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Moralistic versus compassionate portrayals of prostitution in Moroccan cinema: the case of Casablanca by Night versus Much Loved

Representación moralista y compasiva de la prostitución en el cine marroquí: el caso de Casablanca by Night versus Much Loved

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Abstract

In Moroccan media, the prostitute is gradually becoming a cultural icon. This article analyses from a comparative perspective its appearance in two Moroccan films, Casablanca by Night (Mostafa Darkaoui, 2003) and Much Loved (Nabyl Ayouch, 2016). These two films portray prostitution in a very different way. Whereas in the first film the figure of the prostitute corresponds to the hegemonic moralistic idea that the general public have about prostitution in Morocco, in the second one the representation of this figure is built on an understanding drawn from the experience of prostitutes. The main objective of this paper is to define prevalent themes such as crime, deviance, immorality, poverty, disease and violence, among others, associated with prostitution in Morocco and mobilised in the media. The aim is also to analyse how these themes unfold differently in these two featured films and why they gave rise to a violent social controversy for the second. We will argue that Casablanca by Night uses cinematographic and social "mechanisms of neutralisation". Much Loved, on the contrary, adopts a realistic perspective. The higher the level of realism and modern representation of prostitution, the higher the social controversy and polarization.

Keywords

Prostitution; cinema; Morocco; representation; gender; sexual markets.

Resumen

En los medios de comunicación marroquíes, la figura de la prostituta ha pasado a ser un icono cultural. Este artículo analiza desde una perspectiva comparada dos formas diferentes de representación en dos películas marroquíes: Casablanca by Night (Mostafa Darkaoui, 2003) y Much Loved (Nabyl Ayouch, 2016). En el primer caso la figura de la prostituta se corresponde con la idea hegemónica y moral que el gran público tiene sobre la prostitución en Marruecos. En el segundo caso se lleva a cabo un retrato extraído de la experiencia directa de las prostitutas. El principal objetivo de este artículo es definir temas prevalentes como el delito, la inmoralidad, la pobreza, la enfermedad y la violencia, que normalmente se asocian con la prostitución en Marruecos a través de los medios de comunicación. Nuestro segundo objetivo es analizar como estos temas se despliegan de forma diferente en estas dos películas y porqué dieron lugar a una fuerte controversia social en el caso de la segunda. Argumentaremos que CBN utiliza "mecanismos de neutralización" de carácter cinematográfico y social. ML, por el contrario, adopta una perspectiva realista. A mayor nivel de realismo y de representación moderna de la prostitución, mayor nivel de controversia social y polarización.

Palabras clave

Prostitución; cine; Marruecos; representación; género; mercados sexuales.

1. Introduction

1.1. Enigma

In May 2015, Morocco was shaken by a scandal of national stature following the selection of the Moroccan film *Much Loved* in the section "Un Certain Regard" of the Cannes Film Festival and the broadcast on the same occasion of excerpts drawn from the film. Each of the three clips uploaded on the official webpage of the section depicted, in different ways, the life of three women making a living out of commercial sex in Marrakech (Diao, 2015). In the first one, the main character, played by Loubna Abidar, is with her two acolytes in a taxi driving them to what we suppose being their venue of prostitution. During the journey, the main character is chatting with the taxi driver. The dialogue set the stage and the tone: we are facing a character who is speaking without half measure about her main activity, prostitution, and in a "crude" manner never heard before in the mouth of a female character in Moroccan cinema. The second clip follows on with the "crudeness" of the language which aim is to project us without filter in the reality of the interlope world of prostitution. The clips intertwine different scenes of women with their clients in what are the main settings of prostitution in Marrakech: discotheques where clients are mainly Europeans and private houses where clients are mainly men from the Gulf states. The specialisation of the activity and the distribution of men according to their nationalities correspond to the way prostitution in Morocco is represented in the collective imagination and the national narrative about the widespread social phenomenon of prostitution in Morocco. The third clip takes another look at the reality of Moroccan women entering prostitution by highlighting issues of female precarity¹ (de Rochebrune, 2015). Indeed, the clip shows the main character going at her family's place to hand them the money they need to survive. The clip evolves around the heated discussion the daughter who visits, and her mother have around the activity of the former.

Despite this third clip trying to show how the story is built on two faces of the activity, sex-work and the social conditions of the women, the general public outrage sparked mainly around the two first clips that, according to the moral entrepreneurs at the base of this scandal, were damaging the reputation of Morocco and its female citizens. What shocked the viewers of clips not lasting more than three minutes each is the crudeness of the words used by female characters in the taxi and the crudeness of mimed sexual scenes during suggestive dances. The scandal first developed on social media through the creation of hate groups against the two key players involved in the making of the film, Nabil Ayouch and Loubna Abidar, who began to face obsessive criticism from a variety of sources and received death threats. Then, the scandal moved to the political space and different political parties took advantage of and converted it into a national scandal (Laabid, 2015). This step forced the director and the actress to face a legal investigation for debauchery, indecency, and pornography. The ministry of communication issued a statement that banned *Much Loved* in Morocco (Chambost, 2015). The scandal did not stop there. It continued its own life and grew out of proportion. Months after, in November 2015, the main actress, Loubna Abidar, had to flee to France after being attacked and beaten with a knife by a group of men in the streets of Casablanca (Dwyer, 2016; Laabi, 2015).

With this scandal everything was new: the scandal around a movie, the out-of-control proportions it took, the online mobilisation and the power of social media, the involvement of the State and all the political establishment. In other words, the selection of *Much Loved* at the Cannes Film Festival created the first episode of a moral panic that would follow on during the summer 2015 with other events involving issues of decency, sexuality and modesty (Joseph, 2015). If everything was new, the depiction of prostitution in Moroccan cinema was not. Indeed, even though it has never been seen in such a realistic and straightforward manner, the theme of prostitution is common in the cinema made in Morocco.

The concepts of public morality and moral panic conceptually frame this study. They help to understand part of the controversy, as studied by authors such as Foucault, Saiz-Echezarreta and Peñamarín (2015) or Legarre (2004). The latter states:

La moralidad pública, un concepto esquivo y de difícil definición, es entendida como un conjunto de manifestaciones del "recto obrar" de los miembros de una comunidad que más inmediatamente repercuten en la esfera pública, contribuyendo a formar la "ecología moral" de dicha comunidad, la moral pública sería considerada un bien jurídico, protegido tanto por la penalización de ciertas conductas que la ofenden, como por normas no criminales que promueven su efectiva vigencia. Así, para que la moralidad pública esté comprometida no sólo ha de existir una "conducta inmoral" sino que además ésta debe ser pública (181).

Terms such as 'moral panic', coined by the British sociologist Cohen Stanley in 1972, or 'sexual panic', coined by the American anthropologists Carol Vance and Gayle Rubin in 1984, have been extensively used by activists and academics to refer to the accumulated fears related to security and morality, also applied to the acknowledgement and management of prostitution in polarized societies. 'This kind of panic tends

to gather social movements at a large scale dealing with anxieties generated by sexual questions' (Vance and Rubin, 2005: 162). As Irvine states, 'Prominent researchers, among them Estelle Freedman, Gayle Rubin, Jeffrey Weeks, and Lisa Duggan, deployed the panic metaphor—moral panic, sex-crime panic, AIDS panic, or sex panic—to explore political conflict, sexual regulation, and public volatility about sex' (2008).

Regarding realism, Ángel Quintana theorisation on cinematic realism allow us to distinguish between a realism of representation (the framework of the narrative management) and a realism of the represented (realism as a way of putting the world in perspective). According to the author: 'Realism has been based on a willingness to understand the world, through careful observation, to highlight social conflicts and crises' (Quintana, 2003: 108). As he states it, 'Questioning what is real and how it is inscribed in the sphere of the visible is one of the great challenges that realism must face, which must also seek a theoretical reformulation that goes beyond the traditional forms of imitation of the world based on transparency and in a certain naive idea of the referent.' (ibid.:43).

1.2. Problematic, argument and objectives

This article aims at analysing from a comparative perspective the depiction of prostitution in two Moroccan films, *Casablanca by Night* (Mostafa Darkaoui, 2003) and *Much Loved* (Nabyl Ayouch, 2016). These two films, despite sharing several similarities, portray prostitution practices and voice the prostitutes in many different ways in terms of social and moralistic approaches. These differences, we argue, explain, in part, the opposite reception from the general audience: positive for the first one and negative for the other. The main aim is to understand the reasons of the absence of scandal for one and its presence for another. We argue that whereas in the first film the figure of the prostitute corresponds to the hegemonic moralistic idea that the general public have about prostitution in Morocco, in the second one the representation of this figure is built against this idea to draw from a non-hegemonic perspective on prostitution. This non-hegemonic perspective is drawn from the experience of prostitutes.

Our questions are: what are the similarities and differences of the two movies? How do these films construct the identity of women's morality or immorality? How is sexual behaviour portrayed in terms of cinematographic realism? Which mechanisms of incrimination or compassionate portrayals are present in the films? In which way and to what extent do these films use any kind of cinematographic or social mechanisms of neutralization in order to avoid censorship, controversy or moral punishment? Up to what extent are women empowered in both films and how are perceptions shaped thereafter? Which are the prevalent themes relating prostitution to topics such as crime and deviance, immorality, poverty, disease or violence, as portrayed by the media? How do they unfold differently in these two featured films and why they gave rise to a violent social controversy for the second? The main hypothesis assumes that *Casablanca by Night* uses cinematographic and social 'mechanisms of neutralisation' that protect the film from social controversy, whereas *Much Loved* adopts a direct realistic perspective, thus contributing to expose the film to moral scandal.

This is this double standard in the depiction and reception of the prostitutorial subject that lies behind our interrogations. How and why prostitution has to be approached in a certain way as to maintain a balance between the moral and the immoral? The cinematographic production on prostitutorial activity is not unfamiliar with this polysemy. And, as in the political domain, cinema can approach the issue of prostitution in a complex or a simple manner. Cinema, as an artistic form that can present models of a specific society and its structure of thought (Howard, 1986: 25), may be helpful in understanding social phenomena and grant meaning to reality, modelling our representation system and proposing cultural schemes for identification or rejection. Furthermore, it is helpful in constituting the structure of feelings, which is essential on issues rooted in social controversy (Williams, 1997).

1.3. Methodology

Casablanca by Night (CBN) and *Much Loved* (ML) are not the only films dealing with prostitution in Moroccan cinema. There are very few films addressing prostitution in a monographic way in the Moroccan cinematography, though². The choice of these movies is not random. With a gap of 12 years between both, CBN and ML represent a milestone in the history of Moroccan postcolonial cinema. *Casablanca by Night* has been acclaimed as the first blockbuster on Moroccan cinema that fostered a 're-encounter' with the Moroccan public, in terms of entrances' revenues. CBN was released in Moroccan cinema and also screened on TV. In 2007, a tribute was paid to film director Derkaoui during the seventh edition of the international festival of Marrakech. His film was screened with two others (Siraj, 2007). On the contrary, the theatrical release of ML has been banned in Morocco, despite the fact that the director never asked for a

release authorization. One of the contradictions of the ban is that although it was intended to prevent the representation of prostitution in Morocco, it instead backfired completely and brought even more attention to the issue than if the government had just not gotten involved (Weinstein, 2016).

Another reason for choosing these two films lies in the fact that ML is a movie grounded in what have been established by Mustapha Derkaoui in CBN. Moreover, being released at different historical period, they allow us also to grasp the evolution of a more and more polarized debate on morality in Morocco. While CBN was treated as a national pride, despite the sequences of violent sex that it contains, the second one, based as well on a documented reality, gave rise to a violent social controversy.

The sample has been explored by the use of qualitative methods, using three complementary approaches. As our analytical claim is that the two films depict, in a certain manner, social realities, we have structured the manuscript in a descriptive way. Firstly, through a contextual analysis our aim is to locate the films in their own cinematographic environment. Secondly, we seek to tackle the question of realism, as this is a key factor when talking about the representation of sensible topics such as prostitution. Thirdly, we develop on the concept that we have called "mechanisms of social-cinematographic neutralization". In our view, these mechanisms aim at "protecting" the film from censorship or social controversy while talking about sensitive subject as prostitution. The absence of these mechanisms lead to the opposite effect. This qualitative approach seeks to place both films in their respective contexts (social, artistic and temporal), and to discuss the possibilities and limits that condition filmmaking in Morocco. These conditions are explored in the relationship between filmmaking and the social transformations taking place in Morocco.

2. The issue of prostitution in Morocco

2.1. Sociological work on prostitution

Prostitution is indeed one of those activities whose definition obscures more than it highlights the reality and the plurality of its practices. Social studies on prostitution and sex work across the world have demonstrated that to better grasp the practices at stake, it is important to understand prostitution not as a monolithic activity but one that differs according to the historical, social and geographical context but also according to the persons that practice it and the different actors involved in it (clients, institutions, police, association, etc.) (see Mathieu, 2015; Weitzer, 2009, 2013). This fact is underlined by the existence of many different ways of naming the practices. Among them we have the two most known words that have departed the political space around the issue of commercial sex and allowed the activity to be a political concern and not strictly a moralistic one. We are referring to the word "prostitution", often followed *ad nauseam* with the quote "the oldest profession of the world", and the term "sex-work" that appeared in the early eighties and which allowed after centuries of solely criminalisation, moralisation, spatial segregation and victimization, among other processes of exclusion, to frame prostitution in political terms. More recently, as social sciences developed knowledge on the activity in other parts of the world, other terms emerged such as "transactional sex", "economic-sexual exchanges" (Hunter, 2002; Tabet, 2004; Osborne, 2004; Holgado, 2008; Broqua, 2014; Pisciatelli, 2016; Lamas 2017, etc.) as to highlight the complexity of the social meaning of monetary exchanges (Zelizer, 2010). The exchange of money for sexual services can also involves the exchange of emotions, sentiments but also of symbolic element such as prestige, among others, as developed by several specialists of the Global South (Roux, 2011; Cole, 2010; Cheng, 2010.) In the case of Morocco, M. Cheikh have recently demonstrated this entanglement of intimacies and monetary transfers (2015) insisting on the festive aspect that the practice of prostitution can provide for working-class women. This cultural aspect is contained in the denomination of prostitution in Moroccan i.e. "the going out" (*l-khrij*) (Cheikh, 2018). This emic conceptualisation of commercial sex joins the above-mentioned concepts used to define the practice elsewhere in the world. It also allows to question the formation of subjectivities by the persons involved in the activity instead of questioning them only through the lens of prostitution (Carmona, 2008) or through the lens of historical cultural practices (Venema & Bakker, 2004). Fun, leisure and economic strategies form part of the construction of the individual independently of their social background (Cheikh, 2017).

2.2. Media and prostitution

The media exposure of prostitution is nothing new in Morocco. The thematic of prostitution has been constantly present in the media for at least the last three decades. To better grasp the specificity of the mediated prostitution in this country, it is important to link it to the emergence of the private press in the early nineties with the beginning of the economic openness and the late nineties with the political change. As demonstrated by Smolin, the boom of dozens of newspapers and magazines in Arabic and later, in

French, focusing mainly on social topic have prepared the Moroccan audience from all social classes but especially from low and middle urban classes, to read about subject on marginal lives. This press, following the model of the tabloid, has thrived mainly thanks to exclusively treated topics dealing with crime, delinquency, public immorality and especially prostitution (Smolin, 2013). Later, the widespread exposure of those topics will follow with the intense production of TV and radio programs, talks, but also with movies (Cheikh, 2015, 2017). The exposure of the social life of "the poor" created an audience but also a way of receiving and processing such thematic. Indeed, subject on marginality that implies a transgression of the moral order will be understood on two level of comprehension: a compassionate level and a moralistic one (Cheikh, 2015). The first one allowing the subject to be talked about and the second one reminding the limit of the empathy.

2.3. Prostitution in Moroccan cinema

In a context as Morocco where the use of the norm "what is not said does not exist" is still vivid (Cheikh, 2011), the production of films with narratives on prostitutional practices acts as a thermostat to measure the state of moralisation within Moroccan society, to gauge what is speakable and what is not. At the same time, they give valuable images through which we can observe sociologically and cinematically specific phenomena. In other words, each film is an analytical space of the degree of "transgression and social rupture" proposed by the filmmakers, as well as of the degree of its acceptance by the society. In the Moroccan cinema, although the figure of the prostitute is not as iconic as in other cinema, it is however present, and the depiction is far from being marginal or anecdotic. The representations of the prostitutes in Moroccan cinema are connected to various historical practices of social and state regulation of sexuality, of definitions of what is immoral and of "specific identities".

The history of Moroccan post-independent cinema has showed that there are different ways of facing controversial topics such as prostitution: avoiding the subject, making up reality (using metaphorical, poetic, connotative, unreal or stereotypical narrative tools), or facing it with total realism. Previous studies have shown that Moroccan cinema usually illustrates the practice of prostitution with ambiguity, showing it from the borderline with other cultural variations, using subtleness, text-visual insinuation and a scarce professional demarcation (Peralta, Saiz-Echezarreta, 2018). In this way, the presence of the prostitutes is very often in secondary roles in films that do not deal directly with the topic of prostitution. The presence of prostitutes serves to illustrate the marginality, to emphasize on the double standards that fall on all women being caught as bad or as good and to remind to the good one how they have not to behave as to stay in the right path. Prostitution becomes often "an excuse" to talk about other topics, such as impossible love, poverty, emigration or social morality, among other social topics.

We can find an illustrative example of these prostitutes in residual roles as source of conflict in the film *Marock* (Leïla Marrackchi, 2005). The film has two young main characters, Rita and Youri. She is a Muslim and he is a Jewish. They fall in love and they need to overcome a lot of social prejudice and constraints to make their wish come through. When they first met, a misunderstanding threatens the pursue of any relationship. The best friend of Youri, wants to surprise him by arranging the services of two prostitutes, who appeared at the main entrance of the house. Youri declined the offer and refrained from having sex with them. But his friend did. While they were having sex, Rita called Youri. With a movement of their bodies, the phone fell down from the bedside table before Youri could even answer the call. Rita assumed that the one groaning was Youri. She was resolute to immediately ending any contact with him. In this scene, the presence of prostitutes equals a source of problems, a recurrent recourse in Moroccan cinema. Other movies also show prostitutes in secondary roles. In *Les amis d'hier* (Hassan ben Jelloun, 1997), Leïla recruits her clients while doing grocery shopping in the Medina of Casablanca. A radical Islamic young man gathers signatures to expel her out of the neighbourhood, considering dishonest to have her living among them. In *Ali Zaoua, Prince de la rue* (Nabyl Ayouch, 1999), Amal Ayouch plays the role of a mother who is rejected by his child for being a prostitute. He left home and became a street child, dying afterwards in a quarrel among rival bands. Other relevant films with the presence of prostitutes in secondary roles are: *Une histoire d'amour* (Hakim Noury, 2002), *Mémoire en détention* (Jilali Ferhaty, 2004), *Nancy et le monstre* (Mahmoud Frites, 2007), *Sur la planche* (Leïla Kilani, 2010), *Les ailes de l'amour* (Abdelhay Laraki, 2010), *Les chevaux de Dieu* (Nabyl Ayouch, 2013).

3. Comparing two movies: narrative and structural aspects

3.1. *Casablanca by Night*

Casablanca by Night was the first film in Moroccan cinema approaching prostitutional practices with a certain degree of realism. The story revolves around Kalthoum, a 14-year-old girl who decide "to go out" to find money to cover the cost of a heavy medical operation of the heart for her little brother. We quickly understand that Kalthoum evolves in a universe where the activity of prostitution is central for the women of her environment. She lives in the medina of Casablanca with her mother and her brother in a house that serves as a brothel. Many other women live there as well where they wait for the clients. A few men also live in this house: Kalthoum mother's lover, an old retired police commissioner and a taxi-driver, the husband of one of the women living in the house and who works as a belly dancer in a couple of cabarets of the city. This woman, who Kalthoum calls 'auntie', is the one who will introduce the girl into the nightlife world of prostitution when the latter stubbornly decide to go out to find money selling her dance and sexual services. The movie is constructed on two main settings: on the one hand the nightlife avenues and the streets of the metropolis and on the other hand the operating room of the hospital where the brother undergoes surgery.

Through the eyes of Kalthoum we first discover her neighbourhood but also the interiors and exteriors of prostitution. As in ML, the different actors constituting the world of prostitution are present: the women who prostitute, the men who are in deep relationships with the characters of the movie as lovers, husbands or suitors, the taxi-drivers, the police who do their arrest job, the bartenders, the procuress or Madam of the brothels, the clients and the Saudi, whose reason to exist in the movie is to correspond to the widespread stereotype about client of prostitution in Morocco. The director Mustapha Derkaoui introduces also other important actors: institutions. Police is one of them, but we have also social, sanitary and educative institutions that represent the State.

Through the hospital, the director is able to critique the system's failures. If Kalthoum, a teenager who should be at school, has to go out to find money risking to lose her reputation (she is still virgin) but above all risking being violently raped (this is the issue of the movie), it is because the sanitary system does not work as it should especially for the more vulnerable. It is because the State does not provide social protection. Derkaoui operates a shift in the meaning of morality: morality is not an individual problem but rather a social problem. The State is the one being immoral. This double scenery (hospital/nightlife) allows to the audience to be more compassionate toward Kalthoum who chooses to go out, who repeats several times that her intention is to save her brother. The role of life-saving she gives herself reinforce the compassionate approach toward her character. She has a deep will, no matter the consequences in terms of morality, reputation and self-worthiness. This will does not play against her, though, as we have seen in ML. On the contrary, she is a brave person who must sacrifice herself because of the dysfunctions of the State. In ML, the main character sacrifices herself too for her family but the lack of coercion from third parties and the extreme recognition of her prostitutional practice condemn her from part of the audience. Indeed, Noha, the character played by Loubna Abidar, does not spark any empathy, whereas Kalthoum does.

To understand this, two other characters are important to consider: the characters of the mothers on the two movies. In CBN, the mother is the one who with the State institutions is held responsible. She is immediately considered as a bad person who pushes her daughter to prostitute – which is not true since we see her struggling to prevent her daughter from going out – and she is considered so because she leads a brothel. She is considered as the Madam of the house. It is interesting to say here that in the movie the word "Madam" is not said in Moroccan but in French by one of the hospital employees. We see how Derkaoui tried to lighten the burden of the mother's character by avoiding to fully identify her through a word *quwwada* which has a great impact in the Moroccan imaginary. In ML, on the contrary, the mother is against what her daughter does. So, the daughter can be seen as going against her family will. The audience can see this without seeing that, at the same time, the mother takes the money. The mother in CBN knows and accept being seen as a bad woman. Her way of playing when in interaction with the hospitals employees shows that she is ashamed of herself when the former reprimanded her for what she is. The voiceless and non-empowered mother ease the reception of the movie by the audience that is always expected to be judgemental and moralistic. By not claiming herself as a valuable person, she allows her daughter to be seen as someone squandered by the destiny, the family and the society. In other words, the victimization of the daughter allows her to be voiced. Kalthoum, despite walking in the streets at night barely dressed throughout the film and developing intimate friendships with two men, depicted as marginal, we can identify moralistically with her. Despite, having feelings for men she does not know, we can identify still moralistically with her because she falls in the frame of suitable interactions with men outside prostitution. Moreover, we can identify moralistically with Kalthoum because she is depicted as wily. She does not sell sexual services: she dances, she sings but she does not lose her virginity out of will but under violence and coercion: she is raped. As a victim, reframed not as a woman but as a teenager who shall

be protected, Kalthoum is granted a form of legitimacy. Recasting or reframing her as a young person allows also the director to lead another social critique on the State that is unable to educate properly all his 'children'.

The victimization paradigm versus the State responsibility coupled with the family ones ease the positive reception of CBN. In this paradigm that allows compassion lies the hegemonic and authorised perspective on prostitution in Moroccan cinema. However, this positive reception has a cost: the reproduction of the double standard that weighs upon women and divide them. The recognition of the precarious conditions of one goes in hand with the ignorance of the conditions of another. Casting the mother as the responsible one and ignoring her very own conditions is the cost to pay in order to escape public outrage. Public outrage is managed from the onset of the project by the director. In ML, public outrage is not anymore considered as a director's problem. It is externalised and not taken into account. Comparing the two movies, we can see how the opposite ways in managing morality reflect the passing from a private management of scandal (self-censorship, in the process of creation, prevents scandals to spark) to a public management (the freedom of creation is preferred).

3.2. *Much Loved*

Much Loved (ML) tells the story of four prostitutes from the city of Marrakech. The film follows their daily encounters, both with clients and with family, friends and strangers. As most films of Nabyl Ayouch, ML concentrates in the psychological dimension of characters. ML is a film about prostitution the same way as it is a film about characters. Delving into the circumstances and personalities of the four starring women constitutes a way to expand the fringes of the ambiguity with which prostitution has often being represented in Moroccan cinema.

The film constitutes an exercise of what we have called 'inverted anthropology', where women are the ones who have the power, which is shown in many different ways. The empowerment that the director gives to his characters help to break down stereotypes related to gender roles and confronting the viewer with the day to day of prostitution. Here prostitution is not stigmatized, it is professionalized. It is not lived as an insurmountable burden but as an option of life. The speeches are stripped of victimization, which is replaced by operative ways of living. These women have chosen their lives and they are brave, beautiful and fighters. No men knock them out. Whereas in CBN the figure of the prostitute corresponds to the hegemonic moralistic idea that the general public have about prostitution in Morocco, in ML the representation of this figure is built on an understanding drawn from the experience.

The opening sequence of the film serves to illustrate these ideas. The three main characters, Noha, Randa and Soukaina, are talking around a table while getting ready for a service. The narrative action is structured as follows: Noha prepares some hash joints and Soukaina reprimands her for what she does, until Noha explains that she earns 200 DH (around €20) per each one when she sells them to the clients. Soukaina automatically changes the register and goes to use a different tone: - *In that case, let me help you!* On the other hand, Randa is sniffing cocaine and in turn Noha reprimands her too: - *Stop sniffing cocaine, you're becoming a drug addict!* Randa, whom we later see in her first lesbian relationship, responds to Noha: - *Leave me alone, stay with your femininity and your foreigners!* To this, Noha responds by providing some comments that help the viewer to focus their idea of prostitution: - *You have to understand men and what happens to them; There are several types of men, the luxury ones, the medium ones and the less than nothing. For me the three are the same; the only important thing is that they have money.*

Noha is remembering Randa, while pouring vodka on her glass (twice during the initial sequence), the day that thanks to Noha's mediation, Randa won \$7,000 in a single night at a birthday party. In a dialogic format, Randa recalls that Noha "was allowed to kiss" (expression that connotes sex) in any corner: in the kitchen, in the bathtub and even in the bathroom. To which Soukaina argues: - *That is the true prostitution!* Randa reminds how Noha ended up that night in a hospital, after having sex with a "black man", reproducing racialised stereotype of a supposedly African "wild sexuality and masculinity", who caused Noha to have her vagina split. She adds: - *Said was there and can attest.* Said is the man of confidence, the one who cooks for them, the chauffeur who drives them to perform their services and waits to pick them up and take them back home, for all of which he receives his salary derived from the women's work. Said never intervenes in the work of the women. He is there to serve them, and they maintain a relationship of attachment and trust. In this initial sequence, Said serves them couscous at the table. The connoted reading of this fact is that these women, are first of all Moroccan, and being Friday, they also participate in the religious-cultural practices of the country. The sequence closes with Noha who talks as follows: - *Do not laugh at me, young man, I am already 28 years old and I will be able to dedicate myself to this one year or two more years.* Then I'll have to find something else. Said adds: - *Have some lunch or you will provoke to really turn off.*

Ayouch has been criticized for trying to address too many controversial issues in one film: prostitution, paedophilia, alcohol and other drug use, homosexual relations, trans* diversity, immigration, police corruption and the question of single mothers, among others. The idea of delving into the psychological profiles of the characters and their particular circumstances is linked to a line of work typical to documentary film that seeks to contextualize the circumstances that lead each person to take specific decisions, something that contributes to go beyond collective imagination. Certainly, ML can be considered a documentary-based fiction film. Before writing the script, the director interviewed 300 women involved in prostitution (*The Guardian*, 2015), whose experiences have been well versed in the script. The arguments that the film "damages the image" of the country are refuted by Ayouch by arguing that the film is based on real research work. Although the images of the film do not please, they are there to act as a mirror that reflects a certain reality. In fact, the main actress, Loubna Abinar, transferred her experience to the script when as a child she observed the prostitutes of her neighbourhood. As she states, "These women were always so nice and generous" (Alami, 2016).

Being 28 years-old, Noha is the older of them, the most experienced and charismatic also. She acts as not only a protector and manager of the group. Sometimes she interacts in the personal life of her 'team'. For instance, she does not accept Soukaina's relationship with a modest young man from the neighborhood because he interferes in her work. In a sequence in the car, after a night of service at a party with Saudi clients, Noha pulls a wad of bills from the vagina. She had stolen the money to one of the clients, but instead of keeping it for herself, she shares it with the rest (there are numerous gestures of solidarity throughout the film). Noha supports her family, who lives in the medina. The family consists of her mother who takes care of Noha's son, her brother and her younger sister. We do not know anything about the father of Noha's son. We only know that she does not show any kind of attachment to him when she goes to visit her mother. Is this child the result of a violation? The result of an unwanted relationship? We do not exactly know but Ayouch opens a narrative sub-plot to relate the main argument with the problem of unwanted pregnancies and the stigmatization of single mothers in Moroccan society. Noha is however much more interested in the future of her younger sister, Sarah, symbolising the interest for the fate of women in general. This interest is contrasted with the bittersweet reality that the movie evolves: on a night when Noha goes out with her group of friends/co-workers for their own fun, she discovers her teenage sister getting into the car of a seemingly wealthy man. Noha's facial expression condenses the frustration and the emotional intensity of the moment.

Randa grew up without a father. She was 4 years-old when she saw him for the last time. He went to Spain, and never returned. Ayouch again opens a new narrative sub-plot: that of emigration without return. Her mother lives with serious health problems in the outskirts of the city. Does Randa's prostitution, and her addiction to cocaine, derive from the fact that his father left them? Does her lesbian condition derive perhaps from the rejection of a father who never returned? Randa refuses to sleep with men for whom she does not feel any sexual attraction. In a sequence on one of the nights of service at a Saudi party, Randa dances with a man who touches her chest. She rejects him and Noha reprimands her unprofessional attitude and warns her of the consequences. She leaves the party in visible anger. This sequence contrasts with the night when they go out partying on their own and in a nightclub Randa is attracted by a mature woman. They dance together and conclude the night at her house, where Randa is nervous about her first lesbian experience.

Soukaina, meanwhile, is torn between a seemingly amorous relationship with a young man without resources, who wants her to abandon her activity, and that of a rich Saudi, Ahmad, who proposes her in marriage as a second wife. Ayouch evokes the theme of romantic love between a client and a prostitute, which has been reflected in other Moroccan films such as *Yarit ou le temps d'une chanson*, by Hassan ben Jelloun (1994), *Une histoire d'amour*, by Hakim Noury (2002), or *Graines de Grenades* (2013). The Saudi client of *Much Loved* condenses much of the stereotypical representation that has been made of this archetype so far: unbridled consumption of alcohol, behavioural infantilism, compulsive need for sex, intense commercialization of human relationships and bisexuality, among others. This last feature of the character, which contribute to further transgress moral conventions, is shown to the public when Soukaina discovers a file in Ahmad's tablet with pictures where he is having sex with other men. This fact prompts Soukaina to finish the relationship with Ahmad. The issue reveals a moral enigma: What is best: a humble true love or a manufactured relationship splendid in money?

4. The issue of realism

In our first approach to the movies, we immediately thought that the main difference between both movies concerned realism. It came to us that ML adopted a more realistic approach of prostitution and CBN a more euphemistic approach, making it less realistic about the social phenomenon under scrutiny. We

associated the realistic approach with the non-hegemonic perspective on prostitution and the euphemistic approach with the hegemonic point of view on the activity. We thought this difference could explain the contradictory reception of the movies. However, while conducting some press archives in order to see how CBN was perceived, we came across a critic published in a French Moroccan newspaper where the author stated that with no doubt CBN is profoundly realistic (Daki, 2003). How it came that a decade later we see it as less-realistic? Somehow, although both films may be considered profoundly realistic, the approach is radically different.

In Ayouch's film there is no spectacular treatment of the narrative reality. There is no space for the audience to get distance from reality or from the credibility of the facts, which has maybe acted as one of the most disturbing elements of the controversy. Everything moves in the plane of the real, of the feasible, of the credible. Narratively, Ayouch moves away from the classical structure of beginning, conflict and resolution. And that, also, gives a feeling of everydayness to the argument. CBN navigates between both the real and the spectacular. The opening scene in the Medina plunges us in the everyday life of a place that is already built in the Moroccan imaginary as a place out of time. The specificity of the medina space brings at the same time exceptionality and banality: the spectator sensibly and intimately knows what he sees but can put a distance with it because it belongs to a specific social space. CBN is about this: proximity and distance at the same time that goes with the way morality transgressions are managed.

The protagonists of both films move in the margins of the social periphery and marginality but while some are victims of their circumstances the others perform as agents of their own. Kalthoum, the heroine girl, goes through all the "evils" of the night to "save" her brother. The price to pay is extremely high, since she was raped by the owner of the club. But Kalthoum achieves two important things: to be able to pay for her brother's operation and to have the perpetrator of the rape killed at the end of the film. Everything happens in a very spectacular way, little credible somehow. In CBN, the structure is marked by the spectacularity of the turning points. The aggressor fell down from the roof/terrace of the building where the rape took place, after the guardian's dog, alerted by the girl's screams, pushed the man in the void. This filmic end implies a denotative meaning: when a woman ends in prostitution due to an insurmountable need, as in the case of Kalthoum, and not as a life option under constraint, as in the case of the women of ML, some sort of restitution may be granted from a socio-moral point of view, as if society were more ready to accept the first circumstances.

The way the women of ML are narratively punished (morally, socially and personally) differs to the way Kalthoum does (besides Kalthoum is protected from punishment since her mother can be held responsible). Noha's mother rejects her when she becomes aware of her professional activity. Furthermore, the neighbourhood has mobilised for not letting Noha enter the medina. Such is the disgrace of her presence among "honourable" persons. The mother rejects even the money that Noha brings her regularly. How she will manage to make ends meet without this support is not revealed in the film. Despite the daily difficulties and constraints, the four women of ML carry out their lives, with their contradictions, with their bittersweet taste, and with the need and desire to continue it by their own means, without depending on anyone. This need to "carry on despite of..." also places the film far away from spectacle and brings it near to direct realism. However, the kind of direct realism that probably disturbed the most to a part of the audience was not the fact that everything in the film looks like credible and real, but the fact of displaying naked bodies on the screen, sexual sequences, erotic/porno dances or frustrated attempts of ejaculations, among other dare filming decisions. The final sequence of the film also illustrates how Ayouch gets apart from the classical narrative structure, as there is neither a close end nor it involves any resolution. After a night of service, the team of women and Said go to the shore of the beach to chat quietly, while they empty the bottle of vodka, surrounded by human warmth. That's all.

Kalthoum is also pursuing her life and has also an agency and a will. She is after all walking alone all night in the streets of the city. She is walking dressed in a very suggestive way but her sexy dress little by little disappears behind the specific personality of Kalthoum. This personality reveals itself little by little throughout the film and in day life with the third part of the trilogy to which CBN belongs. Indeed, with *Casablanca day light*, we follow Kalthoum during the day following her everyday life. Kalthoum as the director Derkaoui stated is a young girl "well aware of her body. It's not really money that interests her, not her family problem, but herself." (Le Matin, 2003). And herself, her will, her passion for music and dance, her very own opinions are what guide the movie from the beginning to its end. In a certain way, Kalthoum is the predecessor of Noha. Our purpose is not to oppose both movies but to find the links and the continuities. The differences are rather marked by the breakages that happened in the forms of public outrage and the diffusion of moral panics.

4.1. The mechanisms of social-cinematographic neutralisation. Depicting social change... with moderation

We understand by "mechanisms of socio-cinematographic neutralization" those decisions that the filmmakers take to ensure that their films, especially when it comes to controversial issues, reach their audiences, avoiding the types of public controversy that result in the rejection of the film, including or not violent reactions against the team of professionals (as in the case of ML), and ultimately censorship.

There are many ways to carry out these "protection" or "neutralization" mechanisms, such as the narrative punishment for women who "deviate" from the norm; prostitutes pay a high price in plots for what they do (they can be expelled of their neighbourhood, rejected, raped...) and by thus, the hegemonic vision of society is restored at one point or another of the film. The end of films is also a privilege space where to observe this restitution of the hegemonic moral. Drama or tragic drama prevails as genre if prostitutes are present in the film (Peralta and Saiz Echezarreta, 2018), and so does death.

The decision to introduce these kind of neutralization mechanisms are important. They can be seen as preliminary forms of negotiation with the *Centre de la Cinématographie Marocaine* (CCM), depending from the Ministry of Culture and Information. Any film that aspires to receive funding from the said institution will be submitted to the scrutiny of an expert council that will approve the script or reject it. Filmmakers such as Nabyl Lahlou, Abdelkader Lâagta, Hassan ben Jelloun, or Nabyl Ayouch himself, among many others, have experienced the process of official censorship of parts or of the totality of their films. We could describe the current situation as one of ambivalent political duality: while some films are still banned, other films tackling very sensitive topics, such as the so-called Years of Lead (the period of intense political repression that the country experienced mainly from 1960s through the 1980s), keep on receiving Government financial support (almost a dozen themed-related films have been produced so far). We have to point at the evolution of the political sphere in Morocco but also the shifts in the production of Moroccan cinema. For instance, *Casablanca by Night* received DH 900.000 (around 81.000€) (La vie Eco, 2005) from the Government at a time when Morocco wants to (re)-dynamize its cinema (Roy, 2005). *Much Loved* is a Franco-Moroccan independent production (A Pyramide Distribution, Les Films du Nouveau Monde, Barney Prods., New District, Ali n 'Prods). As stated in the website of the *Centre de la Cinématographie Marocaine*, the filmmaker applied for and obtained a recording permit to film in Morocco³ but did not get any financial support from the CCM.

It is worth remembering that Nabyl Ayouch has become one of the most controversial filmmakers in Moroccan cinema, which in turn has given him great popularity. In the concrete example of *Much Loved* we agree with Weinstein when she says that the film does not criticize prostitution itself, which is why she thinks that it was ultimately banned, but rather the silencing of it (2016). One of the most controversial elements was the circulation on the Internet of the three abovementioned excerpts from the film, prior to the premiere. According to Nabyl Ayouch all they did was to comply with the rules of the Cannes festival, as it happens in most film festivals, which demand the sending of these fragments. The problem is that these excerpts contained sequences that did not appear in the final version of the film. Controversy has also concentrated in those images, as they were considered to have gone "too far". Among the Moroccan filmmakers' community there are all sorts of opinions, based on our semi-structured interviews results. Only a few declared openly that they loved the film. Among them, the directors Leila Marakchi, Farida Benlyazid, etc. Most of them showed a kind of scepticism in one way or another. Rachida Chbani, director of the Arab film festival in Brussels, believe that it is not necessary to show scenes of direct sexual realism to bring the debate to the audience. Does this strategy of "provoking the public to the extreme" obey eminently to mercantilist criteria? -she wonders. For director Saâd Chraïbi, cinema has to find the right place from where best to contribute to mobilize society without causing a clash or a shock. Directors such as Alazarbe claim in favour of the topic but against the form: "narrative and structurally the film is not well fixed". These examples show how the debate and the controversy have also been present among the filmmaking community in Morocco.

Casablanca by Night, despite its realism and also the presence of extreme scene such as the rape scene symbolized by the blood flowing down the thighs of the main character, has entered the popular culture in a more positive way than *Much Loved*. It was well acclaimed and screened on the second national tv channel (2M) in August 2004, reaching a large audience. One character of the movie, a man whose life has been the focus of Derkaoui's previous movie *Les amours de Hadj Mokhtar Soldi* (this film is actually the first opus of the trilogy that contains CBN but also *Casablanca day light*), is obsessed by women and constantly run after them. When he sees one he constantly repeats a sentence that evoke the street harassment in Morocco seen here as a mere and inoffensive way of approaching women in the street. This sentence "Allah 'la hlawa" (God, what a beauty) is often repeated today.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the characteristics of two Moroccan films, *Casablanca by Night* and *Much Loved*, from a representational, narrative, moralistic and cinematographic point of view. By doing so, our first conclusion affirms that *Casablanca by Night* incriminates the women involved in prostitution to better save one of them (the youngest infantilized and cast as fragile) while *Much Loved* portray them as they are: fighting for themselves independently of the general opinion. Cinematographic incrimination in a controversial social issue such as prostitution is implemented through a set of complex and interrelated mechanisms ranging from the historical practices of social and state regulation of sexuality to the definitions of what is immoral and the construction of women's identities.

Our hypothesis can be confirmed, as we have offered concrete arguments to understand how what we call the "moralistic" portrayal is better accepted by society, as it cannot "contaminate" the rest of the society, since it is confined to the universes of deviance and marginality.

Casablanca by Night uses cinematographic, narrative and social "mechanisms of neutralisation" that have prevented the film, despite having dealt with the topic of prostitution much earlier, from being rejected by society. Although the film tackles very immoral issues, such as sexual violence, harassment and rape, these events are not highlighted by the cinema reviews of that period. On the contrary, most cinematography critics avoid talking about these topics and highlight instead the surprising capacity of the young actress, Samira Nour, to interpret her role and the ability of the cineaste to direct her. The film succeeded in avoiding censorship and social controversy, probably because prostitution is associated to the compassionate speech of "she had no other chances than going into prostitution", due to economic circumstances: how could we not be sensitive to a girl who wants to help her mother to pay the operation of her son? On the other hand, the spectator is not allowed to abandon the arena of ambiguity and implicit subtext, which also has proved to be a very efficient mechanism of neutralization.

Much Loved, on the contrary, adopts a realistic perspective in terms of portrayal of sex and does not avoid talking openly about disturbing controversial issues for conservative Moroccans, such as genre diversity, consumption of drugs and association of prostitution with amusement and self-agency. Whereas in the first film the prostitutional environment is held responsible (except Kalthoum who cannot, because of her age, bear the fault of being raised in a brothel), the second example shows empathy towards all characters without exception. In that sense, *Much Loved*, would be a film with "no protection", with no "mechanisms of neutralization". As a result, the film has not only been only banned by the CCM, but it has also shocked society and has furthermore provoked violent reactions. In terms of cinema reviews, opinions are polarized: while for some the film represents an exercise of freedom of expression, for others the film is pornography. While some get fascinated by the film, others get scandalized. In Barthian terms, connotative planes predominate in this film, those of transparency, as opposed to denotative ones, marked by ambiguity and euphemism.

We conclude that the higher the level of realism, modern representation of prostitution and absence of ambiguity, the higher the social controversy and polarization. With the same reverse effect, the more compassionate the narration towards prostitutes is, the more immoral the film is perceived by society.

6. References

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Notes

1. In several interviews, Nabil Ayouch insisted in the fact that the movie is not about prostitution but about the life conditions of four women involved in sex-work.
2. The film *Les Yeux Secs*, by Narjiss Nejjar, was produced in 2003, the same year as CBN. It has also been an important and controversial film. Its study will be addressed separately in a different paper, as a study case, as the poetic and metaphorical treatment of the topic requires a different approach.
3. <http://www.ccm.ma/en/autorisations-tournage.php>

