



وشمة

Wechma

Traces

Hamid Benani

Production company Sigma 3 Films (Morocco). **Director** Hamid Benani. **Director of photography** Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi.

Editor Ahmed Bouanani. **Music** Kamal Dominique Hellebois.

Sound Hans Klein.

With Mohamed Kadan, Kadidja Moujabid, Majdouline Abdelkader Moutaa.

1970, 35 mm, black/white. 105 min. Arabic.

Orphan Messaoud is adopted by a childless farmer at the age of eight. His adoptive father disciplines the gentle child with extreme severity, leading to ever more rebellious behaviour in the traumatised youth. As a young man, Messaoud gets involved with a group of violent ne'er-do-wells and lives his life on the edge.

Wechma marks a departure in Moroccan cinema: a feature film that is experimental, particularly in the second part, breaks with conventional narrative structures and abruptly counters naturalism with Freudian symbolism and sequences that are downright fantastical.

Hamid Benani, Mohamed Sekkat, Ahmed Bouanani and Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi, classmates at the Parisian film school IDHEC, came together to found the production company Sigma 3 for this film. *Wechma* was made in collective fashion (Sekkat served as producer, Bouanani as assistant director and editor, Tazi as director of photography). Bouanani's *Al-Sarab* was meant to be the collective's next production, but Benani alienated his collaborators by claiming all the glory for himself. The group broke up and Bouanani had to wait a decade before being able to complete his own project.

Christoph Terhechte

“We had such motivation, such passion, the passion of our craft, of our commitment”

Kevin Dwyer: Could you tell me the story of Wechma and of Sigma 3, which you formed with two other filmmakers, Ahmed Bouanani and Mohammad Seqqat?

Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi: Of all the IDHEC [Institut des hautes études cinématographiques, film school in Paris, -Ed.] graduating classes during the early years, I think ours was the only one that really worked together. But our attempt to build a cooperative was a bit utopian in that each of us, while wanting to make fiction feature films, also had to earn a living – Bouanani continued to work in an office at the CCM [Centre cinématographique marocain, -Ed.], I was always on the lookout for a documentary project, and Seqqat was starting to make advertising films. But we had a very strong desire to make a feature film; we were militant about it, and it had really become an *idée fixe* for all of us. So three of us who had been together at IDHEC – myself, Bouanani, and Muhammad Seqqat – formed Sigma 3, trying to figure out how to work together in a more creative way. Then Benani came back from IDHEC and had a subject that was ready to go and that excited us all. His idea had the strongest effect on Bouanani who, as a poet and writer, was the most literary among us. He read some pages and spoke to us about it, and we were all enthusiastic.

How did you work on Wechma?

We divided up the tasks: Bouanani worked on the continuity and was editor and assistant director, I was cinematographer, Muhammad Seqqat was director of production, and Hamid Benani was the director. We applied what we'd learned at IDHEC, where each of us had a specialty but had also been trained for versatility and could perform other functions. We all worked so long on the screenplay that we knew it by heart! I even had the chance to put in a scene referring to my own father, the scene where the father greases the gun. This was one of his rituals (...). When we filmed it I had the actor make exactly the same gestures my father used to make – like the way he manipulated the rifle – as I remembered them in my mind. We even used my father's gun!

And everyone contributed what he could materially – car, gasoline, and so on. I had a trailer at the time and that's where we all slept. This was really militancy: we all had the will to achieve our goal and to prove that one could make films, without all kinds of pretentious talk, without bringing in foreigners for the images and the sound – we could express ourselves without Cinemascope and even without colour. And certainly without equipment like cranes. And without a sound camera – we did all the post-synchronisation in a studio in Casablanca, even to the point where we ourselves dubbed the neighing of the horses. [Laughs.]

It was really exciting. I talk of it now with a lot of nostalgia, but I also have a lot of regrets that we weren't able to continue in that manner. We had such motivation, such passion – the passion of our craft, the passion of our effort, of our commitment. Anything we owned – ‘hey, this table here, will that work for such-and-such scene?’ – if it would work in the film we'd say, ‘OK, load it in the truck’, even if this was the only table in our house! We all lived in the trailer in the countryside and shot out there, and nothing stopped us from shooting – no problems with the desert nor with a star nor with equipment.

What was the relationship between Wechma and those first three Moroccan films?

There was no relationship whatsoever! First of all, there wasn't the slightest hint of commercial spirit in the making of *Wechma*. In those three earlier films, the main idea of the producers was to take a kind of cinema that had had good success – in this case Egyptian film – and to substitute a Moroccan film, saying, in effect, ‘if we can replace ten Egyptian films with one Moroccan film, we can count that a great success.’ They copied the musical aspect and took a well-known star, the singer Abdelwahab Doukkali, brought together some actors and foreign technicians, filmed in Cinemascope, and dealt with subjects that had no particular relationship to Morocco. Basically the aims of those films had nothing to do with our aim with Sigma 3, which was that of contributing to creating a national cinema.

Were those three films successful?

Not at all, not at all. For the public these were indeed the first Moroccan films, but they had no impact at all. Of course, neither did *Wechma* have any impact on the public!

You have to understand: we had absolutely no way to get a film on the commercial screens! *Wechma* was certainly talked about in the film clubs and the press and it won some prizes in foreign film festivals, but you can't say it reached the public – that would be false. However, this was the case for all Moroccan films – there was no distribution and no commercial screening.

Although the wider public never had a chance to see the film and give its opinion, the film was highly praised in the press, in the film clubs, and so on. Why do you think this was?

First of all, this wasn't a film you liked because of the star, or the actor, or anything on that level. It was a film that addressed a subject central to Moroccan society, central to its identity – the problem of adoption, which is still a big problem today. The film didn't gloss over things – we wanted to show this problem not only during childhood but also all the damage this leads to when the child becomes an adult. We wanted to treat it simply, directly, cinematically.

Also, from a technical and artistic standpoint, I still think this film is a very valid one, and in these ways it marked the cinema of that time. Afterwards, starting in 1973–1974, there was a number of fine films – from Moumen Smihi and Souheil Ben Barka, for example – made with the same basic objective we had with Sigma 3, that of expressing and building a national cinema rather than plagiarising the Egyptians, expressing ourselves as a group with a film from our own... terrain. That's it; it was as simple as that.

Given this relatively successful outcome, why was Sigma 3 unable to produce another film?

After *Wechma* was completed and shown, what had been a collective effort began to be seen as basically the work of ‘Monsieur’ Hamid Benani. [...] The rest of us grew increasingly frustrated with this; we felt our wings were being clipped.

Why did this happen? Do you think it had something to do with the notion of ‘cinema d'auteur’ that was so strong in France – the idea that it was the director who took full responsibility and credit for the film, even when it was a collective effort?

I think this Western idea definitely had something to do with it. But you have to say that Benani bears his share of the blame. No doubt he didn't want to pull the covers to his side at the outset, but when the press and the media put him on the spot he didn't explain how things were. So the rest of us were very discouraged and lost the enthusiasm needed to continue in this manner. We were all upset to find ourselves in this position, all the more so because for each of us this was just the first step on a long march. Bouanani had his film all ready to go and this had to wait another ten years before being produced. Then I was going to direct a film, and there would be another by Seqqat.

What was the film you planned to make?

We were discussing a number of stories, but I can't say that at that moment I had a clear subject that I was ready to put on the table. I still wasn't really thinking about fiction. (...)

What finally happened with the Sigma 3 cooperative?

It broke up after *Wechma*, completely dissolved. Some of us kept up contact on an individual basis, but there was no structure. It was a great disappointment, especially because we all gained from a symbiosis of ideas, effort, beliefs, motivation, and so on. It wasn't just disappointment. The effect was societal, in fact, because the unhappy end to this experience had the effect of completely eliminating the collective spirit in filmmaking. When you think of this notion of 'cinéma d'auteur', where you try to eliminate everything that happens 'in the wings' of a production, where you try to put everything on the shoulders of one person, the director – obviously, all kinds of misunderstandings can arise. I remember arguing at some length that this notion of 'Author' can't really exist in our cinema, not yet at least. To have an 'author', a 'cinéma d'auteur', you have to already have an existing filmmaking tradition. But here we don't have that – you might talk of a cinema of artisans, or some such term, but you can't talk of 'cinéma d'auteur'.

It really was a pity that we couldn't go forward with Sigma 3 because I think that the cooperative structure – producing as a non-profit-making entity – was the most suitable one for the situation of Moroccan filmmaking at the time. In any case we would not be making a profit, because a Moroccan film can never recoup its costs simply from spectators (...). We can only make films thanks to subsidies, to financial support, whether from Moroccan or foreign institutions. So, whether we like it or not, we are necessarily in the non-profit making sector.

I recently read an interview with the Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, in which he talked about spending half of his time training people to make films cooperatively. He said that this cooperative effort was one of his greatest joys. Making films under his own name, like Memories of Underdevelopment [1968], obviously gave him pleasure, but it was the cooperative work that he felt gave meaning to his labor. In Cuba structures were created to support that kind of cooperative activity; here, obviously, that was not the case.

That's right. In fact, things moved in the opposite direction. Starting in 1977, if you wanted to make a film you became legally required to form a production company. From that moment on, if you hadn't created a company you couldn't get authorisation to shoot, or be on the business register, or work on a project, or apply for a contract from a ministry. You could no longer exist simply as an individual in this profession.

But creating a production company only is meaningful if the profession becomes profitable, which it isn't by any stretch of the imagination. The proof of this is that now there are some 270 production companies in Morocco, because every time a project is on offer production companies are created just to apply for the project and then they disappear right afterward. Given all this, I think that a cooperative structure might have been the most appropriate for us as filmmakers, but it's only now, with this distance from the past, that we can see this.

Kevin Dwyer, Beyond Casablanca:

M. A. Tazi and the Adventure of Moroccan Cinema, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 92–96

Hamid Benani was born in 1942 in Meknès, Morocco. He studied Philosophy in Rabat until 1964, after which he completed a degree in Film at the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) in Paris. In 1970, Benani co-founded the production company Sigma 3 along with Ahmed Bouanani, Mohamed Abderrahman Tazi, and Mohamed Sekkat. That same year, he made his first full-length film, *Wechma*. He made his second full-length feature film, *La Prière de l'absent*, decades later. Hamid Benani is a director, editor, and screenwriter.

Films

1970: *Wechma / Traces*. 1995: *La Prière de l'absent* (93 min.), *La Rivière*. 1998: *Le Mirage*. 1999: *Oulad Laghial*. 2012: *L'Enfant cheikh* (80 min.).