



## NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

### **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs Notice of Funding Opportunity at the appropriate resource page ([Awards for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#), [Awards for Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#), [Awards for Faculty at Tribal Colleges and Universities](#)) for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

**The application format has been changed since this application was submitted.** You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above links).

Project Title: *Moroccan Director Moumen Smihi (b.1945): Arab Modernities and Cinema*

Institution: University of California, Santa Cruz

Project Director: Peter Limbrick

Grant Program: Awards for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Application, NEH Awards for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions  
Peter Limbrick, Associate Professor, Film and Digital Media, UC Santa Cruz

**Research and Contribution:**

When, after the work of Edward Said and others in his wake, we reject Orientalism and its production of a passive and exotic Arab world, with what critical models should we then engage the diverse and vibrant historical phenomenon of Arab cinema? This project answers that question through a critical study of one of today's most important Arab filmmakers and creative intellectuals, Moumen Smihi, whose films played a founding role in postcolonial cinema in the Maghrib (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya). Smihi's work draws upon longstanding Arab cultural and philosophical models while pursuing an equally rigorous engagement with European and American cinema and theories. Whereas recent scholarship on Arab film has tended towards national cinemas or to a conventional "auteurism" that privileges the filmmaker's creative triumph over the constraints of history, my book *Moumen Smihi: Arab Modernities and Cinema* instead reveals how Smihi's work engages an extensive traffic of images and ideas between Arab and non-Arab cinemas and cultures. My analysis of this exchange deconstructs the assumed homogeneity or self-evidentiary status of both the nation as an organizing frame for film theory and "the Arab world" as an assumed linguistic or historical totality. Moreover, *Moumen Smihi* continues the project to rethink the relation of Arab thought to modernity (Hussein 1975, Pandolfo 2000, El-Ariss 2013) and further engages debates about the use of avant-garde and modern forms by filmmakers in "the Third World" or "global South" (Ganguly 2010, Salazkina 2009).

While recent events in the Arab-speaking world continue to provoke commentary on the political history of the region, analysis of creative artistic production has generally reduced it to a function or expression of broader political movements or ideological positions. We urgently need an understanding of artistic expression from a humanities perspective. Contemporary film and media studies interrogates contemporary images and historical archives and works across national borders, yet there is still relatively little research in English that engages Arabic-language moving-image traditions with the same rigor as other film histories. Drawing upon extensive primary research in Morocco and France, my project provides new routes for thinking about transnational cinema and authorship in the Middle East and North Africa.

My project also fulfills the need for a scholarly, book-length assessment of Arab cinematic and intellectual traditions of modernism and their relation to projects of modernity in the Arab world. Smihi's work is a compelling vehicle for such a study in that it offers a way to ground questions about Arab modernisms in specific historical and textual examples. The relative scarcity of filmic production across many Arab countries (except Egypt, which has already attracted significant critical work, e.g. Armbrust 1996, Shafik 2007) and the historically uneven distribution of these films means that sustaining an informed argument across a thematically coherent and accessible body of work is a major challenge for the film theorist or historian. The few monographs with sustained theoretical and historical arguments (Khoury 2010, Marks forthcoming) are far outnumbered by the edited collections that treat an assortment of single films or countries (e.g. Dönmez-Colin 2007, Gugler 2011). Rather than being dissipated across a range of disconnected films, *Moumen Smihi* is focused on the prolific production over forty years of one filmmaker whose films have recently garnered renewed international attention.

Born in 1945 in Tangier, Smihi trained at the influential IDHEC (L'institut des hautes études cinématographiques) in Paris in the late 1960s; he also studied with literary theorist Roland Barthes and took seminars with Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. In addition to making a long series of groundbreaking films, he has published five volumes on cinema in French and Arabic. In contrast to scholars (Carter 2009) who have characterized Smihi's work as overly "francophile" due to his Parisian training and passion for European thought, my work upsets nationalist and parochial discourses to situate Smihi among other Arab filmmakers such as Ahmed Bouanani, Nouri Bouzid, and Chadi Abdel Salam. They, like Smihi, were dedicated to the creation of a "*nouveau cinéma*

*arabe*” or New Arab Cinema that, beginning in the 1970s, would resist the conventionality of the dominant Egyptian film industry and would reject religious or political conformity. Beyond the influence of French filmmakers like Robert Bresson or Jean Rouch, Smihi's films are equally informed by Hollywood directors like Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, and by Japanese filmmakers like Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi. In accounting for his ongoing engagement with histories beyond Morocco, I argue that Smihi's intellectual project reinvigorates discourses of modernity within the Arab region and revalues the cultural links between West and East and between sites in the global South. My work further develops within film and media studies the revisionist, internationalist discourses on Arab cultural practices that presently animate the fields of history (Miller 2013) and literary studies (Sefrioui 2013) and, in dialogue with these and other works, *Moumen Smihi: Arab Modernities and Cinema* offers a new way to think about the complex traffic of ideas and images through which Smihi's films construct an Arab modernism.

### **Methods and Work Plan:**

This application is to support a one-year period of leave from teaching and administration to work fulltime on this book. To date, I have made multiple trips to Morocco to conduct primary research for this project at the Centre Cinématographique Marocain, the Tangier American Legation and Institute of Maghrib Studies, and the Bibliothèque Nationale du Maroc, where I have studied historical films, journals, books, and personal archival collections, and have consulted other journals and texts at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in Paris. Simultaneously, I have presented and published on Smihi's work internationally, including an essay in the art and theory journal *Third Text* (2012), a new, invited essay in a forthcoming collection, *Middle Eastern Cinema*, and another invited essay, rethinking the vernacular modernism of Smihi and his Moroccan peers, under peer review for *Framework: Journal of Cinema and Media*. In conjunction with my publishing, I have curated a touring program of Smihi's films, "Moumen Smihi: Moroccan Mythologies," which has so far shown at the Pacific Film Archive (Berkeley), the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN), the Block Cinema (Chicago), the Tate Modern (London), and the Musée des Beaux Arts (Montréal). I sourced prints, preserved and digitized previously unavailable films, subtitled others, and worked closely with the filmmaker and prospective venues. While secondary to the book project, my curatorial work and the enthusiastic response it has generated confirms a need and future audience for my book.

I will complete an introduction and two chapters in the coming spring, summer, and fall 2015. During the fellowship year of January to December 2016, I will complete outstanding primary research in Morocco and France (one month), write chapters three through five (seven months), revise the entire manuscript (three months), and submit it to a university press as a manuscript of around 250 pages with fifteen illustrations and some of Smihi's writings, translated by me, as an appendix. My introduction will situate Smihi's work within the debates on modernity, postcoloniality, and cinema described above. **Chapter One**, "Radical Realities," will address the porous boundary between documentary and fiction that characterizes much of Smihi's early work, situating it within both the modernist experimentation with the *court-métrage* or short film in Morocco in the 1960s and 70s and within similar aesthetic practices across the region, especially in Algeria and Syria. The chapter pays particular attention to Smihi's first two films, the short documentary-fiction, *Si Moh, pas de chance/Si Moh, the Unlucky Man* (1971) and the feature, *El Chergui/The East Wind* (1975), in which the filmmaker developed a radical response to postcolonial realities in Morocco. **Chapter Two**, "The Voice of the Arabs" turns from image to sound to understand the primacy of soundtrack across Smihi's films. To listen to the soundtrack of these films—from Radio Cairo's pan-Arab broadcasts of the 1950s to Moroccan pop stations, calls to prayer, the popular stories of the *halqa* tradition, the music of Berber songs, and the non-diegetic music of Chopin—is to be struck by the ways in which sound constitutes a mode of social exchange, political critique, and self-fashioning across the region. Smihi's particular attention to sound illuminates the polyglot and cosmopolitan history of Arab and North African life. **Chapter Three**, "Kān yā makān..." or "once upon a time" develops an argument about the multivocality of Arab culture in the postcolonial period by considering the rigorous

intertextuality of Smihi's films. Whether in collaborations with living writers like Paul Bowles (*Caftan d'amour*, 1987), in retrospective homage (*With Matisse in Tangier*, 1993), or through his films' multiple citations to world cinema, Smihi's filmmaking relies on a deep intertextuality, the conditions for which are located in the unpredictable circulation of American and global culture across the Middle East. **Chapter Four**, "Situating Desire," shows how Smihi's recent "Tangier trilogy" of semi-autobiographical films, *Le Gosse de Tanger/A Muslim Childhood*, (2005), *Les cris de jeunes filles des hirondelles/Girls and Swallows* (2008), and *Tanjawi/Sorrows of a Young Tangerian* (2012), poses provocative questions about gender, sexuality, and childhood in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. Such questions permeate all his films but here are tied closely to the institution of cinema itself. This chapter will argue, as have scholars like El Saadawi (1997) and El-Ariss (2013), that questions about sex and gender remain central to dissent and critique across the region. **Chapter Five**, "Sacred and Secular," enters the debate on secularism and Islamic worlds that has been engaged by authors such as Talal Asad (2003) and those in dialogue with him (Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2005). Smihi's films navigate a complex path through this terrain, showing many examples of religious tolerance and moderation while, at other moments, dramatizing a near-total indictment and rejection of religion. Smihi's respect for filmmakers like Luis Buñuel or Woody Allen, whose work can be at once profane and imbued with the religious values of a culture, animates this chapter's consideration of the place of religion and ideas of the secular across the wider terrain of Arab cinema.

#### **Professional Competencies:**

As an established historian and scholar of transnational cinemas, I combine careful historical research with theoretical sophistication and close critical analysis of texts. My 2010 book *Making Settler Cinemas: Film and Colonial Encounters in the US, Australia, and New Zealand* (Palgrave) is the first transnational study of settler colonialism and cinema. My new book builds on my training while offering new challenges that I have already successfully embraced. In addition to the published and forthcoming essays mentioned above, I have published on Palestinian and Lebanese film and video and have an essay under review at *Visual Anthropology* that addresses an experimental video on the destruction of the Iraq Film Archive. Thanks to the public presentations of my work and my memberships in the Middle East Studies Association and American Institute for Maghrib Studies (in addition to my closest professional organization, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies), I am actively engaged with multiple scholars and curators who work on the Middle East. My research is further enabled by my French and Arabic proficiencies and I am committed to working in a way that respects not only the Francophone nature of the Maghrib but also its Arabic languages – the local Arabic or *darija* of Morocco and the "modern standard Arabic" (MSA) of media, writing, and official discourse (Amazigh or Berber languages, while important in Morocco, are not necessary for the project). Currently, I work with basic *darija*, intermediate/advanced standard Arabic, and advanced French, both written and spoken.

#### **Publication:**

I have been in detailed conversations with Indiana University Press about this book, whose editor has solicited a book proposal, introduction and two chapters that I will submit by the time of this fellowship, in expectation that a successful review would enable an advance contract. Indiana's strengths in both Middle East Studies and Film and Media Studies would ensure a wide scholarly readership; my curation work will ensure that the book will also find an audience of general readers.

**Statement of Eligibility:** University of California Santa Cruz is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, as determined by the Department of Education and the data on file with the National Center for Education Statistics.

Peter Limbrick, *Moumen Smihi: Arab Modernities and Cinema*  
**Bibliography**

- Abu-Lughod, Ibrahim. *Arab Rediscovery of Europe*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963.
- Armes, Roy. *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005.
- Armbrust, Walter. *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Bouzid, Nouri. "The New Realism in Arab Cinema: The Defeat-Conscious Cinema." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 15 (1995): 242-50.
- Carter, Sandra Gayle. *What Moroccan Cinema? A Historical and Critical Study, 1956-2006*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009.
- Dönmez-Colin, Gönül. *The Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East*. London: Wallflower, 2007.
- Edwards, Brian T. *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, From Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.
- El-Ariss, Tarek. *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*. New York: Fordham UP, 2013.
- El Saadawi, Nawal. *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. New York: Zed, 1997.
- Elhaik, Tarek. "A Bloc of Sensations In Lieu of Geography." *Sweet Sixties: Specters and Spirits of a Parallel Avant-garde*. Ed. Georg Schöllhammer and Ruben Arevshatyan. Berlin: Sternberg 2014. 217-228.
- Fanon, Franz. "This is the Voice of Algeria," in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. H. Chevalier. New York: Grove, 1965. 69-98.
- Ganguly, Keya. *Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2010.
- Gaonkar, Dilip, ed. *Alternative Modernities*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- Gugler, Joseph, ed. *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence*. Austin: UT Austin P, 2011.
- Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006.
- Hussein, Taha. *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. Trans. Sidney Glazer. New York: Octagon, 1975.
- Kassab, Elizabeth. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010.
- Khatibi, Abdelkebir. *Maghreb Pluriel*. Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1983.
- Khouri, Malek. *Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema*. Cairo: AUC Press, 2010.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Marks, Laura U. *Hanan al-Cinema*. Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming.
- Miller, Susan Gilson. *A History of Modern Morocco*. New York: Cambridge, 2013.
- Pandolfo, Stefania. "The Thin Line of Modernity: Some Moroccan Debates on Subjectivity." *Questions of Modernity*. Ed. Timothy Mitchell. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. 115-47.
- Safouan, Moustapha. *Why the Arabs are not Free: The Politics of Writing*. London: Blackwell, 2007.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 1977.
- Salazkina, Masha. *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.
- Sefrioui, Kenza. *La revue Souffles 1976-1973: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc*. Casablanca: Éditions de Sirocco, 2013.
- Shafik, Viola. *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation*. Cairo: AUC Press, 2007.
- Smihi, Moumen. *Ecrire sur le cinéma*. Paris: Slaïki Frères, 2006.
- . *Hadīth al-Sinimā*, vols. 1 and 2. Tangier: Silikī Ikhwān, 2005, 2006.
- Willemen, Paul. "The National Revisited." *Theorizing National Cinema*. Ed. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen. London: BFI, 2006. 29-43.