



عبور الباب السابع

Obour al bab assabea

Crossing the Seventh Gate

Ali Essafi

Producer Ali Essafi, Rasha Salti. **Production company** Cinemaat Prod (Casablanca, Morocco). **Written and directed by** Ali Essafi. **Director of photography** Hakim Belabbes, Hassan Ouazzani, Ali Essafi. **Editor** Chaghig Arzoumanian. **Sound design** Rana Eid. **Sound** Touda Bouanani, Ali Essafi.

Black/white & colour. 80 min. French, Arabic.

Premiere February 12, 2017, Berlinale Forum

„La Septième Porte“ (The Seventh Door) is the title of a 300-page film historical work dedicated to Moroccan cinema between 1907 and 1986. It was written by Ahmed Bouanani (1938–2011) by hand over many years, but was never published. Neither his contribution to film history nor the five films (four of them shorts) he made between 1966 and 1980, which also pursue the politics of memory, could count on support in postcolonial Morocco. Ali Essafi's portrait film equally takes a stand against the state-driven policy of forgetting. He visited Bouanani three years before the latter's death. The filmmaker, poet and novelist who also made drawings was leading a reclusive life in a remote village with his wife Naïma and many cats, living in the midst of huge piles of books and manuscripts, those that had been spared from a devastating fire. He was physically frail but unbroken in spirit. The discussions about how he saw his position, censorship, the filmmaking ban he received and his work as a film editor are combined with film excerpts, photos, a TV interview and other documents to map out the contours of an independent artist and his oeuvre that are both full of integrity.

Birgit Kohler

Bouanani and the collective memory

Since my return to Morocco in 2004, I have sought to get to know Ahmed Bouanani and his cinema from closer up. One major lesson has stayed with me from my studies in the west, namely that the creative act is intimately linked to both how artistic production accumulates over generations as well as the way it's transmitted. While tracing the lineage of my own practice, *Al-Sarab* and *Wechma* rank first from our national cinematic legacy. Once I was finally able to discover *Tarfaya Aw Masseurat Sha'er*, and *Al-Manabe' al-Arba'a*, I identified with the heroes of both films and their quest for the key to the 'seventh gate'. My own quest to find Bouanani, however, turned out to be almost impossible. By the time I had returned to Morocco, he had retreated to Ait Oumghar, a small town in the High Atlas. The traces of his filmography I found on the web were imprecise, contradictory and incomplete. Not a single picture of him was available, with the rare press reviews of his work always being illustrated instead by his namesake, a well-known national television host. Only one bookshop in Casablanca still owned copies of his book *L'Hôpital*. In fact, Ahmed Bouanani and his œuvre had almost entirely disappeared from circulation. Slowly but surely, he was being erased from collective memory, the very same cursed 'memory' that formed both the central leitmotiv of his work and the principal cause of his misfortunes. When I finally managed to discover *Thakirah Arba'at 'Ashar* and *Sitta wa Thaniat 'Ashar*, I felt a rush of questions that I have been carrying since. Why have I and those like me been denied access to these major works? Would I have followed the same path had I known Bouanani's œuvre when I was twenty years old? In 2007, a relatively unknown festival in Rabat finally honoured him with a tribute. That was when I was finally able to meet him in person. His body was like that of a ghost, but his spirit was lively, and his hand gestures elegant. His gaze remained youthful and piercing, his memory miraculously intact. I had no trouble finding my way into his solitary poetic universe. Our shared cinematic affinities drew us close, but the privileged intimacy was more due to our literary rapport. With the support and complicity of his spouse, Naïma Saoudi Bouanani, and their daughter Touda, it was possible to film a series of conversations with him, in view of my prospective film. He playfully lent himself to my camera, despite the visible ravages of his ill health, his eyes shining with the spark of the fearless and tireless rebel.

Obour al bab assabea draws an intimate poetic portrait by lacing these interviews with sequences from films in which he played a role as screenwriter, cinematographer, director, editor or actor. I wanted to weave an invitation to a voyage to the heart of this singular artist's interior universe rather than construct a biopic. The film's structure takes its cue from the dominant motifs that animated his practice, to mediate the beguiling mystery and wisdom of his talent.

Ali Essafi



Ali Essafi was born in 1963 in Fez, Morocco. In 1989, he completed a degree in psychology at the Université François-Rabelais de Tours in France, where he began working as an assistant director on numerous documentary and feature films from 1991. In 1997, he made his first film, *Général, nous voilà!*. He returned to Morocco in 2002, and was the artistic director for Moroccan television (SNRT) from 2006 until 2009. Ali Essafi works as a filmmaker, curator, cinematographer, and video artist. He lives in Casablanca.

Films

1997: *Général, nous voilà!* (60 min.). 1998: *Le Silence des champs de betteraves* (54 min.). 1999: *Paris mois par mois* (26 min.). 2001: *Ouarzazate* (55 min.). 2002: *Al Jazira, les Arabes de 1424!* (66 min.). 2004: *Le Blues des Shikhatés* (57 min.). 2011: *Fuite!* (29 min.). 2015: *Le Cosmonaute* (80 min.), *Nos sombres années 70* (75 min.). 2017: *Obour al bab assabea / Crossing the Seventh Gate*.