

# Morocco in Cinema: Between Global Fantasies and Local Realities in Shaping Tourism Image Destination

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## Abstract

*Tourism can be considered as a business model that is built on selling images that seeks to fuel imagination with seductive and exotic visions of "a lost paradise on earth". These images can be a byproduct from intentional and chosen marketing strategies and from incidental portrayals shared through other various types of media.*

*Cinema finds itself as one of the key contributors in constructing the touristic image of a territory, thanks to its vital ability to influence tourism through the representation of places and territories. It has the power to transform unknown destinations into the next must see locations by mobilizing various compelling narratives or by showcasing scenes that ignites the curiosity of the audience.*

*Given the direct impact of cinema on how destinations are perceived, this papers aims to explore the difference and dichotomy between Moroccan representations in foreign and local films, and their influence on shaping the image of the destination through the Barthes' semiotic model of analysis. The objective resides in identifying the elements that build those representations, compare them to identify and uncover the fragments of reality within cinematic imagination.*

**Keywords:** Cinema, Tourism, Touristic image, Imagination, Perception, Representation.

## Introduction:

Cinema, can be usually defined as the art of expressing a state of being, by transcending traditional storytelling through the employment of visual narratives that help to create a accumulation of perceptions, a cultural medium and a summary of sociocultural systems, imagination and sensibility (Beeton 2021). Characterized by its unique capacity to evoke sets of different emotions, cinema can be considered as a powerful media tool for the development of tourist image destination (Echtner, s. d.). Building an illusion that increases the attractiveness of destinations

(Baloglu et McCleary 1999) by imprinting them into collective memory of the audience, and stimulating their genuine curiosity.

This phenomena, knows as "film induced tourism" showcases the underlying commercial effect of cinema, where territories and locations featured in popular movies turn into the next must see destinations, such as New Zealand in The Lord Of The Rings, Paris in Amelie and London in Harry potter franchise.

Tourist image destination, known as TDI, plays a crucial role in tourism development; this mental representation is the decisive factor in the travel decision-making process. Hence the necessity to portray well-constructed TDIs, it enhances the location's appeal, shapes grounded expectations and directly influences tourist satisfaction. For emerging destinations seeking notorious reputation, the portrayal of their culture, landscapes and folklore in global media directly impacts their ability to attract more international tourists.

In this context, Morocco showed a remarkable growth and development in tourism, positioning itself as one of the pioneers in Africa, famously known for its vibrancy, merging historical heritage and modern cultural dynamism. Major promotional campaigns like VisitMorocco have sought to boost the visibility of the country on the international market by highlighting the richness of its product. Nevertheless, Morocco's depiction in cinematic representation often oscillates between orientalist fantasies and authentic local storytelling, creating a dichotomy fueled by complexity in composing its tourist image. While foreign productions label the destination as an exotic, mysterious and often dangerous land frozen in medieval times, local narrative try to showcase a more progressive picture by addressing the evolving realities and societal changes of the country. This duality raises critical questions about the authenticity and its impact on these representations on the country's global touristic perception.

The aim of this study is to explore the influence of cinematic representations on the perceived TDI of Morocco, by answering the following research question: "How do cinematic representations of Morocco in

foreign and local cinema influence the perceived tourist image destination?" the goal is to compare foreign and local portrayals through the semiotic model of Ronald Barthes. By dissecting the visuals and narrative codes used in the selected films, this paper seeks to identify and highlight the elements that contribute to create Morocco's image.

## Literature review:

### Tourist destination image:

According to Hunt (1971), a tourism destination image defines a set of impressions developed by individuals about a country where they do not reside. Kotler, Gertner, Rein, and Haider (2007), describe the phenomena as being a collection of made up characteristics of people's perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about a territory. These images are the result of the mind's attempt to process and frame vast amounts of information about a place; they frequently represent a simplification of several associations and bits of information relating to that place. Fakeye & Crompton (1991) likewise regard a potential visitor's mental construct based on a few chosen impressions as the picture. An attitudinal concept created by the addition of elements such as beliefs, ideas and impressions that a tourist has from a destination (Crompton 1979). Sanz and Sánchez (2003), see TDIs as the tourist's mental representation of what they know and feel about the place, their overall impression of it. It is unquestionably all that the location evokes in one's mind, including any notion, conviction, emotion, or disposition that is connected to the location. This is visible and encompasses both the perception of sensory stimuli and semantic coding (Campo, Brea, et Muñiz 2011).

It is undeniable that TDI is an important asset in tourism destination's promotion. Its various facets follow tourists during their travel cycle, influencing the cycle from the start while allowing them to express their own judgement towards the end of their trip, depending on their experiences. It is unquestionably all that the location evokes in one's mind, including any notion, conviction, emotion, or disposition that is connected to the location. This is visible and encompasses both the perception of sensory stimuli and semantic coding (Campo, Brea, et Muñiz 2011). The sharing of these experiences remains the prime outcome awaited by business and institutional actors of tourism. They allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of the TDIs produced, to rethink destinations under completely new perspectives (Jenkins 1999). First seen through a unidimensional approach, TDIs were limited to identify key components building mental representations. The concept then was recognized as multidimensional products through the studies of Lawson, Baud and Bovy (1997). Affective component shows tourist's emotions towards the destination (Lin et al. 2007), while the cognitive image tends to dissect the tangible aspects containing the beliefs and knowledge concerning the destination (Lin et al. 2007).

The diversity of information and its nature builds the process of construction. Publicity channels such

as travel flyers, commercials, online ads, other's experiences and media, these are seen as unavoidable elements of building fragments of TDIs (Echtner, s. d.). The Gunn model (1988) divided the TDI into three components: an organic image that is a result from the exposition to regular information, which leads to the formation of an incomplete representation, easily influenced before the travel.

Induced image, based on broadcasting purely tourism related information for the sake of selling the destination. Finally, the complex image, known for its originality and authenticity, and differs from one tourist to another in depending on their own travel experiences. Therefore, The goal of every institutional actor of tourism is to elevate TDIs while bringing it closer to the representations of tourists.

### Influence of cinema on the tourist image composition:

Tourism can be strongly influenced by cinema, through the representation of different spaces and cities (Rodríguez-Peral, Gómez-Franco, et Tabora-Hernández 2024). Tourist image destinations are a byproduct of the interaction of many components, its creation and perception depends on different types of media and experiences, films and movies find itself actively contributing to this composition. As Morgan and Pritchard say in the book *Tourism Promotion and Power: Creating Images, Creating Identities* (1998), placing a destination in a film is the ultimate in tourist product placement (Real et Herrera 2018).

The influence of movies, series and cinema on audiences gave birth to this new type of tourism; the talks are all about film-induced tourism, more commonly known as screen tourism. Contu & Pau (2022) declared that tourists will seek to visit cities and locations that have become famous settings for popular film productions, falling within the category of cultural tourism (Hudson and Ritchie 2006; Gjorgievski & Trpkova 2012; Rodríguez-Peral et al 2024). It is true that this kind of tourism may appear as a novelty to some people but, much to the contrary, it has been ongoing in some countries for quite some time now. (Real & Herrera 2018), some authors indicate that it was from 1932 to 1946, during Hollywood's golden age, that people started traveling to places motivated by films, especially blockbusters (Hoffman 2015). » (Real & Herrera 2018). When messages are not perceived as advertising, the receptor's mind is open to a subconscious and conscious dimension and the persuasive effects are bigger (Real & Herrera 2018). Campo (2011) revealed that the ability to look at and touch what has been previously represented on the big screen produces "a miracle" that makes an illusion real.

Going from tourism to patrimony, and from patrimony to cinema, the link intertwining this three elements shapes the local development and economy. The economy of territories is fueled by imagination and finds in portrayals of destinations in big screens the reflection of tourist's aspirations (Laffont & Prigent 2011). Cinema has the power to transform unfamiliar

and unknown places into new attractions, by utilizing romantic narratives or by showcasing scenes that help to inspire the audience into recreating them, and feeling like protagonists in their own stories. (Rodríguez-Peral et al. 2024). Both tourists and locals actively contribute to shaping these collective imaginaries (Schiavone & Reijnders 2022).

Therefore, a potential tourist will be more eager to visit "a destination or attraction as a result of the destination's being featured on television, video, or the cinema screen" (Hudson & Ritchie 2006). It is also a "specific pattern of tourism that drives visitors to see screened places during or after the production of a feature film or a television production." (Roesch 2009). Broadly speaking, It is a "visitation of a site or a location that is or has been used for or is associated with filming" (Buchmann et al. 2010 ; Taibi & Iflahen 2023). « To Pruseviciute (2014), substituting a factual location leads to building false representations of destinations by foreign filmmakers who seek cheaper and similar-looking places rather than original/actual ones.

Prior research focused on the correlation between the real image of cities and the projected image portrayed through cinematic productions. While the concept of tourist image emerged to refer to the social construction that individuals create around destinations, while dissecting the dissonance between the real world and it cinematic representation. (Celik 2016; Gkritzalia et al. 2016; Osácar 2016 ; Rodríguez-Peral et al. 2024). Cinema has a significant role in destination imaging and marketing. It reinforces potential visitors' perception of a destination, builds a new one, or replaces another. The effect of films on tourists who seek to "re-live an experience (or even emotion) encountered in the film reinforce myth, storytelling or fantasies, or for reasons of status (or celebrity)" (Beeton, 2010) » (Taibi & Iflahen 2023). After being featured in films or television dramas, many countries have witnessed an increase in tourist numbers (Hudson & Ritchie 2006). The narrative can stir up emotions in the reader/viewer and it also creates a bond through the plot and personal circumstances or aesthetic sensibility. » (Real & Herrera 2018).

## Methods:

Although none of the scenes in Casablanca (1943) were actually filmed in Morocco, the film is sometimes acknowledged as the first to be widely linked with Morocco, demonstrating the long-standing tie between cinema and tourism (Dwyer, 2004; Taibi & Iflahen 2023). With all of its filming taking place in California, this classic Hollywood production shows how compelling cinematic narratives may create and maintain enduring pictures of faraway places, feeding fancies that are largely unrelated to local realities (Haney 2016; Taibi & Iflahen 2023). Although these instances highlight the impact of international films, domestic movies have also become increasingly important in influencing traveler attitudes and encouraging domestic travel. According to Chaouni (2018), the Moroccan soap opera Lalla Mennana served as both a marketing tool

for tourism and a means of identity affirmation, as evidenced by the notable rise in visits to Chefchaouen, especially among Moroccans living in the region and those living abroad (Taibi & Iflahen 2023). As Beeton (2005) argues, the strength of cinematic representation ultimately resides in its capacity to produce "realistic, evocative and desirable" depictions of place, which have the capacity to affect people' relationship with their surroundings as well as outside perceptions.

In his groundbreaking book *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes introduces a framework dissecting the interpretation of meaning in cultural materials. He adopts three levels of analysis in his approach to semiotics: Denotation is a literal sign, outward meaning, or what we can see or hear. For instance, this could be a city square, a traditional garb, or a desert location in a movie. Connotation is the meaning that a symbol conveys beyond its actual existence, such as cultural, emotional, or ideological connotations. For example, a desert may evoke a sense of timelessness, mystery, or seclusion. Connotations are naturalized and portrayed as "common sense", or universal truths in myth, a second-order signification. Myths frequently conceal their manufactured nature in order to propagate and uphold prevailing ideas. For Barthes, myths operate by transforming historical and cultural meanings into seemingly eternal or "natural" representations.

Building on this context, the present study adopts a qualitative and comparative research, grounded in Ronald Barthes' concept of semiotic analysis. The goal of the paper is to decipher the visual narrative, and symbolic components that influence how people perceive Morocco in both domestic and international productions. Applied to this research, Barthes' model enables a multi-layered understanding of how Moroccan identity and space are mediated through cinema and how these depictions influence the touristic imagination either by providing more realistic, culturally authentic viewpoints or by reinforcing clichés and exotic fantasies. This approach is especially relevant in the comparative analysis of international productions such as Babel (2006) and national films like Casanegra (2008), each contributing in distinct ways to the construction of Morocco's touristic imagination.

## Results:

Two films were chosen for a comparative analysis in order to study the existing conflict between local realities and global fantasies in Morocco's cinematic representation: Casanegra (2008), a Moroccan film directed by Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, and Babel (2006), an international production directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. These movies were picked based on their divergent histories, artistic philosophies, and intended viewerships. While Casanegra provides an insider's perspective based in urban Moroccan realities, Babel portrays Morocco through the prism of a worldwide auteur film with roots in Western discourse. These differences allow for a more detailed analysis of how cinematic language envision, exoticizes or demythologizes the destination.

Babel employs board views of sunburned mountains, a large horizon of empty gorges, stone built homes, and rough ochre-toned ground to visually decode Morocco. The Moroccan characters wear traditional ragged clothing, particularly the two boys and their family. Their houses are not equipped with modern amenities. The family herds and protects goats with an illegally acquired long-range rifle. While the police officers are portrayed as these hostile, non-empathic people and ignorant of the suffering of western tourists. The accidental shooting of the American tourist serves as a pivotal narrative trigger of the plot. These denotative components convey ideas of distance in time and culture. In sharp contrast to the western folks' frailty and assumed refinement, the country surroundings is implied to be antiquated and barbaric. Two boys shooting a weapon in a lighthearted manner instantly conjures up images of carelessness and hidden danger from the "Third World." The hostile tone used by the authorities when they step in serves to further the perception of an unruly, distrustful society that is out of step with global standards. A sense of cultural and communication isolation is exacerbated by the American couple's powerlessness in this environment. Furthermore, the Moroccan characters are kept out of reach and unavailable to non-Arabic speakers due to the absence of translated speech (subtitled relatively infrequently), which denies them interiority and turns them into symbols rather than subjects. Morocco is portrayed as a place of turmoil, fatalism, and misunderstanding as a result of the cumulative effect. The location turns into a metaphor for the failure of globalization, where local life is devoid of complexity and Western vulnerability is penalized. According to Barthes, myth transforms these symbolic pictures into "natural" facts; in this case, the myth of Morocco as being hazardous, emotionally closed off, and culturally stagnant is ingrained in the film's affective structure rather than being expressed directly. In order to support a larger narrative about the frailty of modernity, this "myth" reduces cultural identity into spectacle rather than raising questions about why a rural community lacks resources and knowledge. In essence, Babel reduces Morocco to a backdrop for a global moral parable, a symbol of the unknowable Other. This reinforces a neo-orientalist fantasy that — while more melancholic than triumphant — still others the Moroccan subject and naturalizes the West's perspective as central.

Casanegra transports the audience to the urban life of Casablanca. Narrow alleys, busy streets, bars, gas stations, and public roofs are all closely captured by the camera. Karim and Adil, the main characters, traverse a desolate terrain of corruption, hustle, and dashed hopes. There is a lot of street slang and rough, obscene dialogue in Darija. The protagonists' emotional captivity is emphasized by the handheld, energetic, and occasionally purposefully cramped cinematography. This denotation conveys meanings of moral deterioration, young annoyance, and societal alienation—but importantly, from a local and self-critical standpoint. In contrast to Babel, Casanegra's urban

anarchy is portrayed as familiar rather than foreign. Instead of reducing the characters' conflicts to signals, viewers—especially those in the area—are supposed to relate with them. The main characters are multifaceted, emotionally genuine individuals who are neither heroes nor villains. Here, Casablanca's meaning is recovered as a place of aspiration, violence, and resistance rather than being connected to its colonial myth Casablanca, (1943). Deconstructing prevailing myths is something Casanegra actively pursues. It casts doubt on the notion that Morocco is either a dangerous oriental region or a picturesque traditional area. Additionally, it destroys the glossy advertising picture that is employed in travel promotions. No medinas, no desert sunsets, no camels here. Rather, the movie presents a counter-myth: that of the invisible Morocco, which is the one that travel and foreign films frequently conceal and where everyday life is shaped by political inertia, social inequality, and migration aspirations. From a Barthesian perspective, this movie actively disrupts legendary structures in addition to operating at the level of connotation. Moroccan identity is not universalized or reduced to "authentic culture." It portrays metropolitan Morocco as brutally modern, conflicting, and in transition. The city is a struggle rather than a show. The video re-politicizes what tourism-oriented portrayals tend to depoliticize by bringing to light what is frequently buried (urban deterioration, corruption, personal sorrow).

The disparity is pronounced when applying Barthes' semiotic model: Babel uses an external lens to construct Morocco, mythologizing and muting the local to fit a global narrative about trauma, alienation, and "otherness." It preserves an exotic peripheral myth. By emphasizing underrepresented voices, common urban concerns, and the conflict between aspiration and degradation, Casanegra, in contrast, speaks back to that narrative by representing Morocco through an internal, ingrained perspective. Although they have quite distinct effects, both movies have an impact on Morocco's Tourism Destination Image (TDI). Babel is in line with what Urry (1990) refers to as "the tourist gaze"—which is selective, filtered, and emotionally predetermined. However, Casanegra questions—possibly even disturbs—that gaze, making viewers—including Moroccan viewers—face the contradiction between the idealized utopia and the reality on the ground. The research showed that Casanegra's role in breaking myths contrasted sharply with Babel's approach of creating them. These distinctions are more than just cosmetic; they are philosophically charged and have a big impact on how Moroccans and foreign visitors alike view their country. The global dissemination of Orientalist clichés reframed through a contemporary, melodramatic prism is best illustrated by Babel. Its depiction of Morocco as an emotionally inaccessible, violent, and arid place fits nicely into what Barthes would refer to as a myth—a representation that pretends to be universal or "natural" while actually hiding its ideologically created basis. According to this interpretation, the Moroccan environment serves as a metaphor for misunderstandings and mayhem, bolstering a Western narrative about helplessness

and estrangement. Through images of deserts, historic medinas, and ageless customs, tourism marketing strategies frequently subtly encourage the continuing global myth of Morocco as a mysterious fringe. Reducing a dynamic and diverse country to a narrative or emotional backdrop for Western reflection is dangerous in this situation. This leads to a distorted TDI that prioritizes exoticism over authenticity and show above substance.

Casanegra, on the other hand, delivers a gritty, introspective portrayal of urban Morocco while eschewing the exotic lens. It substitutes voice for stillness and realism for myth. The movie departs from commercial storylines and instead creates a counter-image based on cultural self-awareness by concentrating on the frustrations, paradoxes, and coping mechanisms of disenfranchised youth in Casablanca. Casanegra rejects the idea that local adversity should be transformed into myth from a Barthesian perspective. In an urbanized, globalized, but unequally developed society, it demonstrates the fractures, the messiness, and the changing character of Moroccan identity. It aims to comprehend Morocco from within rather than to "sell" it, and that is exactly where its representational strength resides. The prevailing global narratives can be significantly corrected by this inward look. Although it might not directly help with tourism branding objectives, it provides something more important: narrative sovereignty. By doing this, Casanegra gives Moroccans the opportunity to take part in creating their own image, one that is not confined to the needs of international consumers.

## Conclusion:

Adopting Ronald Barthes' semiotic model as a critical lens, this paper aimed to investigate the relationship between cinema and the tourism image of Morocco. The study discovered how cinematic representations, whether generated internally or externally, contribute in different ways to molding the perception of Morocco as a tourist destination by contrasting the Moroccan film Casanegra with the globally produced Babel. In its orientalist and dramatic depiction, Babel shows how mythologized depictions turn Morocco into a cinematic "elsewhere"—a place of emotional upheaval and otherness. Moroccan reality is not reflected in the country's aestheticization and symbolic instrumentalization, which feeds into international delusions. On the other hand, Casanegra presents a realistic, self-reflective perspective that emphasizes the challenges, paradoxes, and ambitions of Moroccan youth. By doing this, it upends the myth-making associated with tourism and validates a type of narrative sovereignty based on local experience.

We were able to decipher how meaning is created in both films using Barthes' tripartite model, which consists of denotation, connotation, and myth. We also learned how these meanings influence not just how viewers perceive the films but also more general cultural discourses about Morocco's identity, attractiveness, and authenticity. These results highlight the value of

critically examining visual media in tourism studies, particularly in settings where local and international film productions significantly influence cultural image and national branding.

Furthermore, this study allowed us to state the following recommendations : For cultural reasons as well as a soft power tool to influence the TDI, Moroccan institutions might fund and globally promote local films that present intricate, genuine storytelling. By incorporating semiotics and cinema literacy into tourism education, future professionals may be more equipped to comprehend and impact the creation and dissemination of destination images. Instead of depending only on exoticized imagery, tourism boards should think about integrating themes, characters, or sequences from highly regarded local films into their marketing campaigns to combine authenticity with attractiveness.

Despite employing Barthes' semiotic approach to give a targeted comparison analysis, this study has a number of drawbacks. Only two movies served as the basis for the analysis: Casanegra and Babel. Despite being purposefully picked for contrast, they are unable to capture the whole range of Moroccan film representations. Subjective interpretation is a fundamental component of semiotic analysis. Depending on their cultural background, level of cinematic literacy, or personal prejudices, different viewers may interpret the same film in different ways. Empirical information (such as surveys, interviews, or audience response) that would shed light on how actual visitors or Moroccan nationals view and react to these portrayals is not included in this study.

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## Filmography

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