

## Jonathan Smolin

*Moroccan Noir: Police, Crime, and Politics in Popular Culture*. Ser. Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. 308.

The police are linked to the evolution of the state's identity across a number of different national contexts, the strategies of its exercise of symbolic power inevitably changing over time in response to shifting political landscapes. Contemporary police narratives—whether embedded in modern detective fiction, newspaper or journal accounts, television serials, or film—both mediate and reflect governments' and citizens' dynamic conceptions of their own relationship to power and authority. Picking up where Susan Slyomovics left off in her expertly crafted account of the writings and performances produced during Morocco's 'Years of Lead,' Jonathan Smolin's *Moroccan Noir* traces the role of popular culture in the renegotiation of the public's relationship with the police and state authority immediately after this dark period of the country's history.<sup>1</sup>

Smolin divides his discussion of the dialectic interplay of representations and performative spectacles of the police over the past twenty years into six chapters, each of which addresses a distinct stage in the police's relationship with the Moroccan public. Though King Hassan II's rule (1961–99) was generally characterized by a climate of fear, police surveillance, censorship and self-censorship, the expression 'the Years of Lead' often refers specifically to the 1970's and 1980's, when thousands were arbitrarily detained and tortured and dissidents regularly fell victim to state-sponsored disappearances from which they never returned. While the Years of Lead were characterized by a taciturn press unwilling or unable to speak out against the corruption and human rights abuses of the police, Smolin marks the first rupture in the media's silence to be the unprecedented coverage given to the case known as the Tabit Affair. This "trial of the century" that definitively effected how print journalism handled its coverage of the police began on February 18, 1993, when Hajj Mustapha Tabit, an influential police commissioner in Casablanca's Aïn Sebaâ-Hay Mohammedi neighborhood, was tried for abducting and raping 518 women and underage girls. As staggeringly high as this number is, it represents less than a third of the estimated 1600 victims he assaulted over a three year period, many of which were recorded, the videotapes of the attacks carefully stored in his apartment.

1 Susan Slyomovics, *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

The scandal broke with an anonymous article in an Arabic daily which vaguely stated that an unidentified high-ranking public official in Casablanca was under arrest for crimes “related to morals.” This seemingly innocuous news brief, Smolin argues, was a shock to its readers who were habituated to a media context in which reports about ongoing criminal investigations, particularly those implicating the police, were strictly taboo. Regardless that the article was printed in the country’s central opposition newspaper at the time, the *Socialist Union*, its publication signaled a major shift in state policies toward the press. The Ministry of the Interior still controlled the content of any sensitive information appearing in Morocco’s printed news media; if the story was printed, it was printed with the government’s consent. This opening—what could be considered a relatively small victory for freedom of expression—was a victory won with the state’s consent, yet it nevertheless brought startling results. Despite the government’s attempts to depict Hajj Mustapha Tabit’s egregious abuse of power as an isolated incident, journalists steadily increased their coverage of the trial, simultaneously transforming it into a way to address the systemic violence and repression wrought by the police for decades.

In Smolin’s reading, the break in the press’s silence that began with the Tabit Affair established both a new media atmosphere and a broad non-elite readership that subsequently generated several previously unknown genres intimately tied to evolving representations of the police. For example, in the months immediately following the trial, the country’s city boulevards were blanketed with a radically new type of media. Displays of large color tabloids filled the news stands, their sensational headlines and accompanying graphic photographs announcing the onset of a terrifying increase in crime. At the forefront of this new wave of Moroccan crime journalism was Najib Skir, former director of Kénitra’s central prison, who monopolized the market with the concurrent publication of five discrete titles. The papers’ front pages regularly featured coverage of spectacular murders. Often, the headlines’ cases involved victims killed by members of their own families, chosen by design to highlight the supposed breakdown of traditional values. Skir was able to mobilize his close ties to the judicial system and the police to acquire official crime reports and photographs inaccessible to most. Beyond merely supplying the public with objective information, however, his close relationship with these government bodies meant that his papers, in effect, provided the state with the illusion of an unbiased media source that ultimately helped it to manage public opinion.

Smolin argues that “the tabloids linked the spectacle of crime spiraling out of control to a new image of the police as hardworking and law-bound in arresting criminals and returning law and order to the community” (70). It is in instances like these that Smolin sees a new kind of collusion between the

state and media, with the media serving as a vehicle of dissemination for a form of authoritarianism in the process of adapting to a climate now characterized by a rhetoric of human rights. The tension between the media's complicity with, and occasional opposition to, the government's attempts to move from a model of violence and coercion to one in which it produces its authority through manufactured consent is, in fact, *Moroccan Noir's* primary concern. Later chapters address this issue through Moroccan True Crime fiction, police movies produced for local television stations, the media construction of Morocco's first serial killer, and community policing programs instituted after the 2003 Casablanca bombings.

*Moroccan Noir* is impressively researched. Collecting the artifacts of popular culture in Morocco is no easy task. Back issues of tabloids are rarely considered worth the effort of archiving; television stations retain full control of their movies and are disinclined to give copies to anyone, including the films' directors and actors. Smolin's years of dedicated work spent compiling these materials has resulted in a book that is, without question, an accomplished and valuable resource on a little studied topic. Nevertheless, the general dichotomy at the heart of *Moroccan Noir's* premise between high and low forms of cultural production sometimes feels regrettable, particularly when moments in the text point to missed opportunities to combine the two. For instance, in his discussion of the Tabit Affair, Smolin notes that prominent newspapers like the *Banner* and the *Socialist Union* printed daily editorials and interviews about the trial's effect on society. Contributors included many of Morocco's leading writers and intellectuals, among them Mohamed Choukri, Salah El Oudie, and Abdelkrim Ghallab, yet there is no exploration of the role these important figures may have played in the debate. Likewise, *Moroccan Noir's* single chapter to explicitly engage with the literary, "Crime-Page Fiction: Moroccan True Crime and the New Independent Press," limits itself to the police procedurals published by Miloudi and Abdelilah Hamdouchi, and addresses only their 1997 novel *The Blind Whale* with any depth.

Though it is clear that Smolin's interest in the Arabic police novel in *Moroccan Noir* ultimately rests in the influence he believes it to have had on the true-crime narratives later published in *Moroccan Events*, Morocco's first independent daily launched in 1998, he puts forward some weighty claims for the genre and its place in the dialogue between the media's handling of crime and the political changes concurrently underway in the country. That he could have more carefully fleshed out the history of the genre and better contextualized its place in both Morocco and the larger Arab world is evidenced by his recent article, "Didactic Entertainment: The Moroccan Police Journal and the

Origins of the Arabic Police Procedural,” published in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* in November of 2013.<sup>2</sup> It is here, rather than in *Moroccan Noir*, that the reader learns that the genre’s Moroccan origins can be traced to the 1960’s. It is also here that the reader gains an appreciation of the Moroccan police’s long history of strategic attempts to manipulate and control its own image. This is content that would have answered some of the questions raised by *Moroccan Noir*’s chapter on the same topic had it been included.

These are though, in the end, minor points that detract little from the story Smolin aims to tell: that of the state’s efforts to publicly redefine itself through the media without radically altering its fundamentally authoritarian character. To what degree the state’s campaign to alter the public’s perception of the police has succeeded, however, is a question that remains open. *Moroccan Noir* does not claim to analyze the reception of the various representations of the police described within its pages. There are some who may take issue with one of Smolin’s closing statements—that “fear of the police and torture has largely disappeared”—especially in light of the frequent displays of brutality enacted by the police in their responses to the demonstrators of the February 20th movement since 2011 (237). The association between the police and unrestrained acts of violence has certainly decreased, but may not have altogether disappeared, as Youssef Fadel’s novel, *A Rare Blue Bird that Flies with Me*, a narrative of an eighteen year forced disappearance spent in a prison in Southern Morocco and shortlisted for the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, illustrates. Nonetheless, the novel’s free circulation supports Smolin’s central argument about the changing tactics of Morocco’s authoritarianism.

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2 Smolin, Jonathan. “Didactic Entertainment: The Moroccan *Police Journal* and the Origins of the Arabic Police Procedural.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45:4 (November 2013): 695-714.