RTM 1991, on Arab Media Lab, <http://www.arabmedi-alab.org>, and Les Archives Bouanani, <https://archivesbouanani.wordpress.com/2020/06/10/entretiens-avec-ahmed-bouanani/?fbclid=IwAR2umEPMhKg4hUbq-T3g5TQyeP2nh6Lmr8cHnJ2eQrh3NcxrHEirLtwOYaw> (accessed 3 April 2021).

and recreated postcards; open pages and piles of books.<sup>14</sup> The spectator might have sensed an ambivalence about this inherited legacy – places distant yet close, objects weighty yet light, the notion of time facing both the past and the future, preservation and retelling, endeavor and detachment. The exhibition might not have addressed these ambiguities directly and certainly not solved any of them, but it opened up another space, a space other than the archive, in which to experiment with the different connections between archival objects and subjective memories.



Figure 8: Ruins Rabat Touda Bouanani, presented in the exhibition “RE-monter le temps” at Kulte Gallery, Rabat, 2016, ©Touda Bouanani, courtesy of the artist

14- See images and a description on the website of Kulte Galerie, <http://artkulte.com/exhibition/re-monter-le-temps/> (accessed 3 April 2021).

## The Archive and the Storyteller

Another key to Morocco's cultural legacy and cinematographic history was chosen by Ali Essafi in his use of film archives. His short film *Wanted* (2011) is a cinematographic essay about the 1970s, the "years of lead" in Morocco, a time with nearly no visual memory. The film flits back and forth between a witness account and film archives. The narrative, most often in voice-over, consists of personal memories of Abdelaziz Tribaq, a leftist activist in the 1970s who, after a year in hiding, was arrested, tortured and imprisoned. The archival images comprise film scenes, newsreels, newspaper headlines, and some rare personal photographs of the time. The montage of cinematographic images, such as extracts from Ahmed Bouanani's film *6 and 12* (1968) or Mostapha Derkaoui's *De quelques évènements sans signification* (1974), visually evoke memories of the 1960s and 1970s rather than illustrating the first-hand account of political activism and repression (Pierre-Bouthier 2020, p. 11). Marie Pierre-Bouthier draws a parallel between Ali Essafi's film and Ahmed Bouanani's *Mémoire 14*, as both films use montage to combine archival footage and narration in order to reconstitute the "missing image", or the missing visual memory, reinforced by the oral memory of storytelling (Pierre-Bouthier 2017, p. 5; 2020).

Essafi's last film *Avant le déclin du jour* (*Before the Dying of the Light*, 2020) applies the same principle of montage, extending it to juxtapose archival images of the 1960-80s relating to political activism and repression on the one hand and to artistic creation in cinema, visual art, theater, and music on the other. The film is an assemblage of extracts from nearly twenty films<sup>15</sup>, music, concerts, record and magazine covers, photographs, newspaper headlines, the graphic novel *On affame bien les rats* by Abdelaziz Mouride (who created the comic during his ten years of imprisonment in the 1970-80s, although it was not published until 2000), and recent interviews with young men on the street who deny any interest in politics. The two main threads interweave the narrative of Abdelaziz Tribaq about his activism, life in hiding, and arrest in the mid-1970s with the narrative of Mostapha Derkaoui's film *De quelques évènements sans signification* (1974, a film thought "lost", only recently recovered and restored), which itself combines questions about the role of cinema and political activism. The montage of archival footage and a range of images creates a fragmentary yet dense audio-visual picture of both cultural creation and political repression at that time. The two dynamics run parallel in Essafi's film, intersecting at points, and in this way he creates a new kind of memory.

In these as in other works, Ali Essafi frames his own narrative with a cinematographic version of the halqa, the circle of spectators around the public storyteller and performer. This plays out most clearly in *Halaqat nord-africain*

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15- Including films by Ahmed Bouanani, Mostapha and Abdelkrim Derkaoui, Mohamed Reggab, Souhal Ben Barka, Moumen Smihi, Ahmed El Maanouni, Mohamed Afifi, Mohamed Abouelouakar, Majid Rechiche, Mohamed A. Tazi, Mohamed Abbazi.

(shown at the Dakar Biennale in 2014), an installation around archival footage from three documentary films which are in themselves archival: *Mémoire 14* (1971) by Ahmed Bouanani (Morocco), *Mohammadia* (1974 by Ahmed Bennys (Tunisia), *Combien je vous aime* (1985) by Azzeddine Meddour (Algeria). Common to all these films was not only the use of archived footage, but also the recourse to traditional halqa storytelling as a narrative to frame the images. In a similar manner, Ali Essafi's installation, later adopted in film and other exhibition formats, assembled spectators around three loop projections of film extracts on circular panels on the ground, inviting participatory viewing and reflection.

For Ali Essafi, the late recovery of Morocco's cinematographic heritage was deeply influenced by his encounter with Ahmed Bouanani's work. In 2017 he finished his film *En quête de la septième porte*. It equally begins by "opening the circle" referencing both the halqa and Ahmed Bouanani's evocation of the storyteller at the beginning of *Mémoire 14*: "Widen the circle – may God widen your graves – blessed be the poet and the storyteller, may our song be worthy of those who listen to us"<sup>16</sup>. The story Ali Essafi is telling is about Bouanani's restitution of the country's cinematographic memory and how this opened a door for Ali Essafi to rediscover his own cultural heritage. The film includes interviews with Ahmed Bouanani shot shortly before his death, interspersed with archival material and cinema extracts.

## Addressing the Archive in Artistic Creation

Films and videos by Ali Essafi and Touda Bouanani, together with films by Ahmed Bouanani, were presented at the exhibition "Jeux de mémoire" (Memory Games), which explored Bouanani's legacy during the sixth (and last) Marrakech Biennale in 2016. Along with these films and an installation of Bouanani's personal library, curator Omar Berrada had invited three contemporary artists, Yto Barrada, Sara Ouhaddou, and Mohssin Harraki, to create works in dialogue with the Bouanani Archives. The Bahia Palace in the medina at Marrakech became a site for opening doors onto Bouanani's legacy, different strata of memory, and artistic reflection about heritage and creation.

Inspired by the 16<sup>th</sup> century oral poet and Sufi mystic Abderrahmane El Majdoub, whose poems Ahmed Bouanani had translated into French, Yto Barrada created banners with different fabrics from middle-class Moroccan living rooms which she had collected over years, interweaving her reading of the poems with reflections on memory, collection, translation, and cultural syncretism. Barrada "transformed these textiles by embroidering over them and splicing multiple weavings into collages of individual and collective stories. In her hands, the domestic (and traditionally feminine) work of sewing became a subversive act" (Nicolin 2016). With their association of pirate flags, travel impressions and

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16- « Élargissez le cercle – que Dieu élargisse vos tombes – que bénis soient le poète et le conteur, que notre chant soit digne de ceux qui nous écoutent ».

contemporary domestic spaces, the colorful banners hung in the upper part of the room, communicating with other exhibits.

Sara Ouhaddou uses popular tales, which Ahmed Bouanani had collected in the 1960s, as a way to communicate around the work of jewelers with whom she had collaborated in a project lasting several weeks. As these tales were widely known across social and regional divides, they became a key to cultural memory inscribed in artisanal knowledge – in materials, languages, and gestures. For “Memory Games” she created jewelry based on popular tales, developing a series of heads masked by birdlike butterflies, translating the masks into a new ornamental system. She also wove a carpet from pieces of jewelry each containing a word or sign inspired by Amazigh language and craft, which together retell a popular tale known throughout different regions in Morocco. The works by Sara Ouhaddou connect artisanal tradition to a new semiotic system that she derives from popular narratives as a thread to interweave different formal languages into an art work. The popular tale, therefore, enables tradition and transformation, transmission and creation<sup>17</sup>.



Figure 9: Sara Ouhaddou, *Igdad – Oiseaux – Birds*, 2016, traditional Zemmour weaving, wool and cotton. Ceramic coins sown with white silk thread. Presented at the exhibition “Memory Games: Ahmed Bouanani Today”, 6<sup>th</sup> Marrakech Biennale 2016. Photograph by Hicham Bouzid. Courtesy of the artist.

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17- This reading and interpretation is based on an interview with Sara Ouhaddou conducted by Elsa Gaily, Marrakech, February 2016.

Around the opening to a patio in the Bahia Palace, Mohssin Harraki's installation of a wide branching tree-like structure made of black electric cable, "a plant form similar to a forest" (Harraki 2016), took up space on the floor and along the walls and corners. Light bulbs at the end of the branches light up and dim down, as in a staggered rhythm of breathing. On each of the 87 lamps Harraki wrote a word in Arabic, each referring to a title, work, or theme by Ahmed Bouanani. Titled "Tagant", a word which, in Amazigh, signifies forest but also an isolated site devoid of any presence, the installation plays on the double meaning of the archive: the simultaneity of forgetting and remembering, of absence and presence. Tagant as a forest "will 'absorb' the word over time so that it will remain a forest even when it only contains one tree", while it is also "the isolated, empty and deserted place that would in time become a forest" (Harraki 2016). The Bouanani Archives, like Harraki's "tagant", can be seen as forest and a single tree at the same time; as they light up they present an abundance of memories, and as they dim down the forgetting comes close. With each new breath, the potential for memory returns.

Figure 10: Mohssin Harraki *Tagant*, 2016, installation view, detail. Presented in the exhibition "Memory Games: Ahmed Bouanani Today", 6<sup>th</sup> Marrakech Biennale, 2016. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist.



## The Future of the Archive

The singular tree that might be left of a forest, having ‘absorbed’ it or carrying on its memory to potentially become a whole forest again, can translate into the archive which opens to memories – to factual and potential histories that have been absorbed into it. The literary, cinematographic, and artistic works carried out with the Bouanani Archives revive memories, each one individually and as a loose and dynamic assemblage. They take different doors to a legacy that might have been interrupted, forgotten or absent, but is still present in the form of traces – in films, images, texts, words, or objects – which bear memories or seeds to remember the country’s heterogenous cultural traditions, imaginaries, and transformations.

The Bouanani Archives, like cinema itself, open onto different times and poetic worlds, onto subjective and imaginary realities beyond the history kept by institutional archives. As a key to these subjective and imaginary worlds, an archive resists loss and forgetting just as it resists the fixation of history and cultural identity that occurs in institutional archives, in particular when these images and cultural imaginaries have served as tools of colonial and post-independence government. Nevertheless, if this key to memory is not to become a dead metaphor, we need a retelling and reworking of the archive, a transmission of its history, and a continuous use and questioning of its documents. The archive needs to be accessible if it is not merely to be the sealed container of history, constructed and controlled by regimes in power. As Derrida points out, “(e)ffective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.” (1995, footnote 1, p.11). “Archive fever” expands the borders of institutional archives and questions the dominance of archives founded by the sovereign state. It relates to the creation of new archival practices, other sorts of archives, and different archival procedures through new media, digital images, and multiple collaborations (Azoulay 2015, p. 197). Abigail De Kosnik speaks of “rogue archives” to analyze the increasing importance of digital archiving and “the potential of digital technologies to democratize cultural memory” (De Kosnik 2016, p. 2) as a challenge to the power of state archives.

The Bouanani Archives are currently being digitized so that they can open more broadly as a space for research and creation<sup>18</sup>. The digitization will not replace work with the material archive but rather complement the physical preservation and ordering with additional technological resources and conceptualizations, offering open access to the materials and a range of potential uses. The digital archive can widen the circle and trigger new forms of storytelling. It can extend the possible connections and interactions between archival, artistic, and research practices and lead to new collaborations.

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18- To be followed at: <http://cerclearchives.org>, project in process, currently funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.



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**ملخص** | يطرح هذا المقال تساؤلات حول أشكال الاشتغال على الأرشيف ومزاولته في علاقة بذاكرة "الأرشيف المفقود" لتاريخ السينما المغربية. فهو يتطرق لـ"أرشيف البوعناني"، مجموعة خاصة مازالت غير مُفهرسة في معظمها وموجودة في شقة عائلة البوعناني في الرباط. تضم هذه المجموعة المتنوعة والغنية نصوصا ومرئيات وأشياء أخرى التي هي التراث الشخصي للمخرج والكاتب والفنان أحمد الب وعناني (١٩٣٨-٢٠١١) وزوجته نعيمة السعودي (١٩٧٤-٢٠١٢) وابنتهما البتول البوعناني (١٩٦٩-٢٠٠٣)، الذين اشتغلوا جميعا في السينما المغربية. تتولى الحفاظ عليه، حاليا، تودة البوعناني، إحدى بناته، صبة مجموعة من الباحثين والقيمين والسينمائيين. يعرض هذا المقال مقاربات مختلفة لهذا الإرث، التراث، من خلال الانتقال بين استعارة الأرشيف المفقود والعمل المادي والملموس والمفاهيمي في علاقة مع "أرشيف البوعناني". لذلك يقترح توسيع النظرية النقدية للأرشيف في السياق الخاص للذاكرة السينمائية المغربية

**كلمات مفتاحية** | أحمد البوعناني - المغرب - الأرشيف السينمائي أو أرشيف السينما - تاريخ السينما - الذاكرة - الفن - مزاولة الأرشيف.

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