

## I Am Casablančan

Salma Lahlou

I was Casablančan without knowing it. As breath comes without thought, I inhaled my city, never questioning it. When Moussem Cities decided to make Casablanca at the center of its festival in Brussels, and to entrust me with an exhibition about my city, I needed to examine certain issues for the first time: What does it mean to be Casablančan? And, by extension, how can I speak of this tangible yet elusive city other than by impressions? And how could I bring some part of its spirit – *Zeitgeist* - with me to Brussels?

When questions so defining of our identity are asked, a precise methodology of thought is required. It was necessary to be able to rediscover (and discover) Casa. To be amazed or disconcerted, but first of all to find a new sense of wonder in it. Walking through its territories and rereading its archives. Meeting its inhabitants and conversing with its ardent aficionados.

I offer you my city and invite you on a journey that Casablanca has revealed to me. Not as a reproduction which would be impossible. But as an offering of its spirit.

**Open your eyes** ... To see Casablanca as though for the first time, and to look beneath the cacophonous veneer of chaos to see what lies beneath. Before any interpretation, there must be analysis. And before analysis, there is perception. Mine is evidently subjective. And yet the frame, the off-camera that are mine do not exclude objectivity in the collection of data. Walking the streets of the city, its outskirts, its centres, all that I saw and did not see has inspired my reading of Casablanca.

**Identify** ... To see is often not enough. The ineffable, the transformed, and the vanished elude this single sense of vision. And so, I sourced available information about the city to construct a *True History*. I met with its inhabitants and its artists: those who reclaim this city and those who study it. And they in turn accompanied and enrich my rediscovery of the city.

**Analyse** ... This method of empirical observation led me to propose a theoretical synthesis that would unfold Casa, divided among five axes of inquiry. This analysis rests upon five properties inherent to that which Casablanca, or being Casablančan, represents as a *habitus*<sup>1</sup>.

The initial “geographical” property associated with the very territory of Casablanca - which refuses centralised readings and imposes a total and permanent inversion of central/peripheral polarities - as fuelled by the significant *social factor*<sup>2</sup> of **transhumance**.

Polycentric over time, Casablanca saw its surface area spread out, and its population migrate within the urban space as a function of upward mobility. The city adapted by inventing its

---

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*. éditions de Minuit, 1981.

2 Marcel Mauss, « *Essai sur le don* », *Année sociologique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> série, 1923-24

own model of self-regulation: annulling the classical distribution patterns of European metropolises that had served as inspiration for the initial urban plan of Casablanca.

The second property is of a more “social” context, concerning the high **mutability** of the city. The very nature of Casa is defined by the many Moroccan territories it absorbs and digests - notably via mechanisms such as rural exodus. This capacity for progressive synthesis has created a syncretism found most noticeably in the city’s diversity (social diversity as well as religious, political, etc.).

Heretofore deeply rooted in their regions and in their beliefs, Moroccans had only thought of themselves in terms of tribes, or groups. It is in Casablanca, for the very first time, that this phenomenon of diversity will exist, primarily in the proletarian zones of the Maârif, Roches Noires or the Carrières Centrales. The original urban plan, as evidenced in other areas of the city, had the perverse effect of creating a de facto apartheid, which did not apply to these neighbourhoods and these populations. It is this community of destiny that will forge the identity of Casablanca. A new Moroccan is born.

The third property inherent to Casablanca is “politico-cultural”. It is found in the history of resistance that is continually perpetuated through the **counter-culture** (Populärkultur vs Hochkultur) rooted in *Nayda* (a 1990’s Renaissance movement) and its catalysing force, L’Boulevard<sup>3</sup>. I see this as the living heritage of popular culture.

In the aftermath of independence, Casablanca forged a culture in total rupture with a Morocco mired in tradition and corseted by the official discourse of what Moroccan culture should be. The artistic scene that has since emerged considers, as writer and curator Omar Berrada so rightly states, “the popular heritage as a living body, a permanent agent of cultural renewal”. Artists make profane what was once considered sacred. They cease the right to take possession of it, to reinterpret it, and to take every liberty with this legacy.

The aspect of memory, or rather its absence, provides basis to the 4<sup>th</sup> axis of inquiry - “historic” this time - of the city of Casa. I have chosen to speak to this issue of an **amnesic memory**, which this exhibition attempts to correct and repair<sup>4</sup>, in a gesture that might actually be a form of resistance.

In fact, no commemorative plaques, no inscription, no column, and no headstone informs the visitor on the subject of the city and its history. Casablanca cultivates forced oblivion. The price of its resilience is amnesia. Here lies the story of this city: a tomb bearing no epitaph.

Indeed, among the properties of this place, it is a blurring **hedonism** that constitutes the true “philosophy” of Casa. This hedonism is particular to local colonies where a propagandist “branding” used exoticism in the service of a colonial agenda of increasing the population of European settlers. This hedonism has remained part of Casablancon identity, appropriated to become an essential ingredient of its *habitus*.

---

<sup>3</sup> See *archival display of counter culture*

<sup>4</sup> See the notion of repair developed by Kader Attia for DOCUMENTA 13 in 2012

What characterises Casablanca is to work hard to play hard. A sort of gigantism has characterised the city: the tallest tower in Africa, the largest swimming pool in the world, the biggest cinema (Vox) in Africa ... And the 'society of the spectacle'<sup>5</sup> radiated throughout the city: bullfights, cabaret shows by the era's great artists, the Arènes and the Municipal Theatre, a Formula 1 grand prix organised in Casablanca in 1957 and downtown exciting night life.

**Map out** ... Architect and graphic designer Aicha El Beloui accompanied me in a topographical and toponymical interpretation of Casa. The welcoming work *Map of the Legend* plunges you immediately into the sprawl of the city, singling out the different historical landmarks that tell its story. It also shows the strategic importance of the ocean for this city which then bears the attributes common to large port cities: diversity, creolisation and commerce. As for the historic maps presented in the *archives* section, they provide a perspective upon the city's spectacular growth over the last century.

**Hear, smell, touch** ... Casablanca has kept the sensuality of the great African metropolises. It is an incarnate city, fleshly, for better and for worse. For the noise of its deafening car horns that give way to the poetic improvisations of rag-pickers. For the whiff of sea salt from its piers and the pestilence of overflowing garbage bins strewn across sidewalks. For all that can be touched while strolling the marketplace, and for the woman who slaps the unwanted hand. The work of listening and reinterpretation, it is the work of Anna Raimondo, Casablancon at heart. She offers an immersive experience through her sound installation, *Casablanca Tells*, which welcomes you to the city's heart beat as you enter "Loading ... Casa".

**Shoot** ... That which first resists us, we must learn to engage with. That is the chosen subject of Zineb Andress Arraki, who has been collecting fragments of Casablanca for years under the generic title of *Mobility, Questioning the usual*. In her work *CAZAA*, homonymous acronym of the city that mixes the peculiar look of the artist / resident of the city by the addition of her initials, her expert eye on architecture allows her to testify to a closed horizon where she notes the current inability of the city "to fabricate new possibilities". Yassine Alaoui Ismaili, aka Yorias, gives in his work *Casablanca Not the Movie*, a very vivid rendering of the city, urban images where the lived experience stands out. It is no longer the image felt, fictionalized, mythified that is captured but encounters with the city and its inhabitants, closer to reality.

The construction of my repertory of Casablanca includes both still and moving images. In his film, *CasaOneDay*, Hicham Lasri entrusts the discovery of the city to a child with a mirror. This tool, known for the intransigence of its reflectivity, here reveals an unexpectedly urban poetry. As such, Lasri positions himself in the tradition of a Marcel Duchamp, for whom the mirror becomes a revelatory medium to a fourth dimension. As Duchamp

---

<sup>5</sup> Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, éditions Buchet/Chastel, 1967

comments his work *The Large Glass*, "I merely thought of the idea of a projection, of a fourth dimension, invisible since one cannot see it with the eyes ..."<sup>6</sup>

**Collect, remember ...** These works, this exhibition must serve a purpose. They are both a personal, individual effort and a collective one, in service to the reparation of the amnesic memory that afflicts this city in perpetual motion. Mohamed Tangi, out of love and a sense of responsibility, took upon himself the vital gesture of keeping a record of Casablanca, where the ephemeral so quickly replaces the perennial and vice versa. The visionary generosity of his collection allows me now to unveil certain *myths* that together establish the basis of this Casablancon *mythology*<sup>7</sup>.

Fatima Mazmouz, pursues in her work the collection of data, various historical documents allowing her to complete a type of organic, personal archive, which contributes to the constitution of a possible collective memory. Taking as a starting point her own family history and weaving from her own mythologies, she surveys Casablanca, the city where her father is born, in an emotional but also historical way. She discovers that nationalism has had its active force in Casa. "Suddenly, all these names of streets, avenues and boulevards had a face, a body, a story, that of a Morocco of resistance determined to free itself, to emancipate itself." This resistance to oblivion allows her to link her history to that of the city, precisely through the prism of the city's resistance stories. In *Liaisons dangereuses-Résistants marocains* (Dangerous Liaisons- Moroccan Resistants), she associates this larger historical corpus with her personal grammar around a super-figure, autofictional mother who takes the scale of a super-mother country: the Ummah or Nation in Arabic.

**Create, and recreate Casablanca ...** All of these works permit me to create for you, in Brussels, a part of this subjective Casablanca, which artists bring to life. Two of these works, *Socica* (Hay Mohammadi), *Carrières centrales* (Hay Mohammadi), *Assiniya* and *Feu en Océan* (Fire in the Ocean), by Mostafa Maftah, great observer and lover of the city, present a synthesis of its various long-term properties: geographical/transhumance, social/mutability, politico-cultural/counter-culture, historical/amnesic memory and philosophic/hedonism. This artist perfectly incarnates Casablanca's *habitus*.

One can see, the artists and I will show you, Casablanca is a city-world that escapes any tentative of holistic analysis<sup>8</sup>. Casablanca is held in each of its components, and characterised by individuation and singularity. Each person, each artist creates a unique Casablanca.

---

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Cabane and Marcel Duchamp, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp*, Editions Belfond, coll. « Collections Entretiens », 1967, p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, éditions du Seuil, 1957

<sup>8</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, éditions Payot, coll. « Petite Bibliothèque Payot », 2009. 1<sup>ère</sup> édition, 1894