

## FILM REVIEW

Ali Essafi, director. *Beyond the Dying of the Light*. 2020. 70 minutes. Moroccan Darija and French, with English Subtitles. Morocco. Cinemaat Prod. No price reported.

Ali Essafi's film *Before the Dying of the Light* (2020) is an encounter with the story of Abdelaziz Tribaq, an activist member of Ila Al Amam, a Marxist Leninist organization active in the 1970s in resistance against the Moroccan royal regime's Years of Lead, a period marked by state violence. We hear Tribaq—without seeing his face, apart from a current photo and a few from his youth—recount his story of activism, of living in secrecy, of his new identity and eventual imprisonment. The other voice we hear, mirror to Tribaq's, is of Moroccan filmmaker Mostafa Derkaoui, interviewed about his film *De quelques évènements sans signification* (1974), a film, not unlike the activists, which was disappeared for the revolutionary ideas it held. The film collectively asked what cinema could do to build a national culture. It dared to dream a future for a free Moroccan people, without once showing an image of the king, which led to its censoring. Overlaid with their voices are archival images, most from films made between the 1960s and 1980s by Moroccan filmmakers who became adults in the post-independence years.

In his interview, Tribaq speaks of his and his comrades' hopes and how they weren't met; he says, "Marxism reconciled us with ourselves because we were poor." Fifty years later, still in his habits and language, he only refers to Ila Al Amam as the "organization" and does not once address current politics. The impossibility to show Tribaq's face even today hints at a continuum of state violence. He is almost bodiless, and the audience feels it in their embodied presence facing the screen. He speaks of living in secrecy, threatened of arrest if found, and the loneliness and loss he felt. Reliving the night before he went into hiding, he says of his mother's tears that they "haunted [him] for a long time." Like the archives, Tribaq's story was lost.

The tension lies in these traces and the duality of their absence. While activists had to hide physical archives to avoid state surveillance and arrest, the state destroyed and continues to hide archives of the disappeared and censored films, continuously erasing our histories.

I watched the film for the first time in 2021 as part of a cycle of film screenings themed "Decolonizing Archives" during Ch[a]rita, an annual series of artistic events in the public space in Marrakech, Morocco. I and others in the audience cried for all those who suffered then and now, and for ourselves, at once haunted by and amputated from our histories. The film held the sense of loss we all feel facing an inaccessible archive and the deeply seated desire—so difficult to undo—to finally gaze at it. A few months earlier, Omar Radi, a young Moroccan

journalist, had been imprisoned. He was one of many in jail, imprisoned for their thinking and activism.

The film's reparative act lies in the archival footage that it uses, otherwise inaccessible to its audiences, buried behind the bureaucratic walls of the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM). The footage tells a history that is forbidden to us, clouded in state-produced shadow, that feels like it is repeating itself now. There is an urgency in this film, a deep emotional presence felt by everyone in the audience.


Opening with filmmaker Ahmed Bouanani's voice from *Mémoire 14* (1971), Nass El Ghiwane's music, the paintings of the School of Casablanca, photos from Bouanani's and Derkaoui's sets, Ali Essafi conjures the filmmakers and artists of post-independence Morocco and inscribes himself in their legacy. Amidst images of reels unwound and canisters piled, he draws the history of the School of Casablanca and 1970s cinema as a space of resistance and history-telling. Essafi syncs the images with jazz, flowing in movement. The state squashed them, sending both films and artists into hiding.

While Tribaq speaks of a revolution once dreamt of and the crushing violence of torture, we see post-independence images produced by the CCM of royal processions and peaceful protests. State violence is accessed only through fiction films and written press—newspapers and magazines—sole testifiers of a history that escaped the national state narrative.

Without directly naming the CCM, which holds the archives of Moroccan films, Ali Essafi ends his film with this mention: "But the archives for Moroccan films remain very difficult to access." While it isn't one of the funders of the film (supported by Moroccan 2M; French CNC, Arte, and Fond Image de la Francophonie; Qatari DFI; and Lebanese AFAC), the CCM is listed in the end credits as a source for the archives and a partner. Within a political landscape of archival control, Ali Essafi exercises his privilege of access to subtly trace this historical complicity between the CCM and the state without ever denouncing the current CCM politics. I wonder if it will always come as a generation's duty to piece together the last's struggle with institutional complicity in erasure.

Essafi opens and closes his film with film canisters, all waiting for an unearthing. Through editing, he draws the images near, associates, and sutures, reflecting the filmmakers of that time's need to dream and inability to scream, to explicitly speak of their time but always alluding to it, haunted by it. Next to martyr Saïda Menebhi's photo, Essafi edits Aïcha's drowning in *El Cherqui* (1975). She dared to want something other than an alienating existence, and her body floated lifeless.

The film ends with a dedication to all artists who suffered from repression and censorship, telling of the imprisoned, the disappeared, the dead, and Mostafa Derkaoui's words haunt us. "But we are not there now. It's an old story. It will not be repeated in Morocco inshallah!"

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