

“Shrek in the *suq*: Rethinking public diplomacy ‘from the native’s point of view’”

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This paper appraises the field within which U.S. public and cultural diplomacy operates by critically examining the circulation – both U.S. state- sponsored and autonomously— of American cultural representations in Morocco since 2001. Morocco is itself a place long associated with the movement of American culture, but usually in a reverse direction -- namely as a key site of American cultural fascination with the Arab world, by which American writers and filmmakers represented and thought through the global reach of American political projects. Films such as *Casablanca* (1942) and Hitchcock’s *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), used reimagined Moroccan locations to portray the possibilities of – and manage the contradictions of – American globalism. But if America had “taken” Casablanca for its own narrative and political purposes during the waning years of the French protectorate, Moroccan artists and writers had their own responses to these projects from the start. In the postcolonial period, Moroccan responses to American Orientalism and to U.S. literature and culture became more legible to attentive outsiders (though still almost never considered in American media or scholarship). Such responses demonstrate the active rethinking of American culture when it is broadcast in Morocco, and simultaneously explode the idea of cultural binarisms or a univocal response by Moroccans to American culture. For many Moroccans, for example, particularly in the late colonial and early postcolonial period, American cultural projects are seen comparatively against French ones, foiling or complicating the notion of “cultural imperialism” as explanatory.

In the last decade, Moroccan creative engagement with American culture demonstrates the anachronism of the model of “broadcasting” underlying State Dept projects in public and cultural diplomacy, both during the Bush administration and thus far in the Obama administration. (“Culture” here is used in the broad sense of the word: Moroccans attend actively both to American cultural production, especially Hollywood and popular music, *and* via media and the academic interest in “American civilization,” to aspects of U.S. society.) Factors involved in the complexity of the field within which public and cultural diplomacy attempts to operate include the popular embrace and impact in Morocco of the technologies of the digital age, shifting attitudes toward the U.S., the greater interest in English language as entry point to globalization, and reactions to the geopolitical adventures of the U.S. in the Arab world since the 1990-91 Gulf War (itself controversial in Morocco, which joined the U.S.-alliance). These do not, however, lead to simple rejection of American cultural presentations. Indeed, as my examples will demonstrate – the popular digital recordings of the animated Dreamscape film *Shrek* made by a Moroccan video pirate-cum-digital artist named Miloudi and Moroccan hip-hop – there is often an active rethinking of American culture that creatively recasts the American cultural framework from which it emerges. In this sense, the Moroccan engagement with certain American cultural objects both offers a legible *critique* of American social fabric (especially with respect to race) and an otherwise

illegible recasting of American cultural objects for Moroccan (i.e., local) purposes. This essay seeks to bring both moves into legibility.

The title and subtitle of my paper allude, somewhat ironically, to Clifford Geertz's writings on Moroccan culture from the late 1960s and 1970s, which I have critiqued in the chapter of my book *Morocco Bound* on "hippie Orientalism" for being too circumscribed in their attention to isolated, bound locales. Cognizant of this methodological shortcoming, I invoke Geertz here to suggest both the need for a "thick description" of Moroccan reworkings of American culture, and to suggest a way to understand how the recoding of and meanings attached to the *foreign* cultural object help demonstrate something of the fabric of contemporary Moroccan urban life. The primary goal here is not, of course, a critique of Geertz. But by naming him and selectively and critically employing his approach, I mean to suggest that cultures in the digital age are neither discrete nor disengaged from the transnational circulation of cultural