

1 Traversing the Desert: Fascination and Fear in Bertolucci's The 2 Sheltering Sky (1990)

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7 **Abstract**

8 This article aims at exploring acts of narration and representation of Morocco in Bernardo
9 Bertolucci's The Sheltering Sky (1990). This filmic production offers a critical examination of
10 the representation of the typical Moroccan in Hollywood. The Sheltering Sky (1990) offers a
11 rather different narrative mode drifting away from Hollywood traditionalist model of
12 narration, writing in bold a new tradition of narration and representation of Morocco.
13 Bernardo Bertolucci's The Sheltering Sky (1990) constitutes such a narrative mode that
14 embraces this denigrating and demeaning system of representation. Such a system, I would
15 say, explains how this Hollywood power to represent Morocco could very well nourish the
16 ideological power to dominate and subsequently produce Morocco according to global
17 standards

18

19 **Index terms—**

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23 Moroccan in Hollywood. The Sheltering Sky (1990) offers a rather different narrative mode drifting away from
24 Hollywood traditionalist model of narration, writing in bold a new tradition of narration and representation of
25 Morocco. Bernardo Bertolucci's The Sheltering Sky (1990) constitutes such a narrative mode that embraces this
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28 Morocco according to global standards.

29 Written in 1947 and 1948, The Sheltering Sky is Paul Bowles's first book. ?? The novel was a best seller
30 in early 1950. Bowles's piece "is intricately part of that moment when the United States is coming to terms
31 with itself as a global power. ?? The movie I would be reading in this section states the backbone of a model
32 of American relationship with the Oriental, and more specifically the Moroccan. At this stage, I would argue
33 that Bernardo Bertolucci's filmic version of Bowles's novel articulates the ideals of Henry Luce's 'the American
34 Century'. Bowles, in particular, "was writing in the wake of one of the most influential American narratives about
35 the foreign". In short, Bertolucci's The Sheltering Sky translates awkwardly the Oriental as foreign, adding up a
36 new chapter to Hollywood's cultural engagement in the process of orientalising the other as well as to its political
37 commitment to silence this alien creature.

38 Bertolucci's film production of The Sheltering Sky follows a love triangle unravelling miraculously in the desert.
39 Although of a mode of narration that should have been dedicated to narrate Morocco and Moroccan life, the
40 movie seems instead to trace the American plot. The Sheltering Sky works out this denigrating narrative e-mails:
41 tarik_mahdi@yahoo.fr, tarik.bouguerba@yahoo.com technique in the way it celebrates the Western civilization
42 and condemns Moorish ways of life. The movie at hand also describes the potential dangers and potentialities of
43 venturing too far from an American frame. This risk taking that is very often attributed to voyaging into Morocco
44 in particular is indicative of how The Sheltering Sky is stereotypically charged. It is through its orientalist mode

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45 of narration that the movie puts the life of American citizens in jeopardy in Moorish land. Bertolucci's piece
46 therefore depicts three Americans-Port and Kit Moresby and their friend Tunner, all constituting a love triangle.

47 In its nostalgia for Orientalism, *The Sheltering Sky* seems to reject American civilization in all its forms. This
48 double-standard approach of Bertolucci's 1990 film relegates the piece into lower taste. "A strong misreading of
49 Bowles novel", Bertolucci's is a movie that has received mixed reviews but modest box office 4

50 In his haste to fulfil this objective, Bernardo Bertolucci tries very hard to bring the native inhabitants together
51 with the Americans into one shot. In doing so, he manages to confirm the pretext that the American discourse
52 on the other claims some difference in as opposed to the media coverage the novel has taken. Yet, I believe that
53 *The Sheltering Sky*-the source text as well as its filmic adaptation-is a chapter added to the awkward Hollywood
54 canonicity on Morocco. I would argue with Sara Mills and Denis Porter in the way that Western hegemonic
55 discourse is heterogeneous and not homogenous or lop-sided as Edward Said claims since the opening of *The*
56 *Sheltering Sky* articulates for the first time the voice of the native. It also speaks of this relationship between the
57 American and the Moroccan. The opening scene of the movie is very significant as it uses the muezzin voice, a
58 voice that is oriental par excellence, citing Koranic verses. This use of the muezzin voice is a way of acknowledging
59 the other, its culture and its religion. It appears that Bertolucci has put himself within American Orientalism
60 frame; it pays much attention to the native culture as much as it celebrates the American culture. At face value,
61 the opening scene of the movie also confirms that Hollywood claims some difference in approaching the foreign
62 from other European rigid frames. However, the movie restores in an extraordinary haste its awkward tone and
63 precipitates in hegemonic engagement with the other.

64 1 Introduction

65 Author: Ph.D, Assistant Prof, Ibn Tofail University, Morocco. approaching this very other from European
66 orientalising hegemonic frames. Dressed in white, the three American voyagers driven by their desire for voyage
67 and adventure into the Orient are represented as explorers in the classical definition. Fascinated by Morocco,
68 the American travellers -and Westerners in general-are willing to pay 'in blood and tears' to unveil Morocco
69 and learn things Moroccan. Reminiscent of the first encounter between the White man and Native Americans,
70 the encounter between the three travellers and native inhabitants draws on the same descriptive discourse in
71 *The Sheltering Sky*. It is an encounter that revolves around the traditional orientalist cliché through which
72 natives naively accept to serve the three American travellers and engage into a servant-master dichotomy. As
73 if sent by God, Moroccans are employed as extras just to carry the American voyagers' luggage, submitting to
74 the supremacy of America and accepting its presence in Morocco. Divested of their voice, no single Moroccan
75 character is assigned a role in the plot although the last part of the movie seems to introduce the other in more
76 flexible yet ideologically charged a mode 5

77 Bertolucci's *The sheltering Sky* persists in the process of orientalising Morocco in its portrayal of Moroccan
78 women. This portrayal, in my view, draws on the fantasies the filmmaker-an American Orientalist in disguise-
79 holds in view of Morocco. Bertolucci could hardly see native women outside the context of veiled harem. In this
80 1990 filmic version of Bowles's masterpiece, women "appear as shapeless bundles of black, a homogenous sea of
81 covered women trekking . The over-sexuality of the Oriental other is underlined in Bertolucci's opus, reducing
82 this very other into a sexually virile creature. This reductionist approach, so to speak, summons the movie into
83 the Orientalist genre in the way it reduces this Moroccan voice and highlights the danger that accompanies the
84 voyage in Morocco. In brief, Bertolucci is in my view a member of this guild of Hollywood Orientalists whose
85 major goal has always been to champion the grandeur of Americans and condemns even the idea of venturing into
86 Morocco. The movie does also fall into representing a model of American Orientalists well-versed in Moroccan
87 matters as 'to go native' to convince Moroccan kids to help in the baggage. Going native and using Arabic show
88 that the American in *The Sheltering Sky* is either an anthropologist or an Orientalist. In contrast, the movie
89 seems to have reproduced and replicated the same Orientalist clichés about Moroccans and subsequently reduced
90 native inhabitants into 'money-mad' cultural others. ?? Here, I am thinking about Abdul in Miachael Curtiz's
91 *Casablanca* (1942), representing Moroccans as passive characters in Hollywood and they are all assigned minor
92 roles in the plot. *Casablanca* is a studio Hollywood film production on Morocco as stage for power relations.

93 silently behind their unshaven mates." 6 Several are therefore the interruptions within the main plot as
94 symptoms of that difference in point of view that distances Hollywood from European taxonomizing discourse
95 on the other. These interruptions, I shall be reading in due course, are against the Saidian copyrighted version
96 of Orientalism as monolithic and not heterogeneous as his critics suggest. It is claimed to be multi-faceted in
97 the case of Bertolucci because his *The Sheltering Sky* is pregnant with examples. Hollywood's representations of
98 the other pay as much attention to the native culture as they do to other identities. This classical rendition of
99 Moroccan women feeds, in my judgment, on traditional Orientalism whereby oriental women featured in groups,
100 divested of their identity yet identified as sexual objects. Engaged in such a reductionist representation, the movie
101 under study seems to have awkwardly contributed to Hollywood's vilifying filmography on Morocco. Laconically
102 yet eloquently, Bertolucci's piece decodes Hollywood's discourse and translates its approach on Moroccan women
103 into an image of a woman in blood and flesh in her bed conquered sexually by the American traveller. She
104 shows in this erotic scene as a speechless body but eloquent in sex, participating on her part in the process of
105 orientalising things Moroccan. This particular scene is suggestive of that possible dialogue Bertolucci claims
106 to uphold between the natives and Americans. This dialogue that the scene seems to communicate explains

107 the interruption that characterizes Hollywood's rites of narration and representation of the Orient and roughly
108 speaking Morocco. 7 Bertolucci's version seems to acknowledge, in part at least, the local colour. Throughout the
109 movie, Ismail, Ma Haniya, Abdolwahab, Belqassim and others are for the first time mentioned by name. In the
110 same vein, the filmmaker tries very hard to demarcate American frames of reference from Europe's denigrating
111 discourse on the foreign when Port, Kit's husband, points out describing the other in the movie 'les Arabes sont
112 sympathiques ??'. 8 Jack G. Shaheen, Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. The ANNALS of the
113 American Academy of Political and Social Science, Book Review July 2003(Sage publications), P.183. 7 This
114 is Brian Edwards's claim which does not hold true in my argument. ?? The Sheltering Sky, the movie, the
115 French version. 'The Arabs are sympathetic'. This version of the other could very much claim to categorize the
116 movie as a text of a heterogeneous nature. The Sheltering Sky proclaims that within Hollywood's mainstream
117 cinematic discourse there always exists a moderate mode of narration. Incorporating non-translated Arabic in
118 the scenario is indicative of this shift in 'speaking the Other'. On the other hand, Bertolucci, who was faithful
119 to Bowles's novel, manages to bring natives together with Americans in one scene. Discussing Kit's relationship
120 with Belqassim, the movie seems to have broken the Western tradition of rejecting any relationship between white
121 women and Arab men. In using Belqassim in this scene, Bertolucci falls into replicating the same stereotype on
122 the other as sexually virile and promiscuous. Kit's fascination by Belqassim's virility is but a reproduction of
123 the same 'stock image' that has been circulating in a number of texts or films. As a case in point, Desdemona
124 in Othello, the movie, is fascinated by Othello, the Moor of Venice, and is trapped in his masculinity. The story
125 of Kit can also be read in the light of Diana and Doddi Alfayad's love story. The media coverage of this love
126 story, I believe, reads Diana's narrative on the ground that she is fascinated by Alfayad's masculinity. In short,
127 Bertolucci's version of these stories plays on the same rhetoric of narration and representation that portrays the
128 Arab as lascivious.

129 In my reading of these interruptions or gaps in The Sheltering Sky, I have pointed to that possible difference
130 in its mode of narration. Yet, I would argue that the movie, at hand, fails to dismiss this dehumanizing approach
131 in its dealing with the Maghreb. The incorporation of non-translated passages of Arabic, for instance, does not
132 mean that the filmmaker seeks to articulate the voice of the natives, but it is used to consecrate the image of
133 the Other as inarticulate and awkward. These Arabic passages used in the film are pointless and meaningless.
134 What Bertolucci tries to communicate in his film is that American representations of the foreign pays too much
135 attention to every detail of the native culture as opposed to the classical frames of narration through which the
136 natives are pushed towards the periphery. To illustrate, the camera of the movie examines every item of this very
137 native culture. This is a sequence, for instance, that follows a native praying and another features a Moorish
138 woman dancing. Other scenes are entirely dedicated to depict the nomadic nature of the native inhabitants.
139 People live in tents, drink tea and ride camels in the desert. Other women are shot veiled and covered. Their
140 unavailability and inaccessibility seems to reproduce the same stereotype of sameness. Put rather differently, they
141 are not individualized that you could hardly fathom one woman from others. In addition, Bertolucci's use of the
142 music track determines the mode of his approach; this allows some visibility-which I doubt-to things Moorish.
143 This evokes nostalgic sentiments and confirms the exotic nature of the place. The music track elicits our tears and
144 triggers our fears. This oriental music also determines the nature of this exotic locale through which the desert
145 figures out as a place that could quench the occidental's fantasies on the Orient. In short, as it acknowledges the
146 presence of the native culture, the music highlights how dangerous the adventure through the desert is.

147 As it claims some distance from those demeaning approaches on the Other, The Sheltering Sky, in my
148 view, seems to duplicate the same fixed stereotypes inherent in the psyche of the Orientalist. Bertolucci's
149 film production restores in an extraordinary haste its Orientalist denigrating taste in the way it justifies French
150 colonial presence in Morocco and Algeria through those scrambled shots featuring French police. This colonial
151 rhetoric-naturalisation-manifests in the fact that the French could licence passage to visitors. 9 When the three
152 travellers come to Morocco, a French agent inquiring about the nature of their visit points out 'how much time
153 are you going to spend here?' Port and his spouse would spend one year or more, a stay period that triggers the
154 French agent's curiosity to pose one other question. ??One year, ??in this country?' 10 This tragedy, I would
155 argue, highlights once more the danger of voyaging through the Orient and away of American frames. Bertolucci's
156 film seems therefore to have contributed to fixing this image of the Orient as exotic dangerous locale and describe
157 This very question foreshadows the dangerous journey that awaits the American travellers in the desert and
158 subsequently asserts France's legitimacy to have the upper hand over Moroccan as well as over Algerian lands.

159 The awkward version of narrating the Maghreb and Morocco, in particular, is preserved throughout the movie
160 to stabilize the very low image of Moroccans in Hollywood. This awkwardness in representing the foreign stems
161 so much from a western tendency to underline the backwardness of this Oriental cultural other and highlight the
162 rationality of the occidental. The funeral procession, as a case in point, is typically Oriental as it paraphrases the
163 chaotic nature of the natives and emphasizes the stereotypical dimension Bertolucci holds true in his rendition of
164 Morocco. Of similar importance, the movie's portrayal of the Other takes the stereotype further as it reproduces
165 his image as dirty through several daunting scenes. In the second phase of the movie, several sequences translate
166 the Moor's dirtiness into 'flies'. Children, women, old men and animals are all represented surrounded by flies.
167 As flies are symptomatic of dirtiness in our culture, Bertolucci, in the bus-scene, taps into Port, Kit and Turner's
168 intimidating experience with this very Moorish attribute. Yet, their fascination mixed with fear would mead
169 to the melodrama at the end of the movie. As they are fascinated by the desert, the American couple soon

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170 recaptures their lost love but only too late because the exotic territory would sentence him to death out of
171 typhoid. Traversing the Desert: Fascination and Fear in Bertolucci's The Sheltering Sky (1990) Orientals as
172 backward and irrational. As it represents Arabs as similar, unshaven and dirty creatures, The Sheltering Sky
173 calls back Iago's seminal statement that demarcates us the Moors as irrational and developed from them as
174 rational and developed. When Port has fallen sick, Moors seem to use their magic, superstition, and exotic music
175 to cure him. On the contrary, a French agent translating Iago's ideology that they 'work by wit and not by
176 witchcraft' comes to Port's rescue speaking the language of science and magic. This scene in the main seems
177 to exclude Moors from science when Kit found no Moorish doctor to help her. This exclusivist approach that
178 Bertolucci uses asserts his tendency to vilify, dominate and produce a passive Moor, a Moor who is unable to
179 interact in his dealing with the West.

180 At this stage, I would argue that Bertolucci's The sheltering Sky celebrates some of the ideals of Luce's
181 concept of the American Century. The movie represents America-incarnated in Tunner, the businessman-as an
182 economic power and underlines his heroic act at the very closing scene. If Moors failed to rescue Port and his
183 wife and the French's attempt was aborted in cradle, Bertolucci-Bowles in disguise-kept Tunner, the epitome of
184 American heroism, alive to save Kit his lost beloved. The economic hegemony of America manifests in the way
185 the American embassy sent an aeroplane to take Kit, an American citizen. Equally important, the movie seems
186 however to praise American-Moroccan relationship and condemn the French presence in Morocco. Whilst in the
187 desert, Tunner -and not Portstands in for the America Kit and her spouse have left behind. Thus, Bertolucci
188 quickly recaptures this paradise-lost (America), to use John Milton, whilst voyaging through the desert.

189 In conclusion, I would point out that the movie, at hand, represents Port as an American anthropologist or
190 a heir of American Orientalism as he is portrayed, oftentimes, as an observer watching over women dancing and
191 trying to discover phases in the inner life of the Moors. Last but not least, Bertolucci, I believe, manages to
192 translate Bowles's narrative of American mobility through a French space, highlighting the birth of America as a
193 neo-global power. In short, The Sheltering Sky, as it distances itself from a French position, fails to mobilize some
194 if not all of the tropes and conventions inherent in French colonialist discourse. Yet, the movie celebrates the
195 spirit of American Heroism and outlives some of the ideals of the American century in the wake of a demeaning
mode of narrating the Other.

[Note: 1 See Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*. (Durban and London: Duke University Press, 2005), P.87. 2 Ibid. 3 Ibid. PP.87,88.]

Figure 1: