مجلة أكاديمية محكمة تعنى بالدراسات القانونية والاقتصادية والإنسانية برؤية حضارية تكاملية
A peer-reviewed journal in law, economics, and humanities from an integrative civilizational perspective

"Voicing the Margins: Media, Youth Expression, and Cultural Resistance in Nabil Ayouch's *Casablanca Beats*"

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Abstract:

This study looks at how media representation and cinema interact in Casablanca Beats (Haut et Fort, 2021). It is a ground-breaking film directed by the Moroccan filmmaker Nabil Ayouch. The film, which is set in Sidi Moumen, a culturally vibrant but socioeconomically marginalized district, shows how hip-hop can be a transformative medium for youth empowerment, resistance, and self-expression. This studyexplores how Casablanca Beats reclaims public discourse by providing voice to marginalized Moroccan youth through a critical examination of narrative elements, character development, and stylistic choices. It also looks at how the movie both mirrors and challenges the way Moroccan urban communities are portrayed in the media, providing a different story that is based on artistic agency andauthenticity as well.

The study places the movie in the larger framework of Moroccan media dynamics and global cinematic representation by referencing media theory and postcolonial cultural criticism. Furthermore, the movie's success at esteemed events like the Cannes Film Festival highlights its contribution to establishing Moroccan cinema as a catalyst for social change and discussion. Accordingly, Casablanca Beats is a potent example of mediated resistance that subverts traditional notions of identity, voice, and visibility in Moroccan society.

Keywords: Voice, margins, media, youth, expression, cinema, Casablanca Beats.

I. Introduction

In recent years, Moroccan cinema has become a crucial platform for discussing issues of representation, voice, and identity in a society that is changing quickly. Nabil Ayouch's *Casablanca Beats* (*Haut et Fort,* 2021), a film that effectively combines media, youth culture, and social critique, is one of the most captivating additions to this landscape. The film provides a powerful depiction of young Moroccans using hip-hop as a means of self-expression, empowerment, and resistance. It is set in Casablanca's working-class neighborhood of Sidi Moumen, a neighborhood that has long linked to poverty, marginalization, and postcolonial neglect. In addition to telling a compelling local story, *Casablanca Beats* adds to discussions about religion, politics, art, activism, and cultural identity by concentrating on the lived experiences of urban youth.

The film's setting is firmly anchored in the complicated realities that Moroccan urban youth currently face. These young people frequently live in a world characterized by social constraints influenced by custom, religion, and official rhetoric, economic inequality, and a lack of educational opportunities. Despite these obstacles, they have used alternative forms of cultural production to become more visible and vocal. Hip-hop and rap music, dance, street art, and the production of digital content have all flourished as means of political commentary and self-representation. In a society that has frequently failed to give them sufficient platforms or institutional support, these cultural practices allow young people to express their frustrations, dreams, and aspirations.In this regard, Nabil Ayouch's movie, *Casablanca Beats*, is notable for its dedication to highlighting the inventiveness and tenacity of Moroccan youth. The film, which features real Sidi Moumen youth and draws from their genuine voices and life experiences, blurs the boundaries between fiction and documentary. Besides focusing on youth expression, Ayouch, who is well-known for his socially conscious films, challenges the prevailing representations that are frequently promoted by Moroccan mainstream media. By redefining what it

means to be young, urban, and Moroccan in the twenty-first century, *Casablanca Beats* hence serves as a cultural product as well as a means of mediated resistance. *Casablanca Beats* strategically employs hip-hop culture and cinematic techniques to empower Moroccan youth and contest stereotypical portrayals of marginalized communities, asserting itself as a tool of social transformation and mediated resistance (Kellner 1–2; Rose 22–25). Thus, this research paper places the movie within the larger theoretical frameworks of media representation, postcolonial cultural criticism, and youth subculture theory by examining its narrative structure, aesthetics, and reception. By doing so, the movie not only captures the hopes and hardships of Moroccan youth, but it also takes part in a broader movement to use art to reclaim public space and give voice to the voiceless.

- **Research Questions**

In order to examine *Casablanca Beats'* sociocultural and cinematic significance within Moroccan and larger postcolonial media landscapes, this academic study is guided by two main research questions:

1. How does the film represent marginalized youth and urban space?
2. In what ways does the film serve as a critique of mainstream media?

The film's engagement with the lived realities of marginalized Moroccan youth, especially those who reside in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods like Sidi Moumen, is the subject of the first question. In *Casablanca Beats*, these urban areas are often portrayed in local and global media as places of neglect, extremism, or delinquency. They are reframed as hubs for political expression, creativity, and resiliency.

Grounded in Henri Lefebvre's concept of the**"production of space"**and Stuart Hall'stheory of**representation as a site of ideological struggle** (33; 128),this academic research explores how Ayouch's film challenges stereotypes by emphasizing the subjectivity, talent, and agency of young people.

Through art, music, and conversation, the young people are shown to be active contributors to changing their surroundings rather than being passive victims of it.

The second research question places the movie in the context of alternative narrative production and media critique. The variety of voices and experiences within Morocco's social fabric has frequently not been sufficiently reflected by the country's state-run or commercially driven media. In contrast, *Casablanca Beats* uses hip-hop, a localized but globalized form of cultural resistance, as a counter-hegemonic language to subvert prevailing narratives. The film challenges the polished and frequently sanitized imagery that is promoted by Moroccan mainstream media with its unvarnished visual aesthetic, spontaneous dialogue, and use of real-life actors.As a result, *Casablanca Beats* aligns with **Douglas Kellner's theory of oppositionalmedia,** which views cultural production as a site of ideological contestation, while also resonating with the aesthetics of **Third Cinema**, a politically engaged film movement that foregrounds marginalized voices, as theorized by **Teshome H. Gabriel** (87; 30–35).

- **Thesis Statement**

The central claim of this academic research is that, by combining hip-hop culture and cinematic storytelling, Nabil Ayouch's *Casablanca Beats* (*Haut et Fort*, 2021) provides a powerful counter-narrative to Morocco's prevailing media discourses by elevating the voices of marginalized youth. By showing how artistic expression becomes a means of agency, resistance, and self-definition for a generation frequently left out of mainstream representations, the movie challenges prevalent stereotypes of urban poverty, delinquency, and voicelessness.

This research paper thus argues that *Casablanca Beats* serves as an intervention in the national and international conversation about urban identity, cultural legitimacy, and visibility, in accordance with

postcolonial and media-critical frameworks, rather than just being a fictional depiction of Moroccan youth. Ayouch uses a hybrid filmmaking technique that combines documentary aesthetics.

The film challenges hegemonic narratives that reduce Moroccan youth to figures of pity, fear, or instruments of state control by elevating hip-hop as both a cultural expression and a political tool. Instead, it reimagines them as agents of creativity, resistance, and hope. As part of a larger process of cultural decolonization, this act of cinematic reimagining helps the margins reclaim their place in art and public discourse. *Casablanca Beats*is therefore more than just a movie; it is a kind of mediated resistance that challenges prevailing ideologies, recasts the urban periphery, and encourages viewers to hear perspectives that have been suppressed for a long time by institutional and cultural hierarchies.

- **Methodology**

To investigate *Casablanca Beats* as a cinematic text and a cultural intervention, this research paper uses a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that combines textual analysis, media discourse analysis, and cultural criticism. These complementary methods are ideal for revealing the film's complex exploration of issues of youth identity, marginality, and media representation in the Moroccan setting.

The narrative structure, character development, visual style, dialogue, and soundscape of the movie are all closely examined as part of the textual analysis component. Particular focus is placed on how these components interact with Moroccan youth's everyday experiences, express ideological viewpoints, and create meaning. The study adopts a semiotic and poststructuralist approach to cinematic analysis, emphasizing how film constructs and conveys social meaning through systems of signs, codes, and culturally embedded narratives. Drawing on the foundational work of **Christian Metz**, who conceptualizes cinema as a structured language system, and **Roland Barthes,** whose theories on mythologies and signification illuminate the ideological work of visual texts, this framework explores how

cinematic form participates in broader discourses of power and representation. Additionally, informed by **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's** theory of subalternity, the analysis considers how cinematic language may either reproduce dominant ideologies or serve as a space where silenced and marginalized subjects attempt to "speak," thereby transforming film into a contested site of meaning production and cultural negotiation.

To place the movie in the context of larger discussions about Moroccan media narratives, the study also uses media discourse analysis. This includes a look at how Moroccan youth, particularly those from outlying areas like Sidi Moumen, are generally portrayed in the country's state media, television, and mainstream press. This method examines the ideological ramifications of representation and omission as well as the power structures ingrained in media language, drawing on the theories of Stuart Hall and Teun van Dijk. It also examines how *Casablanca Beats* has been received by the general public and critics in Morocco and abroad in order to evaluate *Casablanca Beats'* dialogic relationship with prevailing media discourses, including an analysis of the film's critical and popular reception in Morocco and abroad.

II. Media Representation and Cultural Production

a.Representation as Ideological Struggle: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

At the heart of *Casablanca Beats* lies a negotiation over cultural meaning, identity formation, and ideological contestation. Stuart Hall's theories of media representation offer a critical entry point to unpack this dynamic. In his foundational essay "Encoding/Decoding," Hall disrupts the traditional transmission model of communication and posits that meaning is not fixed by the sender but is actively constructed by audiences within specific sociocultural contexts. The media message, therefore, passes through a complex process of encoding (production) and decoding (reception), where power and ideology shape both ends of the communicative circuit (131–34).

Within this framework, Ayouch's *Casablanca Beats* can be read as an encoded intervention that positions marginalized Moroccan youth not as passive recipients of media narratives but as agents of re-signification. Through the mise-en-scène of Sidi Moumen's hip-hop pedagogy, Ayouch constructs counter-hegemonic representations that challenge dominant ideologies of urban criminality, radicalization, and disenfranchisement. His characters, who are often viewed through a securitized or pitied lens, are repositioned as articulate cultural producers engaged in a struggle over their own representation. This act of visual and narrative re-framing exemplifies what Hall calls representation as a site of ideological struggle, where meanings are neither natural nor neutral but contested terrains (263).

Moreover, Hall's notion of "preferred readings" and "negotiated" or "oppositional"readings is particularly useful when examining the reception of *Casablanca Beats* both in Morocco and abroad. The film may offer a preferred reading that emphasizes creative resistance and pedagogical empowerment, but viewers—depending on their socio-political positioning—may decode it through lenses of cultural elitism, Western liberalism, or Islamic moralism. This pluralization of meaning underscores Hall's insistence that media texts are polysemic and embedded within broader discursive fields.

b. Media Culture and Critical Literacy: Douglas Kellner's Cultural Studies Approach

Douglas Kellner's cultural theory further sharpens our understanding of Ayouch's project by situating media as a battleground where identity, ideology, and resistance are negotiated. In *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Kellner argues that contemporary media forms are central to the construction of subjectivities in late modernity. He emphasizes the importance of critical media literacy as a tool not only for interpretation but also for social transformation (1–4).

Ayouch's work aligns with Kellner's interventionist approach in that it models andpromotes media literacy as an emancipatory practice. The filmic classroom of *Casablanca Beats*, where students engage with rap, poetry, and performance, becomes a metaphorical and literal site of media education. These youth learn not only how to express themselves but also how to critique the representational systems that have historically silenced or distorted their voices. In this way, the film foregrounds media as a terrain of cultural production—a space where youth negotiate their identities in the face of dominant ideologies, whether neoliberal, patriarchal, or postcolonial.

Furthermore, Kellner's conception of media culture as a "semiotic battlefield" is vividly illustrated in the tension between institutional authority (teachers, parents, religious figures) and youth expression in *Casablanca Beats*. The young protagonists resist cultural policing not through violence but through language, rhythm, and embodied performance. Their struggle to be heard is not only a narrative device but also an ideological gesture—an assertion of agency within a media landscape that often renders them invisible or hyper-visible in stereotyped ways.

In integrating the frameworks of Hall and Kellner, this study interprets *Casablanca Beats* not simply as a cinematic artifact but as an act of cultural intervention. It encodes oppositional meanings that challenge hegemonic discourses on youth, class, and Islam in contemporary Morocco, while inviting audiences to critically decode the layered aesthetics and politics of representation.

III. Postcolonial and Cultural Studies Perspectives

a. Othering, Hybridity, and the Negotiation of Identity in *Casablanca Beats*

In grappling with the complex dynamics of identity, visibility, and cultural agency in *Casablanca Beats*, Nabil Ayouch participates in a broader postcolonial discourse that interrogates both external

misrepresentation and internal processes of marginalization. Drawing on the critical frameworks of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, this section positions Ayouch's film within the overlapping tensions of Orientalism, cultural hybridity, and the production of "third spaces" in contemporary Moroccan media culture.

- **Edward Said: Internal Orientalism and the Misrepresentation of the Moroccan "Other"**

Edward Said's *Orientalism* remains a foundational text in postcolonial theory for its critique of how the West historically constructs the East as the irrational, passive, and inferior Other. While Said's focus is largely on Western imperial narratives, his framework has been fruitfully extended to what some scholars term internal Orientalism—the processes by which postcolonial states reproduce forms of exclusion and misrepresentation within their own borders (94).

In this context, *Casablanca Beats* can be read as a response to internal Orientalistdiscourse in Moroccan media and social institutions. The youth of Sidi Moumen, particularly after the 2003 Casablanca bombings, have been subject to a national imaginary that frames them as either victims of poverty or latent threats to national stability. This reductive portrayal mirrors the logic of Orientalism: it essentializes the poor, urban Muslim subject as a cultural Other in need of moral discipline, surveillance, or erasure.

Ayouch's film challenges this representational regime by shifting the lens from criminality and radicalization to creativity and self-expression. In doing so, he reclaims the representational agency of Sidi Moumen's youth. They are no longer merely the objects of state anxiety or foreign NGO intervention but subjects who speak, rap, and perform in ways that resist reductive stereotypes. This reversal destabilizes the dominant narratives that define Moroccan identity through bourgeois, Arab-centric, and often masculinist lenses, revealing the fractures within the nation's cultural self-image.

- **Homi Bhabha: Hybridity and the Emergence of the "Third Space"**

Whereas Said's work diagnoses the problem of cultural misrepresentation, Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* offers a theory of cultural production and negotiation. Central to Bhabha's argument is the notion of hybridity, which he defines not as a mere mixture of cultural elements but as a productive tension where new identities are forged in the interstices of difference (56). This process unfolds in what he famously calls the "third space"—a liminal zone where fixed identities are unsettled and new meanings are articulated.

Casablanca Beats occupies and performs such a third space. The arts center in the film is not simply a place of music instruction; it becomes a symbolic and literal site of hybridity where traditional Moroccan values, global hip-hop culture, Islamic morality, and youthful dissent collide and interact. The young artists do not abandon their cultural roots, nor do they uncritically adopt Western expressive forms. Instead, they forge a hybrid language of resistance that redefines what it means to be Moroccan, Muslim, modern, and creative in the twenty-first century.

For instance, when a female student defends her right to rap about gender roles, or when a male student negotiates between prayer and poetry, the film dramatizes the cultural ambivalence Bhabha identifies as the key to postcolonial subjectivity. These students inhabit multiple positionalities—religious and rebellious, traditional and avant-gardewithout fully resolving the tensions among them. Rather than depict identity as coherent or static, Ayouch reveals it as a site of negotiation, echoing Bhabha's insistence that "the question of identification is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (64).

In sum, by creating a cinematic third space, Ayouch reimagines Moroccan youth not as passive inheritors of identity but as active agents in its reinvention. His film aligns with Bhabha's call for a

minoritarian aesthetic, where cultural resistance does not reject dominant norms outright but rearticulates them through subversive appropriation.

IV. Youth and Subculture Theory

a. Symbolic Resistance and the Politics of Voice in *Casablanca Beats*

Nabil Ayouch's*Casablanca Beats* (2021) operates not only within the framework of media and postcolonial representation but also as a vivid case study in youth subcultures as sites of symbolic resistance. Drawing on the critical frameworks of Dick Hebdige and Tricia Rose, this section situates the film within the genealogy of subcultural theory and hip-hop studies, illuminating how marginalized Moroccan youth mobilize aesthetic style, music, and collective performance to resist hegemonic norms and assert alternative identities.

- **Dick Hebdige: Subcultures and the Semiotics of Rebellion**

In his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige explores how youth subcultures in postwar Britain use fashion, music, and language to articulate resistance to dominant ideologies. These subcultures, he argues, engage in "semiotic guerrilla warfare"—transforming the meaning of everyday objects and styles into symbolic acts of defiance (18). While Hebdige's focus was on British punks, mods, and skinheads, his insights are profoundly relevant to the stylistic and performative practices of the youth in *Casablanca Beats*.

The young protagonists in Ayouch's film fashion their own version of subcultural style through streetwear, graffiti, rap lyrics, and dance. These aesthetic choices function not merely as trends but as symbolic resistance to systemic marginalization, rigid educational structures, and generational conservatism. For instance, the act of rapping in Darija—Moroccan Arabic—within the walls of an arts

center signifies more than musical performance; it signals a reclamation of local voice and the transformation of urban vernacular into a political tool.

Moreover, Hebdige's emphasis on the tension between incorporation and resistance is evident in the film's narrative arc. As the youth develop their expressive forms, they come under pressure from institutional and familial forces that attempt to normalize or silence their subversive creativity. Yet their resistance remains performative and symbolic—residing in style, sound, and movement rather than overt confrontation. In this way, Ayouch dramatizes Hebdige's insight that subcultures do not overturn power structures outright, but "disturb the surface of social life" by making dissent visible and audible (18).

- **Tricia Rose: Hip-Hop, Cultural Politics, and Youth Identity**

Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* redefines hip-hop as more than a musical genre, arguing instead that it is a form of cultural politics and a site of youth identity formation in marginalized communities. While Rose's focus is on Black American youth, her theoretical insights are global in relevance, particularly in analyzing how hip-hop travels, adapts, and localizes in postcolonial contexts like Morocco. As Rose argues, "hip hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and urban youth culture" (10). This negotiation resonates powerfully with the struggles depicted in *Casablanca Beats*.

The Moroccan youth portrayed in the film, many from working-class and disenfranchised backgrounds, adopt hip-hop as a transcultural mode of expression, through which they navigate issues of gender, religion, poverty, and generational conflict. Their use of rhythm, rhyme, and oral storytelling forms a vernacular pedagogy, echoing Rose's description of hip-hop as "the hidden transcript" of the marginalized (123). This hidden transcript becomes a cultural counterpublic, where otherwise silenced experiences can be voiced and shared.

Ayouch's classroom is not merely an educational space but a crucible of identity construction. Students voice their lived experiences through rap battles, spoken word, and collaborative composition, offering glimpses into the structural and affective conditions of their lives. Female characters, in particular, use hip-hop to contest gender norms, articulating feminist critiques that challenge the patriarchal expectations of both family and society. This aligns with Rose's assertion that hip-hop provides "a vehicle through which youth construct knowledge, articulate grievances, and imagine possibilities" (Rose 18).

In integrating the frameworks of Hebdige and Rose, *Casablanca Beats* emerges as a cultural text of youth resistance—one that uses subcultural expression not only as a stylistic strategy but as a form of social and political intervention. Through the aesthetics of hip-hop, Moroccan youth are not mimicking Western cultural forms but hybridizing them into tools of localized critique and self-assertion.

V. The film analysis

The film *Casablanca Beats* (*Haut et Fort*) opens with a compelling and carefully constructed sequence that immediately introduces both the tone and thematic direction of the narrative. The protagonist, Anas, is shown driving through the streets of Sidi Moumen, a historically marginalized neighborhood in Casablanca. With a cigarette in hand and Darija hip-hop blaring from the speakers of his modest car, Anas searches for the local cultural center—an institution that, like him, seems somewhat lost amidst the urban sprawl. The use of Moroccan dialect in the lyrics and the gritty visuals signals a break from sanitized representations of Moroccan society and sets the stage for a film rooted in authenticity, resistance, and self-expression.

The director employs a handheld camera that follows Anas from the car's interior, offering a subjective and immersive point of view. This technique blurs the boundary between fiction and documentary, aligning the viewer with Anas's experience as both insider and outsider. The street-level

cinematography, combined with natural lighting and ambient sounds—the clatter of city life, honking cars, and murmurs of the neighborhood—creates a raw, unfiltered atmosphere. The mise-en-scène is saturated with urban decay: faded graffiti, dusty streets, and aging buildings serve as a backdrop to the vibrant, rebellious music that pulses through the soundtrack. This contrast between visual desolation and auditory defiance encapsulates the film's central tension between oppression and expression.

Symbolically, Anas's drive is more than a physical journey to a destination; it is a metaphorical passage toward engagement, mentorship, and transformation. His search for the cultural center reflects a deeper search for meaning and connection—both for himself and for the youth he is about to mentor. The cultural center, hidden in the midst of chaos, emerges as a beacon of possibility. It represents a space where marginalized voices can find power, where identity can be reshaped through rhythm and rhyme. Through this layered opening, *Casablanca Beats* not only introduces its protagonist but also establishes the foundational premise of the film: that art—particularly hip-hop—can serve as a radical, liberating force in the face of societal constraints.

a. From Classroom to Cultural Battlefield

In *Casablanca Beats* (*Haut et Fort*, 2021), director Nabil Ayouch stages the classroom not as a conventional learning environment but as a charged space for ideological resistance and cultural reimagination. The first session between Anas and the students at the cultural center in Sidi Moumen marks a pivotal shift in the film's narrative, transforming a neglected educational setting into a site of socio-political empowerment through the medium of hip-hop. This scene is not merely informative but deeply ideological; it positions hip-hop not as entertainment but as a global response to systemic oppression. In doing so, Ayouch constructs a pedagogy of resistance that affirms the validity of

marginalized voices and aligns the Moroccan youth with a broader, transnational struggle for self-expression and cultural agency.

b. Hip-Hop as a Global Discourse of Resistance

As Anas introduces the students to the origins of hip-hop in the Bronx during the 1970s, he underscores its emergence as a form of protest against poverty, racism, and urban neglect. The film's script and cinematic language make it clear that hip-hop is not imported for aesthetic value, but for its ethical and political potential. As Tricia Rose, one of hip-hop's foremost scholars, argues, hip-hop "confronts social injustices, critiques systemic inequality, and gives voice to the oppressed" (2). Ayouch echoes this in his visual and auditory design: archival footage of graffiti, beats playing faintly in the background, and a classroom dialogue about marginalization work in tandem to connect the Moroccan context with the African-American experience.

This pedagogical framing is rooted in what Henry Giroux calls "border pedagogy"—an educational approach that enables students to "cross the boundaries of culture, identity, and power" and to challenge the dominant ideologies that shape their lives (53). In aligning the students' personal realities with the origins of hip-hop, Anas reclaims education as a space for critical reflection rather than rote learning. The implication is clear: art is not a decorative practice but a disruptive one, a mode of speaking truth to power.

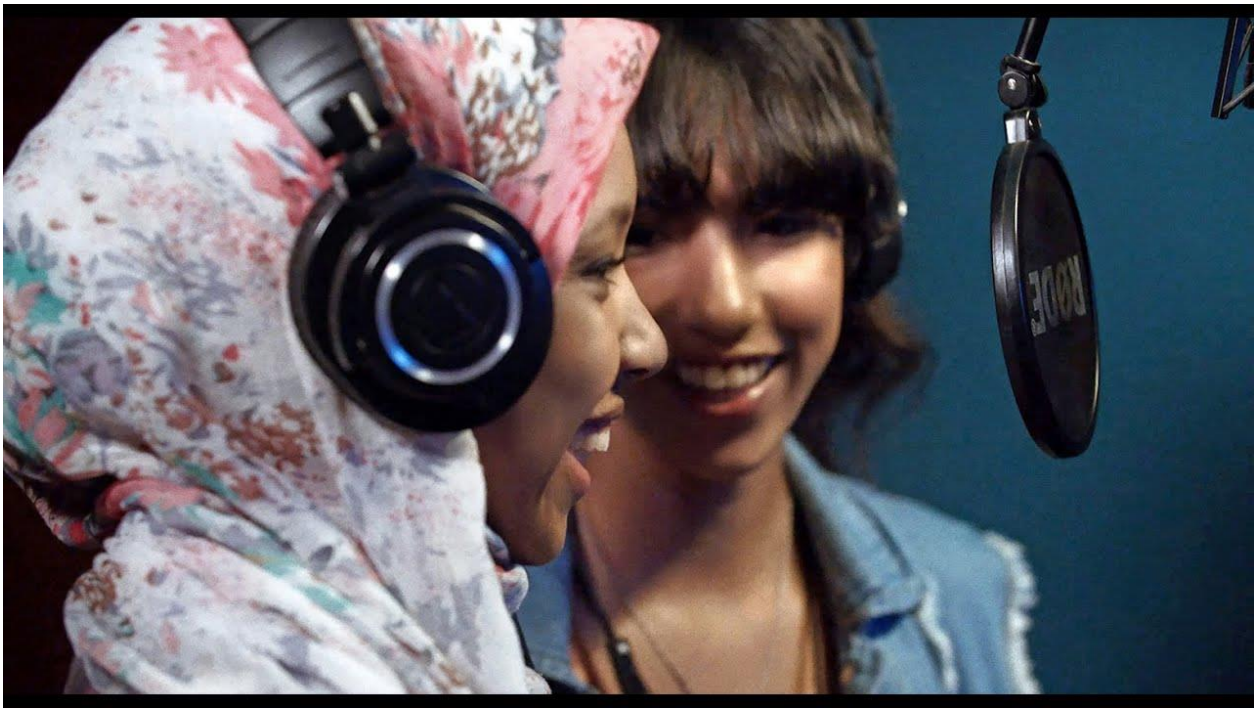


Figure 1: Girls start to sing the hip hop and record their voices.

c.Cinematic Realism and Participatory Learning

The aesthetic choices in this scene support Ayouch's argument. The use of a handheld camera creates a documentary-style realism that emphasizes the rawness and immediacy of the students' reactions. Close-ups and shot-reverse-shot sequences highlight the shift from teacher monologue to student dialogue, reflecting Paulo Freire's notion of "dialogical pedagogy," where education is seen as a collaborative process of meaning-making rather than hierarchical transmission (71). This stylistic decision reinforces the film's political message: knowledge is not imposed; it is co-created through lived experience and cultural resonance.

More significantly, the students are not passive recipients of knowledge but are urged to ask questions and reflect: "Why hip-hop?" "Why rap?" "Why us?" These are not rhetorical inquiries; they are philosophical provocations that disrupt internalized narratives of inferiority and cultural silence. Anas's

methodology parallels what Bell Hooks describes as "engaged pedagogy," a form of teaching that recognizes the emotional, historical, and political realities of students and centers their agency (13). The classroom, then, becomes a battleground between inherited conservatism and emerging consciousness, where artistic expression functions as both survival and resistance.

The sequence starting from 21:05 to 22:43 as follows:

> "There are some things that cannot be talked about. That's just the way it is. For example, for me, religion is sacred. I can't rap about that topic. I can talk at length about everyday life, but I withdraw when it comes to religion... You may say whatever you want, but will you truly express your opinion honestly?" (Casablanca *beats 2021*)

After introducing the socio-historical foundations of hip-hop as a form of resistance, Anas—the mentor figure in Nabil Ayouch's *Casablanca Beats* (*Haut et Fort*, 2021)—shifts from explanation to confrontation. The scene beginning at 21:05 marks a pivotal pedagogical and ideological turn in the film. No longer content with simply educating his students about the origins of the genre, Anas now challenges them to grapple with a far more difficult question: What are the limits of your freedom to express yourself? His intervention is not prescriptive but dialogic; he does not impose an answer but opens a discursive space where doubt, discomfort, and confrontation emerge as necessary preconditions for creative agency.

Anas begins this exchange with a quiet, almost resigned statement: *"There are some things that cannot be talked about. That's just the way it is."* This assertion establishes an immediate tension between the ideal of free expression that hip-hop promotes and the sociocultural constraints that define the Moroccan public sphere. The example— *"For me, religion is sacred. I can't rap about that topic."*—is not a neutral statement but a deeply political one. It acknowledges the internalized censorship that operates not merely at the level of state or institution, but within individuals themselves.

In this moment, one of Anas 'studentsreflect what Judith Butler calls "the performativity of silence"—the way that cultural taboos do not simply prohibit speech, but actively shape what can be conceived and articulated (8). Religion, here, becomes a site of sacredness but also of suppression; it is both revered and off-limits. By admitting his own boundaries, another studentoffers a vulnerable, yet powerful, model of ethical self-awareness: he refuses to weaponize artistic freedom for shock or provocation, but instead invites her peer students to consider what freedom of expression actually means in a society marked by moral red lines.

Crucially, another brilliant student does not conclude this moment with a declaration, but with a question: *"You may say whatever you want, but will you truly express your opinion honestly?"* This rhetorical shift transforms the conversation from a lesson into a challenge. however, Anas's question is Socratic in nature, designed not to convey information but to disrupt certainties. Here, the camera captures close-ups of students' silent reactions—some pensive, others visibly uncomfortable—thereby extending the question beyond the diegetic world of the film and into the viewer's own moral framework.

This method mirrors Paulo Freire's theory of *problem-posing education*, which "rejects the banking model of knowledge" and encourages students to become active agents in their own intellectual and political emancipation (73). Anas's teaching style, deeply informed by this philosophy, does not dictate what is acceptable or not, but forces students to interrogate their own limits. In doing so, he shifts the role of hip-hop from merely a performative act to a philosophical exercise—a vehicle for exploring the tension between self-expression and social responsibility.

Cinematically, this scene is rendered with minimalism and restraint, allowing its philosophical weight to surface organically. The camera lingers on Anas's face in a medium shot, emphasizing the sincerity and fragility of his confession. It then cuts to static shots of students listening in silence, the

ambient sound fading slightly to foreground the emotional gravity of the moment. The lighting is natural, bordering on dim, suggesting the interior space as one of reflection rather than spectacle.

By refusing to dramatize or over-direct the moment, Ayouch underscores the everydayness of censorship—not as a dramatic event, but as a subtle force embedded in socialization. As film scholar Ella Shohat notes, postcolonial cinema often deals not with overt repression, but with "the internalized codes of what may or may not be represented" (19). Anas's challenge, then, is as much about decolonizing thought as it is about encouraging lyrical honesty.



Figure 2: Students to express themselves even on public streets.

d. Locked Lives, Open Voices

In *Casablanca Beats* (*Haut et Fort*, 2021), Nabil Ayouch explores the power of hip-hop not only as music, but as a form of social practice—an embodied tool for voice, defiance, and reclamation. One of the film's most quietly explosive scenes features Ismail, a teenage rapper navigating poverty in the Sidi Moumen neighborhood. After returning to his overcrowded home, the camera captures the grim reality of

his living conditions. Later, unable to sleep, he escapes into the night and begins to rap a deeply personal monologue. Through cinematic framing, lyrical protest, and symbolic lighting, this scene argues for the transformative potential of youth art within urban peripheries. It is not simply about despair—it is about asserting a place in the world through the act of speaking.

e. From Observing Poverty to Framing Resistance

The scene begins with the camera following Ismail home through narrow, dimly lit alleys, capturing the material conditions of marginalization. The dwelling is visibly cramped, worn, and silent. His family members, especially the parents, appear somber and immobilized—figures frozen by structural inequality. This moment is framed with still camera shots and subdued lighting, emphasizing the emotional density of silence. As theorist Bell Hooks writes, "Silence speaks. It speaks loudly. It speaks in pain. It speaks in the spaces where language has been denied" (19). Ayouch thus uses silence not as absence, but as an index of voicelessness—a condition from which Ismail must later rupture.

This framing choice also reflects the aesthetic tendencies of social realism. By inviting the viewer into Ismail's home and showing hardship without melodrama, Ayouch refuses the romanticization of poverty. Instead, he insists on bearing witness. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue, socially conscious cinema must avoid turning suffering into spectacle, and instead center "contextual specificity and human dignity" (30). Ayouch accomplishes this by letting the stillness speak for itself.

f. **The Tunnel of Night**

Later that night, when Ismail can no longer sleep, the scene transitions. He leaves the house quietly, and his younger sister follows him through the dim alleyways. Here, the mise-en-scène

transforms: narrow corridors evoke the feeling of a tunnel, but a soft, warm light glows at the end, symbolizing the possibility of escape—not geographically, but existentially.

This tunnel-like setting becomes metaphorically charged. It resonates with what Michel de Certeau describes as "the spatial practices of the marginalized," where everyday movement becomes a form of resistance and autonomy (97). Ismail's walk through the alley is thus both literal and symbolic—a way of navigating confinement while moving toward hope. He is not escaping his home, but confronting it through his creative voice.

g. Lyric as Liberation

Ismail's rap emerges not as entertainment but as a spoken-word manifesto. He proclaims:

> *I dream of being a hero... I want a new life.*
>
> *I won't die on a raft to Italy.*
>
> *I want the future to smile at me here, in my own country...*
>
> *Even though our lives are locked, the key is in our hands." (Casablanca beats, 2021 from 41:00 to 41: 49)*

This performance stands in stark opposition to dominant narratives that frame migration as the only path to dignity. His refusal to die "on a raft to Italy" critiques both global migration crises and national failures. As AsefBayat notes in *Life as Politics*, youth in the Global South often turn to "non-movements"—collective actions embedded in daily life—to assert agency (20). Ismail's rap is such an act: a micro-rebellion that demands change not through escape, but through reimagination of home.

As already mentioned, Tricia Rose similarly describes hip-hop as a form of "narrative resistance" that enables marginalized voices to articulate "counter-memories" and "unofficial truths" (71). Ismail's

assertion that "the key is in our hands" reframes despair into potentiality, challenging fatalism and asserting ownership over his future. Rather than being a victim of circumstance, he becomes a protagonist of survival.

h. Cinematic Sound and Light

Ayouch's direction reinforces this message through the synchronization of sound, space, and symbolism. As Ismail raps, the lighting warms subtly, echoing the emotional temperature of hope. The camera moves with him, avoiding fragmentation, creating a fluid rhythm that mimics the cadence of his speech. These stylistic choices make the sequence a form of cinematic poetry—where every element (light, space, sound) works in harmony to express inner transformation.

This fusion of content and form affirms what Laura Marks calls "intercultural cinema"—a genre that operates at the border of documentary and fiction, using sensual aesthetics to convey unspoken truths (151). Ismail's scene does precisely this: it brings together the lyrical, the visual, and the emotional to create a moment of embodied resistance.

i. Locked Lives, but Unlocked Imaginations

Ismail's nocturnal rap sequence encapsulates the broader ethos of *Casablanca Beats*: that youth expression is not just personal—it is political. By combining social realism, metaphorical lighting, and autobiographical lyrics, Ayouch crafts a deeply layered argument about voice, agency, and the radical act of dreaming. Ismail may live in poverty, but his rap reframes that condition—not as a final sentence, but as a context from which new futures can be imagined.

In a time when many young Moroccans and other Global South youth feel compelled to migrate, Ayouch offers a cinematic counternarrative: one in which the act of speaking truth—in Darija, in rhythm,

in rage—is itself a form of migration from silence to subjecthood. In the tunnel of their lives, the light is not at the end; it is wherever they decide to sp

VI. Conclusion

Casablanca Beats (*Haut et Fort*) emerges as a vital cinematic intervention that reconfigures the role of film as more than entertainment—it is a medium of resistance, cultural reclamation, and identity negotiation. This study has demonstrated that Nabil Ayouch's film offers a compelling case study in how media, particularly socially engaged cinema, can challenge dominant narratives that marginalize urban youth, especially those from neighborhoods like Sidi Moumen. By foregrounding the lived realities and creative expressions of young people through hip-hop, *Casablanca Beats* disrupts stereotypical portrayals of delinquency and despair, instead framing youth as dynamic cultural producers navigating systems of exclusion with resilience and vision.

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