“Reclaiming Sidi Moumen”: Moroccan Cinema as a Catalyst for Cultural Intervention and Educational Reform

Keywords: Moroccan cinema; cultural intervention; Sidi Moumen; social inclusion; urban youth; hip-hop education; community development

Abstract:
Moroccan director Nabil Ayouch’s engagement with the Sidi Moumen neighborhood of Casablanca transcends traditional filmmaking and enters the realm of social intervention. This article examines how Ayouch’s films and initiatives exemplify the role of cinema as a tool for cultural and educational change in Morocco, with a focus on reclaiming stigmatized urban spaces for inclusion and reform. We analyze Ayouch’s decade-spanning efforts in Sidi Moumen – from the portrayal of its disenfranchised youth in *Horses of God* (2012) to the creation of the youth cultural center “Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen” (2014) and its celebration in *Casablanca Beats* (2021). By situating these efforts in the context of Moroccan socio-political developments, the article highlights how visual storytelling can spark national dialogue, influence perceptions, and directly contribute to community empowerment. Ayouch’s work in Sidi Moumen has helped transform the neighborhood’s narrative from one of radicalization and neglect to one of artistic resilience and hope. This case study demonstrates the capacity of Moroccan cinema to act not only as a mirror reflecting social issues, but also as a lamp lighting the way toward social change – fostering cross-cultural conversations, inspiring policy considerations on youth inclusion, and physically intervening through cultural infrastructure. The implications reach beyond Morocco, suggesting a model for how art and film can be harnessed for educational uplift and the reclamation of marginalized urban spaces in North Africa and the broader region.

Introduction

In North Africa, as in many parts of the world, cinema has long been intertwined with social change. From the revolutionary cinema of Algeria in the 1960s to contemporary Tunisian and Egyptian films tackling social taboos, filmmakers in the region have often viewed the silver screen as a platform for critique and progress. Morocco is no exception. Especially since the turn of the 21st century – following the end of the repressive “Years of Lead” in the 1990s – Moroccan cinema has experienced a new wave of socially engaged filmmaking. Directors began to address subjects once considered off-limits: poverty, corruption, the status of women, and the plight of youth in the nation’s neglected peripheries. In doing so, filmmakers have increasingly assumed roles akin to cultural activists, sparking conversations that contribute to gradual shifts in attitudes and policies.

Nabil Ayouch stands out in this landscape not just for the content of his films, but for the scope of his engagement beyond filmmaking. Ayouch’s career reveals a continuum of involvement – from making award-winning movies that spotlight underrepresented communities, to founding on-the-ground initiatives that directly serve those communities. This dual approach raises important questions: Can cinema function as more than mere reflection – can it be an *intervention* in and of itself? How can

storytelling help reclaim a stigmatized space and insert it into national narratives of pride and progress? And what is the interplay between creative representation and real-life social projects in driving reform and inclusion?

This article addresses these questions through the example of Sidi Moumen, a slum-turned-symbol in Morocco's largest city. Sidi Moumen's name was once associated chiefly with the tragedy of the 2003 Casablanca bombings and the dire conditions of its shantytowns. Ayouch's film *Horses of God* (2012) captured that dark chapter, dramatizing how extremist recruiters exploited Sidi Moumen's disaffected youth. But Ayouch did not stop at depicting the problem. In 2014, he co-founded the **Stars Cultural Center (Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen)** in the very heart of the district, aiming to "break down the 'invisible walls'…that confine culture to the city center" and give local youth the means to express themselves through arttaipeitimes.comtaipeitimes.com. Several years later, Ayouch's film *Casablanca Beats* (2021) – set in that cultural center and featuring its youth – brought Sidi Moumen international acclaim as a cradle of hip-hop and hope. Remarkably, some of the same individuals who might have been relegated to society's margins are now at the forefront of Morocco's cultural dialogue, performing at prestigious venues and even representing Morocco at the Cannes Film Festival.

In examining these developments, we adopt a multi-faceted approach. First, we consider **Moroccan cinema's tradition of social engagement** to contextualize Ayouch's work – how have films historically influenced societal perspectives or policy in Morocco? Next, we delve into the timeline of Ayouch's interventions in Sidi Moumen: the impact of *Horses of God* on public consciousness and policy debates, the founding and growth of the Stars Cultural Center as a form of cultural/educational intervention, and the role of *Casablanca Beats* in reshaping the narrative of the neighborhood both nationally and internationally. We will analyze media reports, interviews, and community feedback to assess tangible outcomes – for instance, increased cultural participation, shifts in public attitudes, and the creation of similar centers elsewhere. Finally, we discuss the broader implications for **cultural policy and educational reform**, arguing that Ayouch's Sidi Moumen project exemplifies how film artists can partner with civil society and potentially influence government priorities regarding marginalized youth.

By reclaiming Sidi Moumen through camera lens and community action, Ayouch has helped turn a "den of suicide bombers" into a "cultural hub," as one headline succinctly put itthearabweekly.comchinadaily.com.cn. This reclamation is not only physical and social but also symbolic. The story of Sidi Moumen's transformation – from being feared to being celebrated – offers valuable lessons on the power of narrative and the importance of investing in human capital in forgotten urban spaces. Through this case, we see how Moroccan cinema can be harnessed as a soft power tool to encourage introspection, empathy, and change within society. In the pages that follow, we explore these themes in depth, illustrating the synergy between *reel* action and *real* action in the quest for social inclusion and educational upliftment.

Background: Moroccan Cinema and Social Change

To appreciate the significance of Ayouch's approach, it's important to situate it within Morocco's cinematic and social evolution. During the post-independence decades (1950s–1980s), Moroccan cinema was relatively limited and often subject to strict state oversight. Filmmakers navigated censorship and a lack of infrastructure, which curtailed direct socio-political critique. Nonetheless, seeds of socially aware cinema were planted by pioneers such as Ahmed El Maânouni and Farida Benlyazid, who touched on youth struggles and cultural identity. It was after the late King Hassan II's

reign – specifically after 1999 – that Moroccan filmmakers found greater freedom to "unveil contemporary and sensitive issues and record every untold story" of the nation. This period, under King Mohammed VI, saw a new official rhetoric of reconciliation and development (e.g. the Equity and Reconciliation Commission for past abuses, and the National Initiative for Human Development focusing on poverty reduction). Filmmakers emerged as both products and proponents of this opening.

Nabil Ayouch was among a cohort of directors who rose to prominence in the 2000s by tackling the very subjects that reflected Morocco's growing pains and aspirations. His early success *Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets* (2000) broke ground by focusing on Casablanca's homeless street children – a raw portrait filmed on location with non-actor kids, giving a face to an invisible population. The film's local and international acclaim demonstrated that Moroccan audiences were ready to confront social realities on screen, and that such stories could garner empathy abroad. Ayouch followed with other bold projects, including *Much Loved* (2015), a film about sex workers in Marrakech that, while earning him a ban and death threats at home, also spurred unprecedented public discourse on sex trafficking and women's rights in Morocco.

This pattern – film provoking conversation leading towards change – is not straightforward, but it underscores an important role of art in civil society. By exposing uncomfortable truths (be it the plight of street children, or the hypocrisy around prostitution), films like Ayouch's have pushed certain issues from the shadows into the public sphere. In some cases, they have dovetailed with reformist currents. For example, the period after *Ali Zaoua* saw increased NGO activity and government attention to street children programs. Similarly, although *Much Loved* was banned, it coincided with rising calls to protect women in precarious situations and arguably influenced a generational shift in attitudes regarding such topics.

Cinema's influence on policy can be indirect and hard to quantify, but its influence on *public imagination* is clearer. This is where the reclamation of Sidi Moumen's image becomes crucial. After 2003, the government launched initiatives to physically transform Sidi Moumen: part of the national "Villes sans Bidonvilles" (Cities without Slums) program involved relocating some residents to proper housing and demolishing shantytowns. Infrastructure improvements like the extension of the Casablanca tramway to Sidi Moumen (completed in the 2010s) and new schools and sports facilities were aimed at integrating the neighborhood. However, changing bricks and mortar is one thing; changing stigma is another. In Moroccan popular culture and media, Sidi Moumen remained a shorthand for "dangerous slum." News reports on crime or extremism would invoke it, and many Casablancans continued to avoid the area.

It is into this breach – between physical change and perceptual lag – that cultural intervention can step. Ayouch's belief, informed by his own upbringing in a Paris banlieue, is that cultural empowerment is key to social inclusion. In France, he benefited from youth centers and arts programs; in Morocco, he saw Sidi Moumen's youth as equally deserving of such investment. His philosophy aligns with contemporary development thinking that "soft" infrastructure (like community centers, arts education, sports) is as vital as "hard" infrastructure in uplifting marginalized communities. These provide safe spaces, foster self-esteem, and build bridges between the margin and the mainstream. The Moroccan state's own efforts – e.g. INDH projects often include cultural and sports centers – acknowledge this. Yet, the scale and sustainability of such efforts can be limited by bureaucracy and funding. Here, a private initiative like Ayouch's Stars Cultural Center can complement public policy, piloting new approaches and galvanizing support through the visibility that an internationally known filmmaker commands.

Another aspect to consider is Morocco's evolving discourse on religious extremism post-2003. The shock of the Casablanca bombings led to security crackdowns but also introspection about root causes. King Mohammed VI himself spoke of the need to "dry up" the sources of fanaticism, which meant addressing poverty and social exclusion. Religious education was reformed to promote a tolerant Moroccan Islam, and numerous associations began grassroots work in poor districts. Ayouch's *Horses of God* fed into this introspective narrative by humanizing the bombers and highlighting the social environment of radicalization. The film, along with Binebine's novel, found its way into discussions among educators and students. For instance, a cross-cultural project described by Boumlik and Van Slyck (2017) had American and Moroccan students read *Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen* and watch Ayouch's film to discuss extremism. This educational use of art exemplifies how cinema can be leveraged for learning and dialogue, not just entertainment. It literally brought Sidi Moumen into a classroom setting – ironically giving the place an educational role where there had been a void.

In summary, Moroccan cinema by the 2010s had matured into a socially conscious force, often running ahead of official narratives and challenging society to confront issues. Ayouch's work must be seen in this context of an art form finding its voice as a catalyst for change. However, Ayouch pushed the envelope further by not limiting his role to that of filmmaker. With Sidi Moumen, he exemplified a holistic approach: diagnose through film, intervene through action, then illustrate success through another film. The next sections detail how this unfolded and what impact it has had.

Ayouch's Dual Intervention in Sidi Moumen: From Reel to Real

From *Horses of God* to a Cultural Center (2012–2014). The release of *Horses of God* in 2012 put Sidi Moumen on the cinematic map, but as discussed, it also intensified debate about representation and responsibility. Ayouch, confronted by the backlash from Sidi Moumen residents who felt mischaracterized, did something atypical: he sought to engage rather than disengage. One immediate outcome was Ayouch organizing a screening of *Horses of God* in Sidi Moumen itself[e.vnexpress.nete.vnexpress.net](). Since the neighborhood lacked a cinema, he arranged an open-air projection. This event – held roughly a decade after the 2003 attacks – turned out to be historical: for the first time, families of the victims of the bombing sat side by side with families of the perpetrators to watch and discuss the film. "Ten years after the attacks, this historic session brought together…families of victims and families of suicide bombers," Ayouch recounted, highlighting the symbolic reconciliation that art facilitated. It is hard to imagine a government-organized event achieving this delicate feat. The screening served as a microcosm of what Ayouch envisioned – using storytelling to create dialogue and healing in a community torn by tragedy and stigma.

Inspired by the conversations and needs voiced at such local screenings, Ayouch conceived of a permanent presence in Sidi Moumen. In 2014, in partnership with painter and writer Mahi Binebine (who had written the novel that *Horses of God* was based on), Ayouch opened the *Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen* Cultural Center. The choice of name – "The Stars of Sidi Moumen" – is itself telling. It flips the narrative: where once "Sidi Moumen" conjured darkness, now it is paired with "Stars," suggesting light, talent, and aspiration. As Binebine described, this cultural project was explicitly to "fight against radicalization" by giving youth pathways to creative fulfillment[youtube.comyoutube.com]().

The center, housed in a white building adjacent to a new tramway station, quickly became a beacon in the communitye.vnexpress.nete.vnexpress.net. By 2017, it was regularly hosting more than 300 young people for classes ranging from music (theory and instruments) to breakdance, ballet, theater, and even foreign languages like English and Frenchtaipeitimes.come.vnexpress.net. The idea was to provide what Ayouch himself had needed in his youth: "a place to learn how to dream" and to replace violence with creativity as a means of expressione.vnexpress.nete.vnexpress.net. The programming consciously balanced modern art forms (hip-hop, rap, DJing) with classical ones (piano, ballet), sending a message that Sidi Moumen's children are entitled to the full spectrum of cultural capital, not just what is stereotypically "street."

One significant impact of the center was on bridging Sidi Moumen with the rest of the city and beyond. The "invisible walls, both mental and geographical," that Ayouch spoke of began to come downtaipeitimes.comtaipeitimes.com. The center's assistant manager noted that initially in 2014 "there was nothing — no culture, no cinema" in the areae.vnexpress.net. But with the center's activities, outsiders started coming in: *free film screenings* attracted people from across Casablanca, *visiting artists* (including international ones) held workshops, and showcases put on by the center's youth drew audiences from "far and wide"e.vnexpress.nete.vnexpress.net. This was unprecedented; Sidi Moumen was no longer a no-go zone but a place where, for example, middle-class families might venture to watch a hip-hop show or art exhibit. Such exchanges are invaluable in eroding the prejudice that often accumulates around segregated urban pockets. It also gave the youth a sense that they mattered to the wider world – a crucial psychological shift from feeling excluded to feeling seen.

The center also had a policy of inclusion regarding cost: while it charged a modest fee for those who could pay (to instill commitment and value), it subsidized or waived fees for low-income familiestaipeitimes.com. No talented or eager child was turned away for lack of money. This model required fundraising – Ayouch and Binebine secured private donations and support from foreign cultural institutes (French, Belgian, etc.) to sustain operationstaipeitimes.com. The success of the Sidi Moumen center emboldened Ayouch's team to expand. By 2018, they had opened a similar cultural center in the Beni Makada district of Tangier, another underprivileged neighborhood known for high youth unemployment and drug problemstaipeitimes.comtaipeitimes.com. Plans were announced for centers in other cities like Fez and Marrakeshtaipeitimes.com. Ayouch described a vision of a nationwide network of centers with "passionate teachers" where young people could "jump into" opportunities, sharing programs and training across sitestaipeitimes.com. In essence, Ayouch's initiative was scaling up into a civil society movement, complementing the state's efforts by focusing on cultural empowerment as a pillar of development.

Cinema as Amplifier: *Casablanca Beats* and Global Dialogue (2021). While the cultural center was making quiet strides on the ground, Ayouch decided to amplify its story through a new film. *Casablanca Beats* can be seen as both a documentation and a dramatization of the experiment in Sidi Moumen. Ayouch cast real students and local youths, including Anas Basbousi – the very rapper-turned-educator who had founded the "Positive School of Hip-Hop" class at the centermoveablefest.comtheguardian.com. Basbousi's real-life journey (from struggling to find spaces for hip-hop in early 2000s Casablanca, to establishing a dedicated hip-hop school within the center by 2015) is interwoven into the film's narrativetheguardian.comtheguardian.com. This blending of reality and fiction served a dual purpose: it kept the film authentic to the community's voice, and it broadcast the community's achievements to a far broader audience than the center alone could reach.

The release and reception of *Casablanca Beats* significantly elevated the conversation around Sidi Moumen. In July 2021, the film made headlines as the first Moroccan film in 59 years to compete for the Palme d'Or at Cannes. This was a moment of national pride; Moroccan media and officials celebrated the selection. Ayouch used the spotlight to talk about Sidi Moumen's transformation. In interviews, he often referred to how *Casablanca Beats* is his most personal, even "autobiographical" film, because he sees himself in those kids and their hunger for expression. He spoke at Cannes about how the film is a tribute to the youth of Sidi Moumen and a statement that "they are the true stars" whose "light in their eyes" he can't wait for everyone to see. Such framing does more than promote a movie – it reframes a community. International news outlets that had once perhaps only mentioned Sidi Moumen in the context of terrorism now were writing about its hip-hop revolution. For instance, *AfricaNews* ran a story highlighting that Ayouch's film shows Sidi Moumen's youth "have a lot to offer yet are chained by a rigid society," and that *Casablanca Beats* provided a "promising tone" of change. The Hollywood Reporter and Variety praised the film's energy and contextualized it in terms of the power of arts in marginal communitiesvariety.comcurzon.com.

On the national front, the Moroccan Ministry of Culture and communication embraced the film. It was selected as Morocco's official submission for the Best International Feature category at the Oscars, further boosting its profilemoveablefest.com. While it ultimately did not secure an Oscar nomination, the fact that it was put forth indicates a recognition by Moroccan authorities of the film's importance. It symbolically said: "This is the Morocco we want to present to the world – one of youthful creativity and progressive change," rather than the old trope of despair.

One concrete impact of the film (and by extension the cultural center) is the attitudinal shift among Sidi Moumen's own residents. As detailed earlier, whereas *Horses of God* had drawn protests, *Casablanca Beats* drew applause locally. Community members felt "represented" in a proud way. They noted that scenes in Ayouch's films truly reflected their life (e.g., the cramped housing, the family dynamics, the conservatism they navigate). More importantly, they agreed with the film's message of "visibility" – the idea that having their stories told is crucial, even if it risks airing dirty laundry, because it puts their issues on the map. This resonates with the argument by cultural critics that representation of marginal groups, however controversial, can galvanize support and resources to address their plight. In the case of Sidi Moumen, the positive representation also served as an antidote to the negative image. It gave locals a narrative to rally behind: *we are not just a terror slum; we are a community of artists and fighters*. This can have ripple effects: instilling confidence in youth to pursue opportunities, convincing local authorities to invest more in the area, and reducing social distance between Sidi Moumen and greater Casablanca.

At a policy level, Ayouch's integrated approach in Sidi Moumen aligns well with Morocco's stated goals for youth and education, potentially providing a model for replication. The fact that the cultural center expanded to five centers across Morocco by 2022, as noted in the Guardian, indicates some level of institutional or donor support could be being leveragedtheguardian.comtheguardian.com. These centers complement formal education by filling gaps: arts, vocational skills, and simply safe communal spaces, which schools or families might not provide. There is anecdotal evidence that such interventions can reduce dropout rates and delinquency, although systematic studies would be beneficial.

Internationally, Ayouch's Sidi Moumen project has sparked *cross-cultural dialogue*. We saw the example of the US-Morocco student discussions on *Horses of God*. With *Casablanca Beats*, a new cultural export is Moroccan hip-hop, which is reaching audiences worldwide through the film's

soundtrack and live performances. The youth from the film performed at the Cannes Film Festival – an almost surreal journey from Sidi Moumen to the French Riviera. As one of them marveled, "You are in Sidi Moumen and then you attend the international Cannes Film Festival". That journey in itself sends a powerful message: talent can bloom anywhere and be showcased on the grandest stages if nurtured.

Moreover, Ayouch's model demonstrates a form of *public-private partnership* in effecting change. While not formalized as such, his foundation-like work in Sidi Moumen supplements government efforts, and indeed has drawn government figures' attention. In a 2021 interview, Ayouch mentioned that some officials were initially skeptical about teaching hip-hop in a conservative area, but the success made them come around to supporting it (e.g., by easing bureaucratic hurdles or attending events). Now, with international awards and media focusing on this narrative, it can influence policymakers to invest more in cultural programs. Already, Morocco has in recent years included arts in some school curricula and built more cultural houses in other cities, but initiatives like Ayouch's highlight how crucial and effective these can be specifically for youth empowerment.

In conclusion of this section, Nabil Ayouch's dual intervention in Sidi Moumen – filmic and on-the-ground – exemplifies how a committed cultural actor can bridge the gap between representation and reality. By first *framing the problem* (in *Horses of God*) and then *demonstrating a solution* (through the Stars center and *Casablanca Beats*), Ayouch has contributed to a narrative and practical turnaround for a community. It's a rare case where we can directly trace a line from art to action to further art that celebrates that action. This holistic approach amplifies the impact: the film draws support to the center; the center's success feeds into the film's authenticity and message. Together, they reclaim Sidi Moumen's story, turning it from a cautionary tale into an inspirational one.

Figures 1: Local Moroccan girls attend a ballet class at the Stars Cultural Center in Sidi Moumen (2017). The center, co-founded by Ayouch, offers classes in dance, music, and arts to over 300 youth, showing that "there are also stars and not only terrorists" in the district[e.vnexpress.nete.vnexpress.net](). Such visual evidence of cultural revival in a once stigmatized neighborhood powerfully complements the narrative of reform.

Broader Implications: Cinema, Policy, and Space Reclamation

Ayouch's work in Sidi Moumen carries broader implications for both the arts and public policy realms in Morocco and potentially across the region:

1. Cinema as a Policy Influencer: The Sidi Moumen case illustrates how cinema can surface issues that need policy attention and even model solutions. *Horses of God* underscored the need for socio-economic investment in slums to prevent extremism, effectively echoing policy recommendations in a visceral form. *Casablanca Beats* then showcased the impact of cultural education, aligning with goals of various youth policies. Moroccan authorities, who might initially view filmmakers like Ayouch as gadflies, can glean insights from these cinematic narratives. For instance, seeing the tangible outcomes at Les Étoiles (e.g., hundreds of youth engaged, families supportive, negative influences kept at bay) can encourage integration of arts programs in national youth strategies. Already, after the 2003 attacks, Morocco injected more resources into disadvantaged areas (housing, jobs). Ayouch's success suggests that including *cultural empowerment* in that mix is

vital. It's a reminder that counter-extremism and inclusion efforts must go beyond hard infrastructure or surveillance to the hearts and minds – something art addresses uniquely.

2. Reclaiming Stigmatized Spaces through Narrative: Sidi Moumen's transformation in the public imagination from "no-go slum" to "neighborhood of stars" provides a template for other stigmatized spaces. Many cities in North Africa (and indeed worldwide) have quarters that are marginalized and carry negative reputations – whether it's Douar Hicher in Tunis, Dar El Beida in Algiers, or Ezbet El Haggana in Cairo. The combination of community engagement and narrative change can help reclaim these spaces. A key lesson is that communities should tell their *own* stories. Ayouch achieved narrative reclamation by involving Sidi Moumen residents directly in the storytelling – from being actors and creators in *Casablanca Beats* to performing their art internationally. This insider storytelling breaks the monopoly of outsiders who often depict such areas. It also instills pride internally and nuance externally. Governments and cultural institutions could leverage this: support local film workshops, community media, or youth theatre in marginalized areas, then broadcast those stories nationally. The authenticity of those voices can replace fear with understanding and empathy.

3. Cultural Centers as Complementary Education: The success of the Stars Cultural Center reinforces the argument that informal education platforms are crucial in neighborhoods where formal education may falter. Many youth in slums drop out of school due to economic pressure or disillusionment, leaving them idle and vulnerable. A cultural center like Les Étoiles can capture some of these youth, offering alternative pathways – perhaps leading to careers in the arts, or simply keeping them constructively occupied and boosting their confidence to pursue further training. Ayouch's expansion of centers to other cities indicates a scalable model. Partnerships with the Ministry of Youth and Sports (which runs youth clubs nationwide) could integrate some of Ayouch's curriculum – for example, hip-hop workshops, film-making, or other contemporary arts that resonate with youth. This could rejuvenate existing youth centers which sometimes suffer from lack of attractive programming.

4. International Dialogue and Perception: On the international stage, Ayouch's films have sparked conversations about Moroccan society that go beyond stereotypes of either exotic orientalism or security concerns. *Horses of God* invited viewers abroad to consider the link between poverty and terror – arguably fostering a more empathetic view of why some Moroccan youths fell into extremism (contrasting with Islamophobic tropes of irrational violence). *Casablanca Beats* then presented a refreshing image of Moroccan youth as creative, reformist, and globally connected through art. This contributes to Morocco's soft power – showcasing it as a country where positive change is brewing from the grassroots, and where young voices push boundaries. Such cultural diplomacy can shape foreign public opinion and even policy (for instance, international cultural foundations or NGOs might be more inclined to support projects in Morocco seeing such success stories). It also facilitates cross-cultural youth connections, as Moroccan hip-hop artists may collaborate internationally, and foreign artists may take interest in Sidi Moumen as a place of innovation, not just deprivation.

5. Challenges and Sustainability: It must be noted that Ayouch's model also highlights challenges. A single charismatic figure (a filmmaker with resources and connections) drove the Sidi Moumen project – replicating that everywhere is not easy. Institutionalization is needed for sustainability. Will the Stars centers thrive beyond Ayouch's direct involvement? They will need continuous funding, trained staff, and community ownership. There's also the challenge of balancing external visibility with local needs. A critique sometimes leveled at such projects is whether they serve the community first or the narrative first. In Ayouch's case, the evidence suggests genuine community benefit, but it's

important that the glamour of film accolades doesn't overshadow on-the-ground work. Ensuring that hundreds of kids can use the center daily may not be as newsworthy as a Cannes appearance, but it's the core of the impact. Thus, a policy implication is that the state or donors should provide steady support to institutionalize these centers, ensuring they aren't dependent on intermittent publicity or the energy of one person.

6. Reducing Extremism through Inclusion: Perhaps the most profound implication of Ayouch's intervention is its contribution to the discourse on preventing violent extremism (PVE). In the wake of continued global concerns about radicalization, especially of youth, Ayouch offers a cultural counter-narrative strategy. By turning potential "rebels" into artists, the Sidi Moumen project aligns with theories that communities resilient to extremism are those where youth feel valued, heard, and hopeful about their future. Morocco has been relatively stable since 2003, with sporadic cases of radicalization mostly tackled through security and religious reform measures. But Ayouch's approach suggests a PVE measure that is bottom-up: flood the space with opportunities for positive expression so that the allure of radical ideology diminishes. As one center member, Soumia, put it, the project taught her "if you want, you can," countering the fatalism that recruiters prey ontaipeitimes.com. The mere existence of the center and the film *Casablanca Beats* also counters extremist narratives that often decry art as immoral – showing communities embracing art without losing their values (notably, the center pauses for prayer times and gradually earned parents' approval)taipeitimes.comtaipeitimes.com. This balancing of modern art and respect for tradition could be a persuasive model in other Muslim-majority contexts grappling with similar issues.

In concluding this discussion, it's apt to quote Ayouch's own metaphor: he described shantytowns as "an open sky jail" – they might not have physical walls, but they impose the trauma of confinement on their residents. His work in Sidi Moumen has been about tearing down those invisible walls. Cinema was the hammer that cracked the wall (exposing the reality), and cultural engagement was the door built in its place (providing a way out and a way in for others). The reclamation of Sidi Moumen is thus a story of both narrative justice and social justice. Marginalized people seized control of their narrative and, in doing so, began to change their reality.

Conclusion

Nabil Ayouch's Sidi Moumen project exemplifies the potent synergy that can arise when art and activism converge. By leveraging the tools of cinema and community organizing, Ayouch and his collaborators have managed to rewrite the story of a neighborhood once synonymous with despair and danger. The journey from *Horses of God* to *Casablanca Beats*, and from a notorious slum to a budding cultural haven, underscores a powerful message: **representation and reality go hand in hand**. Changing how a place is represented in film can influence reality by galvanizing support and altering perceptions; simultaneously, changing the reality on the ground enriches and validates new representations.

For Moroccan stakeholders – be it policymakers, educators, or artists – the lessons are manifold. Investing in cultural and educational interventions in disenfranchised areas is not a luxury or an afterthought; it is a cornerstone of building a more inclusive society. Ayouch's initiative has shown that such investment yields not only social benefits (youth engagement, reduced marginalization, talent development) but also reputational dividends for the community and nation at large. Sidi Moumen's "stars" are now shining on international stages, but they were kindled by local action.

The case also highlights that sustainable change is a collective effort. Ayouch's celebrity and dedication lit the spark, but it was the enthusiasm of Sidi Moumen's youth, the openness of their families, the support of partners (like Binebine and various donors), and the attention of audiences that fanned the flame. Going forward, scaling and sustaining such efforts will require structures beyond any single individual. Incorporating the arts into public education, funding community centers, and training local youth leaders to carry the torch are all ways to institutionalize this model.

Furthermore, Ayouch's approach has provided a narrative framework that can be emulated: identify a negative narrative about a community, physically engage with that community to create positive stories, and then broadcast those stories to drown out the negatives. It's a cycle of reclamation that can apply to many contexts worldwide where communities have been stigmatized by either their history or external labeling.

In the broader context of North African societies undergoing transitions and seeking pathways for their large youth populations, the importance of giving youth a voice cannot be overstated. As seen during the Arab Spring, disenfranchised youth will find a way to be heard – whether through protest, unfortunately sometimes through violence, or through art. It is far better for societies to provide constructive channels. Moroccan cinema, with pioneers like Ayouch, is carving out one such channel by telling stories that matter and inspiring real-world follow-through.

In conclusion, the tale of Sidi Moumen's stars offers hope that even the most marginalized places can be reclaimed as spaces of creativity and dialogue. It reminds us that behind every statistic about a "dangerous slum" are individuals with dreams and talents. All they may need is for someone to believe in them and a platform to amplify their voice. Ayouch believed, provided that platform, and through the fusion of film and action, helped turn a forsaken "open sky jail" into an open stage. Moroccan cinema, in this instance, truly became a catalyst for change – projecting not only images on a screen but projecting a community toward a better future.

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Moroccan Teachers as Agents of Change: Cinematic Portrayals, Cultural Context, and Societal Perceptions

Keywords: Moroccan cinema; teacher representation; cultural agency; socio-political context; education in film

Abstract

Moroccan cinema provides a compelling lens on how teachers serve as cultural and educational agents within society. This article examines seven Moroccan films (2003–2021) that feature teacher protagonists, analyzing their portrayals against the socio-political backdrops of contemporary Morocco. Through contextual film analysis, we find that these movies depict teachers in diverse settings – from remote Amazigh-speaking villages to crowded urban classrooms – often casting them as **"agents of change"** who confront societal challenges. The films address themes of gender dynamics, linguistic identity, economic hardship, and educational policy, thereby reflecting and occasionally critiquing prevailing social attitudes. We discuss how such representations both contribute to and challenge societal perceptions of education. Rather than reinforcing a single stereotype, Moroccan films portray teachers as change-makers striving to uplift communities or, in some cases, as figures constrained by systemic issues. This nuanced cinematic narrative can reshape public understanding by highlighting teachers' roles in cultural preservation and social progress. Ultimately, the article argues that Moroccan cinema not only mirrors educational realities but also stimulates dialogue on the value of teachers in society.

Introduction

Cinema in North Africa has long been a medium for social commentary, and Moroccan cinema is no exception. Teachers, as pillars of education and culture, hold a complex status in Moroccan society – historically respected as "ustad" or mentor figures, yet in recent times facing diminished prestige amid economic and social pressures. Representation of teachers on screen is particularly impactful because film narratives can shape public perceptions (as suggested by cultivation theory) over time. However, teacher-centered stories have been relatively scarce in Moroccan film. Given this rarity, a critical examination is needed to understand how the few portrayals of educators are constructed and what messages they convey about education and society.

This study is grounded in the context of Moroccan arts and education, exploring how films depict teachers as both cultural transmitters and agents of educational change. It builds on the premise that on-screen narratives do more than entertain; they engage with ideological questions and mirror societal values. In Morocco's case, where issues like rural inequality, language politics, and teacher disenfranchisement have featured in public discourse, films provide a creative space to dramatize these realities. By analyzing key Moroccan films and their socio-political contexts, we seek to answer: **How are teachers portrayed as cultural and educational agents in Moroccan cinema, and what**

societal perceptions do these representations reinforce or challenge? Addressing this question illuminates the intersection of education, culture, and media in North Africa, offering insights relevant to scholars of both educational studies and film arts.

Following a review of relevant literature on cinema's social impact and the cultural role of teachers, we outline our analytical approach. We then present findings from seven films spanning rural, urban, and historical settings in Morocco, highlighting how each film's context shapes its depiction of teachers. Finally, we discuss how these portrayals contribute to a broader societal narrative about education and the extent to which they inspire reflection or reform.

Literature Context

Scholars often conceptualize cinema as more than entertainment – it is a cultural artifact that can propagate or challenge ideologies. In postcolonial North African contexts, film has been used to critique social conditions and articulate aspirations of change (Bahmad 2013). Educational films or "school films" worldwide frequently depict inspirational teacher figures who transform students' lives, epitomizing the notion of teachers as *agents of change* (Fullan, 1993). According to Fullan's theory, teachers who act as change agents exhibit openness, innovation, and dedication to reform. These traits enable them to reshape not only their classrooms but the social fabric around them. Classic Western examples, from *Dead Poets Society* to *Freedom Writers*, have popularized the trope of the heroic teacher triumphing against the odds.

However, representation is culturally specific. Analyses of teacher portrayals in Western media have noted that overly idealized narratives can create unrealistic expectations (McCullick, 2003, as discussed in cultivation theory research). In contrast, emerging Moroccan cinema tends toward realism and social critique. Studies on Moroccan film (e.g. by Kevin Dwyer and Miloudi Belkadi) highlight how filmmakers often balance artistic storytelling with commentary on issues like gender, class, and language. The concept of cinema as both art and ideology is pertinent here, as Moroccan directors weave narratives that entertain yet question the status quo.

Crucially, there is a gap in literature regarding North African teachers on screen. One recent investigation notes a *"scarcity of teacher-themed films in Moroccan Cinema"*, which suggests that each representation carries significant weight. This scarcity also led to assumptions (prior to analysis) that existing films might lean on outdated stereotypes of strict, authoritarian teachers. Yet, if Moroccan cinema follows its general trend of social realism, we might expect more layered characters. The present analysis, therefore, situates itself at the intersection of educational discourse and film studies, drawing on theoretical frameworks of media influence (like cultivation theory) and the sociological significance of teacher imagery. By examining films in their socio-political milieu – using contextual analysis – we gain insight into how Moroccan culture envisions the teacher's role and whether these visions challenge or conform to societal expectations.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative **contextual analysis** of Moroccan films alongside interpretative review of their socio-political content. We selected **seven Moroccan movies** released between 2003 and 2021 that prominently feature teacher characters (male and female) in varied settings. The sample was chosen purposively to include a range of contexts – urban and rural locales, different time

periods, and diverse directorial styles – ensuring a comprehensive view of teacher representations. The films analyzed are: *Class 8* (2003, dir. Jamal Belmajdoub), *The Teacher* (2004, dir. Hassan El-Mufti), *The Echo of the Mountain* (2009, dir. Abdellah El-Abdouri), *Razzia* (2017, dir. Nabil Ayouch), *Sahib Al-Bandir* (2019, dir. Ibrahim Chkiri), *The Teacher* (2020, dir. Mohamed El Mejboud), and *School of Hope* (2021, dir. Mohamed El Aboudi). These titles collectively portray educators across a spectrum of Moroccan society, from isolated mountain villages to bustling Casablanca, thereby serving as a rich case study for cultural analysis.

In conducting the film analysis, we followed standard practices of contextual analysis. This involved examining each film's narrative and stylistic elements in relation to Morocco's cultural, socio-economic, and political context of the era depicted. We paid special attention to how each teacher character is positioned as an actor within broader societal structures – for instance, dealing with institutional policies, community norms, or economic constraints. By treating films as texts that both reflect and inform social reality, we interpreted thematic content such as dialogues, key plot conflicts, and character development in light of real-world issues like language policy reforms, gender roles, and educational inequalities.

Our analysis is inherently interdisciplinary, bridging film studies with educational sociology. While the primary "data" are film narratives, our discussion references historical and social conditions (e.g. Morocco's Arabization policy in the 1980s, rural education infrastructure, or contemporary public attitudes toward teachers) to illuminate the significance behind on-screen events. Through triangulating cinematic evidence with contextual knowledge and existing literature, we aim to discern how Moroccan cinema's portrayal of teachers either reinforces common perceptions or challenges the audience to rethink the role of educators in society.

Findings and Discussion

Diverse Contexts, Complex Portrayals

"Agents of Change" across Settings: Contrary to the initial hypothesis of monolithic, negative depictions, the Moroccan films studied reveal a **diversity of teacher portrayals** and often emphasize the teacher's capacity to drive positive change. With few exceptions, teachers in these films are depicted as proactive figures confronting adversity – effectively *agents of change* in their communities. For example, in *Razzia* (2017), set in a High Atlas village circa 1982, the teacher Abdellah strives to **preserve cultural identity** by teaching in the local Amazigh language. His insistence on educating children in their mother tongue, even as authorities impose Arabic-only instruction, marks him as a cultural guardian and change-maker. Abdellah's story illustrates how a teacher can become a **symbol of resistance** against oppressive policies – a role that elevates the teacher beyond the classroom into a defender of communal heritage. The film's socio-political context (the post-independence Arabization campaign) frames this portrayal: the teacher is caught between state policy and local culture. His eventual dismissal by officials for defying language directives is a poignant commentary on how political agendas can thwart educational agents of change. Yet, the image of village children following Abdellah as he departs underscores a powerful truth: while a teacher can be removed, the **impact of a dedicated teacher endures**. Through Abdellah's courageous, if tragic, narrative, *Razzia* challenges society's perception by depicting a teacher as a principled hero whose struggle exposes the **cost of cultural erasure in education**.

In *The Echo of the Mountain* (2009), we similarly see a rural teacher, Hmed, depicted as an **agent of social change** in an isolated Amazigh-speaking mountain hamlet. Young and idealistic, he must overcome a language barrier (he speaks Arabic, the villagers speak only Amazigh) and the suspicion of locals. Initially alienated – even having to live in his own classroom due to lack of housing – Hmed gradually wins trust by showing commitment to the children's well-being. He innovates by taking students on nature excursions and learning local customs, embodying openness and **innovative pedagogy** that Fullan (1993) associates with change-agent teachers. Despite village elders pressuring children to prioritize farm labor over school, Hmed tirelessly advocates for education's value. A telling scene shows him confronted with a local stereotype: villagers gossip that rural teachers often seduce village girls, reflecting a deep mistrust of outsiders. Hmed perseveres to break these prejudices, even as attendance dwindles under social pressure. A breakthrough moment occurs when one pupil uses newly learned literacy to read an official letter that no one else can decipher, thus tangibly proving the **power of education** to the community. By the film's conclusion, Hmed is acknowledged as an **"agent of change"** – he has altered community attitudes, however slowly, by demonstrating that schooling can bring light to their lives. This portrayal affirms a positive societal perception: the teacher as a beacon of progress in rural Morocco, battling ignorance and tradition for the sake of the next generation.

While these rural narratives highlight heroism, they do not shy away from harsh realities. Notably, they diverge from Western cinematic tropes of guaranteed triumph. As observed in the *Razzia* storyline, Moroccan films tend to emphasize **"tragic resilience"** over tidy happy endings. A teacher-character may not completely overcome systemic barriers (be it patriarchal authority or state policy), but their struggle itself is ennobled. This more sober depiction challenges viewers to respect the perseverance of real Moroccan teachers who often operate in less-than-ideal conditions. It also serves as implicit criticism of societal structures – for instance, the **patriarchal oppression** vividly shown in *The Teacher* (2004), where a young female teacher posted to a conservative village faces hostility and harassment.

Gender and Authority in Rural Spaces: *The Teacher* (2004) by Hassan El-Mufti offers a critical look at gender dynamics and institutional neglect. The protagonist, Amal, is a fresh graduate sent to teach in a remote village. Her enthusiasm is quickly tempered by the discovery that as a woman – and one who is young and unmarried – she is met with suspicion and strict social expectations. The village's power structure is dominated by Hajj El-Wardi, a self-appointed patriarch who imposes his will on everyone, including the school's weak-willed director. Amal's modern, independent presence is itself a cultural challenge to the **conservative norms** of the community. Through Amal's struggles, the film portrays a spectrum of issues: sexual harassment by the powerful Hajj, pressures on single women to marry for "protection," and the **vulnerability of female teachers in isolated posts**. A striking narrative thread is Amal's extreme decision to enter a *'white marriage'* (a marriage of convenience without real spousal relations) so she can request a transfer out of the village. This desperate act – and its backfiring when the man exploits her situation – dramatizes the **lack of institutional support** for teachers like her. The government's indifference forces Amal into personal peril, highlighting policy failure regarding teacher placement and welfare. Additionally, the film sheds light on the **financial precarity** new Moroccan teachers face: Amal's salary is delayed for months due to bureaucratic formalities, leaving her dependent on family support and eventually unable to afford housing. Scenes of Amal sleeping in her classroom out of necessity shock the viewer, underscoring the dire conditions some educators endure. By bringing such hardships to the screen, *The Teacher (2004)* performs a dual cultural critique: it **challenges societal perceptions** that might trivialize teachers' complaints and simultaneously calls out authorities for neglecting those at the frontline of

rural education. Yet Amal is not portrayed as a defeated victim; her character resists misogyny at every turn, refusing the advances and unjust demands of male figures. In doing so, the film positions her as a resilient change agent fighting for dignity in a setting that symbolically represents rural Morocco's patriarchal and bureaucratic challenges. This complex portrayal likely resonates with societal conversations about women's empowerment and the need for systemic support for educators. It challenges any romanticized perception of the self-sacrificing rural teacher by presenting a more **truthful, if sobering, image** – one that insists the audience acknowledge the real obstacles behind the noble profession.

Urban Classrooms and Social Challenges

Shifting to the urban context, Moroccan cinema depicts teachers contending with a different set of socio-cultural issues. *Class 8* (2003), set in Casablanca, provides a microcosm of urban public schooling in the early 2000s. The protagonist Laila is an idealistic young teacher determined to implement progressive, student-centered pedagogy. In the opening scenes, Laila passionately defends Paulo Freire's humanistic approach to her more traditional fiancé. This early conversation foreshadows the **pedagogical clash** that underpins the film's drama: the innovative teacher vs. resistant students (and conservative expectations). Once in the classroom, Laila encounters a mix of eager learners and two notably rebellious students, Miloud and Mjid, who test her approach with hostility. The film uses this conflict to explore broader themes of discipline, respect, and the generational gap in urban settings. Laila's attempt to start a theater club – an extracurricular innovation to engage students – is met with ridicule by the troublemakers, reflecting how some youths interpret kindness as weakness. Persisting in her ideals, Laila initially symbolizes the **hope of educational reform** from within. However, as the plot unfolds, the realities of her classroom force a painful adaptation: continuous defiance from the two boys leads her to withdraw emotionally and resort to minimalistic teaching, abandoning the very methods she championed. This trajectory offers a nuanced commentary – while a humanistic approach is laudable, *Class 8* asks whether Moroccan public schools, strained by socio-economic issues, give such idealism a chance to succeed.

The film situates Laila's struggles amid **systemic urban problems**. One is the challenge of language. Early on, the school principal warns that many students have poor French skills and resent the language of instruction. French in Morocco often symbolizes colonial legacy and social privilege; *Class 8* illustrates how this dynamic creates tension in classrooms. Students' resistance to French – "the language of power" – puts teachers in a bind between curriculum demands and student buy-in. Laila's plight thus reflects a wider societal perception: foreign languages (and by extension, schooling) can seem alienating to underprivileged youth, a challenge educators continually navigate.

Another layer is the socio-economic background of students. Through Mjid's character, the film delves into how poverty and family circumstances spill into classroom behavior. Mjid's disruptive conduct is tied to hardships at home – caring for a disabled father and feeling hopeless about his future. His eventual suicide attempt is a dramatic peak in the story, one that Laila and the classmates fortunately intervene to stop. This crisis serves to **reaffirm the critical role of a caring teacher**: it is Laila's understanding and the solidarity she fosters that prevent tragedy. In a broader sense, the film challenges any societal notion that teachers only impart academics; here the teacher becomes a life-saving mentor, alert to psychological distress and acting with compassion. The resolution suggests that **empathy and attentiveness** are as important as pedagogy in Moroccan classrooms, especially where students carry heavy personal burdens. Thus, *Class 8* contributes to societal perceptions by

highlighting teachers' often unseen emotional labor and the importance of supportive teacher-student relationships in confronting youth problems.

In depicting Laila's initial failure then partial success, *Class 8* offers a balanced portrayal that both critiques and celebrates Moroccan educators. It acknowledges the **frustrations teachers face** – overcrowded classes, at least one "dirty dot in a white space" of a generally willing class, and disconnects between educational ideals and ground realities. Yet it also affirms that a teacher's perseverance and understanding can literally save lives and re-inspire students. For the audience, the film reinforces respect for the teaching profession by showing how **complex and impactful** the work truly is. It subtly challenges any societal inclination to blame teachers alone for poor outcomes, by revealing the socio-economic and institutional factors at play.

Teachers Beyond the Classroom: Personal Struggles and Social Commentary

Not all Moroccan film portrayals center on teachers in their professional capacity alone; some venture into the personal and psychological realms, thereby humanizing teachers as individuals with struggles beyond their classrooms. *The Teacher* (2020), a psychological drama, is a standout in this regard. Diverging from the societal focus of other films, it presents an introspective journey into the mind of a teacher – in this case, a brilliant but tormented mathematics professor. This film is unique among the sample for framing the teacher primarily as an individual grappling with mental health issues, rather than as a direct agent of social change. The professor (portrayed as obsessive about math and possibly a genius) gradually unravels under personal and psychological pressures. He exhibits symptoms of extreme stress or mental illness – hallucinations, paranoid thoughts – which the film suggests may stem from the intense demands he places on himself academically. In one sense, this portrayal **challenges societal perceptions** by dismantling the simplistic image of the teacher as a stable authority figure. Instead, the teacher here is vulnerable, flawed, and in need of support – a person whose dedication to his field edges into unhealthy obsession.

By the film's tragic end, the professor's life spirals into a conspiracy-driven nightmare culminating in his suicide. Such a dark turn is almost unheard of in teacher-themed films internationally (where, as noted, triumphant narratives prevail). In *The Teacher (2020)*, the absence of a clear external antagonist – the enemy is the protagonist's own mind and possibly a mysterious organization – flips the script on typical teacher stories. The significance of this portrayal lies in its **spotlight on teacher mental health**. It resonates with findings that teaching can be among the most stressful of professions, affecting psychological well-being. By dramatizing an extreme case, the film implicitly asks Moroccan society to recognize that teachers, often idealized or vilified in public discourse, are fundamentally human. They can be as fragile as anyone else when unsupported.

For an interdisciplinary audience, this portrayal invites questions: Does the intense pressure to be perfect (an educational achiever, a moral guide, a devoted parent as he is shown) exact a toll on Moroccan teachers? The movie's linkage of the protagonist's breakdown with his overinvestment in academic work suggests so. It adds a new dimension to discussions of educational reform: beyond resources and respect, do we prioritize teachers' mental health? In terms of societal perception, *The Teacher (2020)* challenges any lingering stigma around mental illness by unabashedly placing a respected figure – a professor – in that position. It encourages empathy, inviting the audience to see teachers not just as educators or symbols, but as *individuals navigating personal demons*. While this film was one of the two exceptions not framing the teacher as a community "change agent", it nonetheless performs an important cultural function: it **broadens the image of teachers** in Moroccan

media to include personal complexity and vulnerability. This may ultimately contribute to a more holistic societal view, where teachers are neither saints nor caricatures, but people with strengths and struggles.

On a very different note, the comedy *Sahib Al-Bandir* (2019) employs satire to comment on the social status of teachers. In this film, the teacher Abderrafia is portrayed as unmotivated and inept, constantly in fear of a strict headmaster. The story takes an absurd turn when Abderrafia decides to quit teaching to become a wedding singer (playing the traditional bandir drum), where he unexpectedly finds success. This comedic premise thinly veils a biting critique: it suggests that in Morocco, even a frivolous entertainer may fare better than a schoolteacher in terms of respect and livelihood. Indeed, the film pointedly remarks that teachers often earn so little and garner so little respect that other careers – "even mere entertainment" – are more attractive. One scene reinforces this by showing how the teacher's low salary and lack of societal esteem drive him to seek fulfillment elsewhere. The narrative is hyperbolic, but Moroccan educators and audiences would recognize the kernel of truth in its humor. A newspaper quote cited in the film laments that in Morocco, *"Teachers are disrespected by students, maltreated by public force, misrepresented by the media, blamed by officials, and mocked by the layman"*. Such a stark statement encapsulates the crisis of respect facing the profession. By exaggerating a teacher's incompetence and naiveté – Abderrafia misses obvious hints, appears foolish in romance, and is generally buffoonish – the film risks reinforcing negative stereotypes of teachers as bumbling or apathetic. It's no surprise that real Moroccan teachers critiqued these depictions for **perpetuating harmful stereotypes** that do not reflect the true demands of their job.

Yet the satirical approach of *Sahib Al-Bandir* serves a critical social function: it shines a light (through laughter) on genuine issues of teacher morale and public perception. The character's greater success as a musician than as an educator underscores a societal failure to reward those in charge of shaping the next generation. The film thus contributes to the discourse by **challenging society** – are we okay with a reality where teachers feel "better off" leaving the classroom? The comedic framing makes the critique accessible and perhaps more palatable, but the implication is serious. In highlighting low pay and public disrespect, it implicitly calls for change, aligning with the real-world movements in Morocco where teachers have protested for better conditions. Interestingly, *Sahib Al-Bandir* stands apart from other films in not depicting the teacher as an agent of positive change (indeed, Abderrafia flees the field). This outlier status was noted in our analysis. However, in its own way, the film *challenges societal perceptions by exposing them*: it forces viewers to confront the cynicism and devaluation that many teachers experience. The laughter it provokes is uneasy – it asks, "Why should a capable person choose teaching at all, if this is how society regards teachers?" By raising that question, the film invites audiences (and policy-makers) to reflect on how to restore honor and viability to the teaching profession.

Socio-Political Underpinnings in Summary

Across these varied narratives, a through-line emerges: Moroccan cinematic portrayals of teachers are deeply informed by socio-political realities, using individual stories to illuminate broader issues. Filmmakers focus on contextual factors shaping education – **socio-economic hardships, gender and power relations, language politics, environmental marginalization, and institutional policies** – and embed these into their characterization of teachers. For instance, the **socio-economic factor** is omnipresent: whether it's the rural teacher's lack of basic facilities and salary (Amal in *The Teacher* 2004 sleeping in her classroom) or the urban teacher's overcrowded class with students like Mjid

whose poverty drives misbehavior, the films unflinchingly show that teachers operate amid scarcity. Such depictions challenge any societal tendency to blame educators alone for educational shortcomings by clarifying the **resource constraints** and systemic neglect at play.

Similarly, educational **policy decisions** are critiqued through narrative – *Razzia* tackles the top-down imposition of Arabic in place of Amazigh, showing the alienation it causes, while *School of Hope* highlights the government's inattention to nomadic communities suffering climate-induced crisis. In *School of Hope* (2021), which is a documentary-style portrayal of a traveling teacher among drought-stricken nomads, the teacher is compassionate and resourceful but ultimately cannot compensate for the lack of state support like water, infrastructure, or adaptable schooling methods. The film explicitly acts as an **"urgent call to governmental interventions"**, advocating for basic resources and innovative solutions (such as mobile or online schooling) to reach nomadic children. Here the teacher is shown as sharing the same hardships as the community – truly a part of the social fabric – and the narrative uses his perspective to voice policy recommendations. This exemplifies how Moroccan films use teacher characters as conduits for broader social critique and calls for change.

In conclusion of this findings section, it is evident that Moroccan cinema portrays teachers in a multifaceted manner: **as cultural mediators, social critics, and empathetic heroes** who often challenge adversity, and occasionally as cautionary figures or satirical reflections of societal failure. These films contribute to societal perceptions in two fundamental ways. First, by **highlighting teachers' positive impacts and moral courage**, they encourage greater public appreciation of the teaching profession. Audiences see teachers fighting illiteracy, patriarchy, and despair – roles that align with a narrative of teachers as nation-builders and guardians of cultural continuity. Second, by **laying bare the obstacles and sometimes unflattering realities**, the films provoke a re-examination of how society and authorities treat educators. A comedy may exaggerate a teacher's incompetence, but in doing so it points to the deeper incompetence of a system that neither selects nor supports its teachers properly. A drama may end in a teacher's defeat or death, but thereby it issues a wake-up call about systemic oppression or mental health neglect.

Ultimately, Moroccan teachers on screen emerge not as one-dimensional archetypes, but as rich symbols through which questions of social justice, identity, and progress are negotiated. In a region where education is often hailed as the key to development, these cinematic stories underscore that how a society views and treats its teachers is a reflection of its values. Moroccan cinema, with its penchant for realism and metaphor, is both **mirroring and molding** those values – reflecting current attitudes towards education while also advocating for empathy and reform.

Conclusion

Moroccan films from the past two decades have turned the camera toward classrooms and in doing so, held up a mirror to Moroccan society's relationship with its educators. This analysis of seven films demonstrates that teachers are depicted not merely as instructors, but as pivotal **cultural and educational agents** whose on-screen journeys comment on larger socio-political narratives. Whether it is a village teacher preserving Amazigh language under hostile policy, an urban educator grappling with youth disillusionment, or a female teacher asserting her dignity in a patriarchal setting, each portrayal carries implications for how education is valued culturally. These cinematic representations largely **challenge simplistic societal perceptions**: rather than the outdated authoritarian or comic caricatures, teachers are shown as change-makers, advocates for their students, and even heroes contending with systemic flaws. By showcasing both the **triumphs and trials** of teachers, Moroccan

cinema invites the public to recognize the complexity of the profession – the dedication it requires and the support it deserves.

Importantly, these films do more than reflect reality; they also have the potential to shape it. Positive depictions – such as the inspiring resilience of teachers who overcome linguistic and economic barriers – can cultivate greater respect and empathy for teachers among audiences. When viewers see a teacher changing lives or standing up for what's right, it reinforces the notion of teaching as a noble, impactful calling. On the other hand, the frank exposure of issues like underfunded schools, heavy-handed policies, and public disrespect serves as a critique that can spur discussion and demands for change. In highlighting these problems, filmmakers are tacitly **challenging policymakers** to address the gaps: improve rural teacher support, reconsider language approaches, ensure teachers have dignified working conditions, and elevate the profession's status. Indeed, one film explicitly functions as a plea for intervention (*School of Hope*), reflecting real-world policy needs in the face of educational inequity.

For interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners, this case study underscores the synergy between art and social discourse. Education and arts in North Africa do not exist in separate silos; rather, they inform each other. Moroccan cinema has proven to be a vibrant forum for exploring the challenges within the education system and the cultural significance of teachers. By portraying teachers as agents of change (and sometimes illustrating the cost when society fails to empower them), films contribute to a collective understanding that quality education is inseparable from the esteem and conditions afforded to educators.

In sum, the cinematic representations of Moroccan teachers, as analyzed here, both contribute to and challenge societal perceptions. They contribute by **broadening the narrative** – showing teachers in roles of cultural preservation, social leadership, and personal sacrifice that the public may not always see. They challenge by confronting viewers with uncomfortable truths about the obstacles teachers face, thereby debunking any myths that their struggles are due to personal failings. Each story, from comedy to tragedy, ultimately reasserts the idea that teachers matter profoundly to the fabric of society. The hope is that as these films reach audiences (in Morocco and beyond), they will stimulate ongoing dialogue and inspire actions that bridge the gap between the **"reel" and the real** – aligning societal values and policies more closely with the important role that teachers play on and off the screen.

Cinema as a Catalyst for Social Change in Contemporary Morocco: Representation, Space, and Participatory Cultural Infrastructure in Nabil Ayouch's *Horses of God* (2012) and *Casablanca Beats* (2021)

Executive summary

This article argues that cinema can catalyze social change not only through representation (what images and narratives *mean* in public culture) but also through *production practices* (who gets to speak and how) and through *institutional spillover* (how film projects mutate into durable cultural infrastructure). Using Sidi Moumen as the primary spatial anchor, it develops a three-pathway model of cinematic social-change capacity—(a) discursive impact (shifting frames, stereotypes, and publics), (b) participatory impact (redistributing voice and cultural capital through making), and (c) policy/infrastructural impact (translating cultural work into institutions and governance). The model is tested through two case studies: *Horses of God* (2012), a social-realist dramatization of pathways to violent extremism rooted in marginalization and recruitment; and *Casablanca Beats* (2021), a hybrid musical-social drama centered on youth self-expression through hip-hop within a community arts center.

Bringing together film-text analysis, primary production documents (Cannes dossiers and press kits), and thesis-based qualitative interviews conducted by the author (eight to nine young residents/participants, including center participants and at least two individuals connected to *Casablanca Beats*), the article finds that Ayouch's cinema operates as a *representational intervention into stigmatized space* and as a *cultural-policy experiment in micro-institutions*. For *Horses of God*, the strongest social-change claim is the film's attempt to "go back to the roots" of violence and to humanize those typically reduced to "monsters"—a strategy aligned to anti-stereotyping, yet ethically risky in contexts where screen depictions can harden stigma and invite "poverty voyeurism." For *Casablanca Beats*, the strongest claim is that the film is structurally dependent on participatory pedagogy: lyrics and performances emerge from youth experiences within a real arts-education initiative,

producing a mediated public sphere of self-narration. This linkage between film and community arts work is explicitly articulated in press materials that frame the centers as vehicles to “open a window on the world” and dismantle neighborhood reputational enclosure, while enabling “appropriation” of the center by residents.

Empirically, the author’s thesis interviews indicate that local audiences in the sample largely reject the idea that Ayouch “manipulates” or exploits the neighborhood; instead they emphasize perceived benefits of arts access, free/low-cost programming, and expanded horizons, while also noting limited reach and persistent structural needs (employment, safety, broader social services). These findings align with participatory arts research that highlights empowerment potential alongside persistent dilemmas of representation, hierarchy, and sustainability.

The article concludes with policy implications for Ministère de la Jeunesse, de la Culture et de la Communication and partner institutions: integrate cultural-center funding with urban inclusion programs, require participatory governance and ethical safeguards in “marginality” storytelling, and adopt mixed-method impact evaluation frameworks (baseline/midline/endline, stakeholder co-creation) suited to arts interventions.

Introduction

Cinema’s relationship to social change is often narrated in two reductive ways: either film *reflects* society, or film *influences* society. Both views miss a third possibility—cinema as a social practice that produces publics, redistributes voice, and sometimes leaves behind material institutions. This article proposes a more rigorous claim: cinema can catalyze social change when representational strategies, participatory production ethics, and cultural-policy infrastructures align.

The Moroccan case is analytically productive because it concentrates several pressures that amplify representational stakes: post-1999 political openings and intensified attention to social issues in film; the afterlives of the May 2003 attacks in Casablanca; and ongoing urban restructuring and slum-upgrading regimes that reshape peripheral neighborhoods while often preserving inequality in access to opportunity. The May 16, 2003 attacks—five coordinated suicide bombings striking multiple targets—triggered not only security shifts but

also a struggle over narrative: who “belongs” to the nation, what forms of religiosity count as legitimate, and how marginal zones are imagined in the public sphere.

Nabil Ayouch’s filmography repeatedly returns to these contested boundaries between center and periphery, visibility and stigma, morality and freedom—often generating controversy, including state and public debate about the nation’s “image,” as exemplified in disputes around Much Loved and formal references to the Centre Cinématographique Marocain in discussions of screening authorization and moral harm. This wider context matters because “social-change cinema” must be understood within cultural policy regimes that enable, constrain, or redirect what is speakable in national audiovisual space.

Against this backdrop, *Horses of God* (2012) and *Casablanca Beats* (2021) offer a paired lens on how cinema can operate as a social-change mechanism. The first is grounded in the representational challenge of narrating radicalization without sensationalism; the second foregrounds youth self-expression and participatory pedagogy inside a community arts center later linked to the Fondation Ali Zaoua and Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen.

This article therefore asks: How can cinema catalyze social change when the films’ representational politics, production ethics, and cultural-policy extensions are analyzed together—rather than as separate domains? It answers by integrating theory (representation and space), textual analysis (narrative/aesthetics/casting), empirical reception (local interviews), and policy analysis (institutional design and evaluation).

Conceptual framework

Cinema becomes “social change” when it reshapes meaning, redistributes cultural resources, and alters institutional pathways. This section builds a framework to operationalize those mechanisms.

Representation, meaning, and stereotype risk

Drawing from Stuart Hall, representation is not a passive mirror but an active meaning-making practice: it produces the intelligibility of places, people, and events through signifying systems. This is foundational for analyzing Sidi Moumen, whose public identity is not merely “given” by socioeconomic conditions but structured through repeated narrative framings (crime, deprivation, extremism, resilience) that can either fix stigma or contest it.

Stereotypes are not simply “wrong depictions” but condensed power-knowledge arrangements that stabilize difference into hierarchy. In Shohat and Stam’s critique, stereotyping operates in global media through systems of realism and “common sense” that can naturalize domination while claiming neutrality. For spaces marked as slums or peripheries, the ethical danger is that cinematic realism may become a technology of *othering*: spectators consume misery as authenticity, while residents inherit intensified reputational burden.

To theorize this danger, the article draws on work on “poverty porn” and visual ethics: the representation of deprived spaces often sits on an unstable line between awareness-raising and voyeuristic consumption, where “spectacle” can erase context and agency. This concern becomes especially salient for *Horses of God*, which must represent deprivation and radicalization without turning Sidi Moumen into a singular origin story for violence.

Space, marginality, and the politics of enclosure

The films’ social-change stakes depend on how space is narrativized. Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia—“other spaces” that invert, contest, or mirror dominant spatial orders—offers one way to conceptualize youth cultural centers as counter-sites to marginality: places where alternative rules, temporality, and identities can emerge within (and against) the city. While Foucault’s framework is not a policy blueprint, it helps interpret cultural centers as spatial technologies that reorganize who is visible, who speaks, and what futures appear possible.

At the same time, slum space must be situated within global political economy. Mike Davis’s Planet of Slums frames the contemporary expansion of slums as a world-historical urban condition tied to informalization, dispossession, and unequal development, rather than as localized pathology. This matters because a film that treats the slum as cultural “elsewhere” risks decontextualizing poverty and mystifying its structural causes.

Film scholarship extends this insight into media history. Slums on Screen demonstrates that slum representation is a transnational cinematic tradition—spanning documentary, fiction, social realism, and spectacle—often oscillating between reformist exposure and aesthetic commodification. In this tradition, “slum films” can generate empathy and advocacy but can also fuel voyeuristic gazes and even “film-induced” slum tourism dynamics, where spectators seek the thrill of proximity to poverty. While Sidi Moumen is not positioned as a

tourist destination in these films, the analytic point remains: cinematic circulation creates publics whose desires and judgments can affect local communities.

Participatory film and cultural capital

Cinema's social-change capacity increases when "voice" is not merely represented *about* marginalized people, but produced with them in ways that redistribute cultural resources. Bill Nichols's account of participatory documentary highlights the ethical and epistemic significance of the filmmaker's engagement with subjects; even when applied to fiction/hybrid forms, the concept clarifies how production can become a social encounter where representation is negotiated rather than extracted. Participatory film scholarship further emphasizes a persistent dilemma: maximizing participation and empowerment can conflict with artistic control and market demands, producing tensions around authorship, hierarchy, and the instrumentalization of participants' lives. This dilemma is central for *Casablanca Beats*, whose authenticity claims depend on youth-written lyrics and nonprofessional performance yet still circulate within global festival economies and commercial distribution systems.

To theorize what participants gain (and what remains unequal), Pierre Bourdieu's "forms of capital" framework is useful: cultural centers can generate cultural capital (skills, credentials, aesthetic competencies), social capital (networks, recognition), and potentially symbolic capital (legitimacy and esteem). These capitals can translate into life chances—but only if institutions provide pathways (education, employment, industry access) and if structural constraints (poverty, discrimination, policing, gender norms) do not nullify gains.

Cultural policy and "creative placemaking" as governance

Finally, cinema catalyzes change more durably when it links to policy and infrastructure. Morocco's post-2011 constitutional and cultural policy environment includes commitments to cultural-linguistic pluralism and evolving governance structures, documented in national cultural policy profiles. Urban policy regimes such as Villes Sans Bidonvilles signal state attempts to absorb or rehouse slum populations, though the outcomes and politics of "clearance" versus "upgrading" remain contested.

In global cultural-policy research, "creative placemaking" offers a vocabulary for arts-driven community revitalization: cross-sector partnerships use arts and culture to strengthen place attachment, social cohesion, and neighborhood identity. This framework helps interpret the

cultural center strategy observed in Ayouch's ecosystem: a move from depicting marginality to building counter-spaces where marginalized youth can accumulate cultural capital and produce their own narratives.

Data and methods

This article uses a mixed qualitative design oriented toward triangulation across four evidence layers.

First, film-text analysis treats each film as a structured cultural argument. Narrative structure, character arcs, mise-en-scène, sound, editing rhythms, and performance style are analyzed as representational strategies that shape how Sidi Moumen is understood and felt. Film-text claims are supported through official synopses and credits published by the Cannes Film Festival and distributors.

Second, primary/official production discourse is collected from Cannes press materials and distributor press kits. This includes the Cannes dossier for *Horses of God* (interview excerpts about research approach, location choices, and political context) and Kino Lorber's English press kit (director's statement, title explanation), as well as the Unifrance press dossier for *Casablanca Beats* and Cannes selection coverage. These sources are treated as "authoritative but interested": they clarify intent and context while requiring critical scrutiny.

Third, empirical local reception and center experience draws on the author's BA thesis qualitative material: semi-structured interviews with young residents/participants (approximately nine interviewees, with partial nonresponse across questions), including participants associated with the cultural center and with *Casablanca Beats*. The interview corpus includes questions on perceived manipulation/exploitation, impacts of the center, and whether poverty depiction is necessary. These data are used to preserve the thesis's empirical contribution while strengthening interpretive claims through scholarly literature on participatory arts, representation ethics, and spatial stigma.

Fourth, policy and context sources include government descriptions of slum-upgrading programs, human rights reporting on the May 2003 attacks and their aftermath, and cultural policy documentation and profiles.

Limitations are acknowledged: the interview sample is small and not statistically representative; center outcome data rely heavily on institutional self-reporting in press

materials; and causal attribution (“film caused X social change”) is methodologically difficult, requiring cautious language and process-tracing rather than deterministic claims.

Case studies

Horses of God (2012): social realism, radicalization narrative, and the ethics of explanatory empathy

Narrative and representational strategy. Official synopses emphasize a longitudinal arc: childhood friendship and survival within a “destitute slum” on the outskirts of Casablanca gradually transitions into recruitment by Islamic fundamentalism, culminating in the May 2003 attacks. This narrative architecture matters: it invites spectators to treat terrorism as a social process rather than a metaphysical evil, making “explanatory empathy” the film’s principal ethical wager.

In the director’s own statement, the film’s goal is framed as returning to the “roots” of violence and showing “without judging” how children “lost their humanity and were transformed into human bombs,” explicitly positioning the film as a counter-voice in global terrorism discourse. The Cannes dossier reinforces this logic by explaining the decision to begin as an intimate chronicle to produce immediate identification, then expand toward geopolitics—an approach consistent with social realism’s aim to connect lived micro-fractures to structural conditions.

Space and enclosure. The Cannes interview provides unusually concrete spatial theorization: slum space is described as a closed world, and the “unit of place” is central because the youths “had never left their shantytown,” generating a condition of enclosure that shapes susceptibility to micro-systems of ideology. This resonates with Foucault’s insight that space organizes social relations and subjectivities; the slum becomes not merely poverty but a regime of visibility/invisibility, mobility/immobility.

At the same time, slum representation carries the risk identified by Krstić: “slums on screen” can oscillate between contextualization and reduction, potentially turning complex urban marginality into an aesthetic signature. The film’s ethical difficulty is therefore double: it seeks to humanize would-be bombers (a counter-stereotyping project) while depicting a stigmatized space as the origin of trauma and radicalization (a potential stigma amplifier). In

post-attack Morocco, where public discourse can equate peripheral poverty with security threat, this representational tension is not abstract.

Production context, casting, and location decisions. The Cannes press dossier describes a research method "almost like an anthropologist," including engagement with residents and associations, emphasizing process over immediacy (in contrast to journalism). Importantly, the dossier also states that filming in the "real" neighborhood became difficult because the area changed rapidly with new apartment blocks and slum reduction; the production therefore sought another nearby bidonville to recreate the earlier spatial conditions while still working with many residents of Sidi Moumen. This matters for social-change analysis because it shows the film negotiating between realism claims and the material politics of urban redevelopment.

The English press kit specifies that the screenplay is inspired by The Stars of Sidi Moumen by Mahi Binebine, anchoring the film in a prior literary project of testimony and imagination. The adaptation chain (attack → novel → film) is itself a mechanism of social meaning-making: each form selects, condenses, and circulates understandings of how violence emerges.

How social change is attempted. The film's social-change mechanism operates primarily through (1) discursive reframing (terrorism as process with social roots), (2) affective pedagogy (identification with childhood vulnerability), and (3) public deliberation (festival circulation generates debate about state responsibility, exclusion, and ideology). These mechanisms align with Hall's model: representation produces meaning and organizes how publics "know" a neighborhood. Yet the same mechanisms can intensify stigma if viewers fix meaning at "slum → radicalization," rather than "structural abandonment → vulnerability." The author's thesis interviews are therefore crucial for evaluating local perception of this representational risk (see "Social impact" section).

Casablanca Beats (2021): hip-hop pedagogy, hybrid realism, and participatory voice

Narrative and aesthetic design. The Cannes official synopsis frames the film around Anas, a former rapper teaching in a cultural center in a working-class neighborhood; youth attempt to "free themselves" from restrictive traditions through hip-hop. The Unifrance dossier echoes this, emphasizing transmission and the transformation of hesitation into public

voice. Reviews in festival coverage describe the film as a musical portrait of socially engaged youth, with the music and choreography staging moments of escape and intensity while retaining a rough social-realism texture.

Where *Horses of God* centers on the collapse of future into death, *Casablanca Beats* centers on the construction of future through expression. This formal shift—from grim chronicle to exuberant performance—should not be read as simple "optimism," but as a different theory of agency: art is positioned as a practical technology that converts frustration into speech and social imagination.

Participatory production as method, not decoration. The film's core social-change claim is grounded in its making. Press materials explicitly state that Ayouch created the Fondation Ali Zaoua to develop cultural centers and offer youth the same opportunities he received, and that the center depicted is the first of multiple "Stars" centers. The dossier describes the "Positive School of Hip Hop" initiative: Anas (the real teacher and performer) developed workshops where young people write about their lives; Ayouch observed over time, then built the film around this pedagogical encounter.

This production design aligns with participatory media scholarship, which emphasizes that participatory projects create "shared learning spaces" that can reduce hierarchies—while still facing dilemmas of balancing artistic quality and participation. In this sense, *Casablanca Beats* functions as a hybrid: a scripted feature that borrows participatory logics of authorship, where youth experiences and language do not merely supply "local color" but structure the film's speech acts.

Space as cultural infrastructure. Several sources directly link the film to the real cultural center: Unifrance notes that the first center opened in 2014 and that *Casablanca Beats* was shot in that first center over an extended period. A Cambridge interview further situates Ayouch's long relationship to Sidi Moumen, describing it as close to Casablanca and emotionally linked to his own upbringing, while emphasizing the neighborhood's transformation after 2003.

Interpreted through Foucault, the cultural center becomes a heterotopic counter-site: it reorganizes marginal space into a node of exchange, performance, and legitimacy. Through Bourdieu, it becomes a capital-generating institution—turning embodied competencies (rap,

dance, performance, languages) into recognized forms of cultural and symbolic capital, potentially convertible into opportunity.

Festival circuit as amplification. The film's Cannes "In Competition" status is documented in official festival listings and coverage, meaning the film's youth voices circulate—symbolically—into a global arena often inaccessible to those same youth. Media coverage and reviews framed it as a portrait of youth challenging orthodoxies, emphasizing authenticity and the political resonance of rap. The film also received the Cannes-era "Positive Cinema Prize," awarded within the "Positive Cinema Week" framework, explicitly tying cinematic value to future-oriented ethical messaging. While such prizes are not proof of local social change, they are indicators of how institutional cultural actors reward certain kinds of "engaged cinema," shaping what gets funded and circulated.

Figure note. Representative images (posters/press stills) for the two films and the cultural center are widely available through Cannes media libraries and distributor press materials; see Cannes film pages and press dossiers for credits and rights statements.

Comparative table

Dimension	***Horses of God*** **(2012)**	***Casablanca Beats*** **(2021)**
Festival positioning	Un Certain Regard at Cannes Film Festival	In Competition at Cannes Film Festival
Core social issue	Radicalization, deprivation, recruitment, state abandonment	Youth marginality, gendered constraints, voice, and cultural expression via hip-hop
Narrative form	Social realist chronicle moving toward terrorism	Hybrid social drama with musical/performance sequences
Spatial logic	Enclosure of slum life; mobility constraint; "unit of place" central	Counter-space of cultural center enabling exchange and performance
Casting/voice	Emphasis on humanization; production discourse stresses listening and local association engagement	Nonprofessional/pedagogical authenticity; youth-written lyrics; real teacher centered

Relationship to community infrastructure	Indirect: film researches and narrates conditions; later linked to foundation creation via director trajectory	Direct: filmed inside Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen; explicitly tied to center pedagogy
Measurable/claimed impacts (available evidence)	Public debates; awards and international circulation; discourse shift toward structural explanations (claim-based)	Visibility for youth voices; linked to expanding network of “Stars” centers and enrollment figures (institutional claim)
Ethical tensions	Risk of stigmatizing slum space as terrorism incubator; poverty voyeurism concerns	Risk of inspirational framing; authorship hierarchy; sustainability and governance tensions in centers

Social impact and interventions

From filmic representation to cultural infrastructure

The most distinctive feature of this case is that cinema does not stop at the screen. The emergence of Fondation Ali Zaoua and Les Étoiles de Sidi Moumen is repeatedly framed, in press and media sources, as an attempt to respond to the neighborhood’s reputational enclosure after 2003 through cultural proximity institutions. A 2014 TelQuel report on the inauguration states that the center aimed to “open a window on the world” in a neighborhood that “suffers from its reputation,” to “disenclave” Sidi Moumen, and to enable residents to “appropriate” the center through exchange and sharing.

This rhetorical framing aligns with cultural policy logic: culture is positioned as a vector of social cohesion and inclusion rather than as luxury consumption. It also aligns with creative placemaking principles: arts-led initiatives can help rebuild local identity, networks, and civic visibility when embedded in place and co-produced with residents.

Participant outcomes and enrollment claims

Outcome measurement is uneven but not absent. Different sources provide different enrollment figures, likely reflecting growth over time and whether the metric refers to a single center or the network. A 2018 biography excerpt in press materials for Razzia states that “nearly 400” children and teenagers were enrolled in the Sidi Moumen center and that

another center was created in Tangier (2017), with a third in progress. By contrast, the 2021 Unifrance press dossier claims that “more than 1000” children and adolescents are enrolled and that additional centers opened in Tangier (2016), Agadir (2019), and Fès (2020), with another planned for Marrakech (2021). A Luxembourg foundation project page similarly presents a timeline of centers and states that the Marrakech center opened in 2021 as the fifth under the project.

These figures should be treated as institutional claims rather than independently audited metrics. Still, they suggest that the cinema-to-infrastructure pathway is not symbolic only: it produces durable organizational capacity that, at minimum, enrolls and trains substantial numbers of young people over time.

The author’s thesis adds ground-level texture: interviewees describe a mix of free activities and affordable access (monthly fee mentioned as ~50 MAD in the thesis narrative), and they link participation to concrete experiences such as performing, joining workshops, and expanding their sense of possible futures (including association between the center and visibility in festival circuits).

Local reception: stigma, trust, and perceived benefit

A core ethical question is whether such cinema “uses” Sidi Moumen for cultural capital while leaving residents stigmatized. The author’s thesis interviews directly address this: across responses, most interviewees reject the claim that Ayouch manipulates or exploits the neighborhood; instead they interpret the films and the center as vehicles of recognition, opportunity, and support. In a simple descriptive coding of one interview question (“Does he manipulate Sidi Moumen?”), eight of nine responses reject the claim; one expresses uncertainty. A second question (“Has the center changed something?”) elicits uniformly positive answers but repeatedly notes limited reach because Sidi Moumen is large and access is uneven.

These responses do not “prove” absence of exploitation; rather, they indicate that at least part of the local youth public interprets the work through a benefit frame: arts access, self-confidence, and community visibility. This aligns with participatory arts research, which consistently finds that participants experience gains in confidence, communication, and social connection—while structural constraints often remain.

Institutional tensions and sustainability risks

A social-change account must also address institutional fragility. A TelQuel 2018 investigation describes internal dissensions within the center: some participants and teachers reportedly felt excluded, described "authoritarian" methods, and noted staff departures, suggesting governance tensions and potential mission drift. This matters because cultural infrastructure is only socially transformative if it is not only created but sustainably governed—transparent, participatory, and locally legitimate.

Festival reception as symbolic leverage

Both films' festival trajectories function as symbolic amplification. *Casablanca Beats*' Cannes competition status and subsequent reviews framed it as youth voice and political expression through hip-hop. The film's receipt of the Positive Cinema Prize—awarded within a Cannes-week framework designed to reward films judged "positive" in future-oriented ethical terms—illustrates how festival institutions can translate social themes into symbolic capital that strengthens an "impact" narrative. However, symbolic leverage can cut both ways: it can draw resources and attention, but it can also incentivize simplified "inspirational" storytelling that fits global expectations of marginalized youth redemption arcs.

Timeline of key cinematic and institutional interventions

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1990sDocumentary workand early encounterswith Sidi Moumen(per
interviewtestimony)1999Filming in SidiMoumen; laterreturns in Ali
Zaoua2003May 16 Casablancabombings; nationaltrauma
andpolicy/security shifts2010Publication of TheStars of Sidi
Moumen(novel basis for filmadaptation)2012Horses of God inCannes
Un CertainRegard;
internationalcirculation2014Opening/inaugurationof Les Étoiles de
SidiMoumen culturalcenter2016-2021Expansion of "LesÉtoiles"
centers toother cities (pressclaims vary bysource)2017-2019Filming
period forCasablanca Beatswithin the firstcenter (per
pressdossier)2021Casablanca Beats inCannes Competition;Positive
CinemaPrize (parallelaward)Ayouch-linked cinematic and cultural
interventions around Sidi Moumen
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Show code

Timeline sources include Cannes dossiers, TelQuel reporting, and Unifrance press materials.

Ethics and policy implications

Ethical tensions: between recognition and stigma

The ethical field of “slum cinema” is shaped by a structural asymmetry: filmmakers and festivals often gain symbolic capital from marginalized spaces, while residents bear the long-term costs of representation (stigma, policing, discrimination). Krstić’s work on global slum representation underscores how recurring paradigms can trap places within a repertoire of misery, danger, and exceptional violence—even when films are sympathetic. The concept of “poverty porn” further clarifies how exposure and empathy can become voyeuristic consumption when images isolate suffering from context and agency.

In *Horses of God*, the ethical trade-off is sharpest: the film seeks explanatory empathy (a moral and political project) but risks re-inscribing a narrative that binds Sidi Moumen to terrorism in global imagination. The Cannes dossier partially mitigates this by stressing structural factors (education exclusion, family fragmentation, enclosure) and by describing research collaboration and local association engagement. Still, counter-stereotyping requires more than intention; it requires narrative complexity and audience framing that prevents the slum from becoming a deterministic causal container.

In *Casablanca Beats*, the ethical risk shifts: rather than stigma-through-violence, the risk becomes instrumentalized inspiration, where youth expression is celebrated but translated into a global feel-good grammar that can obscure the depth of structural constraints (employment, housing, gendered violence). Reviews that praise “authenticity” and “hope” while noting formula elements illustrate this tension: the film’s power partly depends on recognizable “teacher-saves-students” scaffolding, which can re-center adult authority even as youth voices speak.

Agency and participatory safeguards

Participatory film scholarship insists that empowerment claims demand scrutiny of process: Who sets the agenda? Who controls the edit? How are participants credited and compensated? What happens after release? The *Casablanca Beats* production discourse moves in this direction by emphasizing youth-authored lyrics and sustained observation; it also links the film to a real pedagogical program in which the center is not simply a set but a social institution. Yet the TelQuel 2018 account of internal disputes inside the center warns that participation is not guaranteed by mission statements; governance structures can reproduce hierarchies.

A policy-relevant ethical principle follows: participatory representation must be paired with participatory governance. Otherwise, cinema may democratize voice in the frame while centralizing power off-screen.

Policy implications for culture, youth, and urban inclusion

Several policy directions emerge.

First, integrate arts infrastructure into urban inclusion policies. Slum-upgrading programs like Villes Sans Bidonvilles address physical housing conditions, but social inclusion requires public cultural space that supports youth capability building. A combined approach aligns with creative placemaking research: arts and culture can strengthen cohesion and neighborhood identity when linked to broader planning and services.

Second, fund "proximity culture" with transparent governance requirements. Moroccan cultural policy profiles document evolving institutional commitments to culture and pluralism; this provides a policy foundation for supporting community cultural centers as civic infrastructure. However, sustainability depends on accountable leadership, grievance mechanisms, and local co-design—especially in peripheral neighborhoods where distrust of institutions can be historically grounded.

Third, adopt credible impact evaluation models for arts interventions. Social impact in film and documentary fields increasingly relies on mixed methods: theory of change, stakeholder engagement, and baseline/midline/endline measures. For "Les Étoiles"-type centers, plausible indicators include retention, skill acquisition, educational continuation, employment pathways in cultural industries, psychosocial wellbeing, and community perception shifts (including stigma reduction). Crucially, evaluation should be co-designed with participants to avoid turning youth into "impact data" for donors.

Fourth, link cinema funding to ethical representation standards. Press discourse around censorship debates in Morocco reveals that film governance is often framed through morality and national image. A social-change cinema policy would reframe evaluation criteria toward (a) participatory safeguards, (b) contextual integrity (structural causes, not pathologizing), and (c) demonstrable local benefit pathways. Such criteria could be incorporated into public funding programs and co-production agreements without prescribing content.

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