

Representations of Rebellion and Youth in the *banlieue*

'La Haine' and the Construction of Meaning

In their article for the *Journal of International Affairs*, Marc Angélil and Cary Siress describe the French *banlieue* through its nomenclature as 'peripheries' to an otherwise metropolitan and ever-developing affluent urban city. They define the term roughly as “a pejorative euphemism for neighbourhoods with low-income housing projects, pre-dominantly for immigrant families, that are characterized by widespread poverty, unemployment and violence” (Angélil and Siress 57). These “peripheries” have materialized as hubs for the expression of defiance within the youth – communities that have been stricken with staggering socio-economic hardship and neglect from society. Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 film, *La Haine* [*Hate*], explores these conditions by projecting them onto a fictional day in the life of three young men in one of these *banlieues*.

In this paper, I will investigate the French *banlieue* and its representation in contemporary French cinema, using *La Haine* as a jumping point into the exploration of youth rebellion, violence and unrest within a certain sect of French society. I will also examine how the film’s formal elements and the director’s thematic intent informs our understanding of *banlieue* life and the politics of resistance, by focusing on Kassovitz’s formal style and his astute application of cinematic techniques that help bring his delineation to life.

Historical and Contextual Background for Contemporary Resistance

In this section, I forge a general historical background for rebellions and youth uprisings in France, highlighting their underlying causes and implications/consequences, taking into account cultural and socio-economic contexts that affect every facet of human interaction and

coexistence within these spaces. French society is no stranger to rebellion, but the state of these *banlieues* is a curious one – a state of existence that is littered with defects of political extremities and socio-cultural peculiarities that do not exactly compute completely with French ideologies of days past. The French Revolution was born out of the values of ‘liberty, equality, and fraternity’ – the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ brought about such ideas – yet the state of socio-cultural relations in contemporary France seems to have strayed from its ideological beginnings.

Within the past four decades, L’Hexagone has seen countless riots and rebellions sparked by outrage over sweeping inegalitarian State policies and extreme acts of intolerance. Many of these events were characterized by similar motives born out of mistreatment of minorities, economic hardship caused or unanswered by gubernatorial authorities, and increasing intolerance towards immigrant Islamic and African communities. One of the most prominent rebellions, that essentially typified suburban rebellion in France, took place in 2005 following the police apprehension of six young boys and subsequent deaths of two of them – Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré. This event sparked pre-existing religious and ethnic tensions in the country and caused violent riots throughout the suburbs of Paris and other regions, mostly motivated by retaliation against police brutality and the high rates of unemployment.

Space and Emotional Dynamism in *La Haine*

Throughout the following paragraphs, I ascertain the formal and visual language that *La Haine* utilizes in order to reach the audience in a meaningful and potent way. In *Destroying the banlieue: Reconfigurations of Suburban Space in French Film*, James F. Austin recalls The 2005 Riots and terms *La Haine* as a “cinematic warning”, and examines the framing of suburban,

working-class spaces in French cinema and aims to prove them as “oppressive spaces” (Austin 80-81). Mathieu Kassovitz’s film serves as a perfect vessel through which to examine these ideas. The film kicks off with an introduction to rebellion in these spaces, exhibiting real archival footage of riots. This display serves to highlight the media’s deliberate and calculated framing of oppressed minorities as villainous which establishes the important conflicts that power and authority can breed. This use of montage, as Sergei Eisenstein denotes, urges the audience to take part in the dialectical process of creating *meaning*. We, as the audience, begin to put together the film’s fundamental tonal and thematic syntax.

The film then introduces our first protagonist, Vinz, filmed in a tight room and is then forced into a small bathroom as he confronts himself in the mirror. The entire sequence feels claustrophobic and keeps our character in the center of the frame. The tight space Vinz resides within throughout this scene, and the closing in of the film around the subject, essentially trapping him in, is reflected in the larger outside spaces the film exists within. An homage to the famous scene from Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), this sequence effectively creates a form of identification with the audience – one of emotional impetus and visceral rage. This is a tonal motif that the film repeatedly employs in its storytelling. Kassovitz extrapolates these spatial and emotional components and applies them to *banlieue* life in general. Austin asserts that “the problem of the French *banlieue* is necessarily one of space... and the social and economic problems associated with these places seem endemic to their location on that ‘circular purgatory’ looking in at the urban ‘paradise’” (Austin 82). His argument here essentially boils down to the fact that since these ‘peripheries’ of urban society are spatially denigrated, many of the problems connected to them stem from this very assessment. Austin refers to the writings of Henri Lefebvre, a Marxist sociologist, who contended that this form of spatial configuration

within society is indicative of a distinctive economic system that *creates* these inequalities. In *La Haine*, we see this “circular purgatory” play out in the lives of our protagonists in the spaces they live, socialize, and practice defiance. Kassovitz emphasizes this confinement within both the story and the setting throughout the narrative. Such spaces add to the disillusionment that we see our characters experience, and reflect the sphere of existence that resides in the *banlieues*. When the movie’s setting changes from suburbia to metropolitan Paris, there is a noticeable shift in the way the characters interact and exist within it. They feel smaller and almost overpowered by a space that is dominantly characterized by a higher-class disposition and oppressive energy that not only leaks into, but confines the ‘peripheries’.

Another simple, yet effective method employed by Kassovitz is the black-and-white photography. The entire film is entrenched in this monochromatic color scheme that seems to only affix further the bleakness at the core of its propagated message. The social deprivation present in the *banlieues* stems primarily, as Ginette Vincendeau writes in her article for “The Criterion Collection, from “run-down housing, a high concentration of young people from immigrant backgrounds, drugs, and rampant unemployment”. She asserts that most of these features of ‘social deprivation’ both reflect, and act as results of, their “topographical isolation from the city center” (Vincendeau *La Haine and After 2*). The absence of any color or shifting gradients in the film represents the preeminent desolation that arises from and caused by the factors that Vincendeau outlines. Spaces that occupy this color scheme feel darker, and more imminently fatalist. Similarly, the high contrast world that Kassovitz generates here reflects various signifiers of the seemingly hopeless condition of the *banlieues*. However, the situation is not portrayed as *completely* devoid of hope. Kassovitz makes it a point to contrast and complement the murky environment of the *banlieue* by coloring his characters’ surroundings

with elements of cultural amalgamation. The film introduces many elements of ‘outside’ cultures that provide indications of a multi-faceted existence within the *banlieue* – inclusion of American soul and hip-hop, French hip-hop, Reggaeton – *La Haine* is able to encapsulate the unpropitious condition of existence within and serves as an important representation of *banlieue* environments and the propagation of feelings of ostracization in these spaces, all the while reconciling the recognizable cultural harmony present within the inner circles of *banlieue* life.

Structural Elements: Factors Contributing to Meaning-Construction

In this section, I illustrate how the structural elements of *La Haine*’s syntactic organization with regards to characterization, narrative, cinematography, mise-en-scène, and sound (especially music) – along with its temporal construction – inform its metaphorical and thematic significance. Kassovitz delineates the various tokens of social unrest within these spaces by writing his characters as surrogates for the collective consciousness of *banlieue* dwellers. Each protagonist can be interpreted as a unique embodiment of certain moralities that strike a people when social disorientation unfurls within society. In conjunction with other factors of film form, *La Haine*’s characters serve as conduits for expressions of resistance and the perils of rejection from mainstream society.

The confounding relationships present in the films represent increasingly prevalent, as Angélil and Siress indicate, “racial and class tensions... [as a result of which they] develop animosity towards the state for enforcing policies that perpetuate such tensions”. (Angélil and Siress 62). This frustration with authority that sits deep within the social and cultural relationships in the *banlieue* manifests in *La Haine*, as introduced above, within its characters. Vinz represents the vehement rage that permeates within these communities. Transfixed by grief

over the unjust beating of his friend, Vinz's character stands to express a *collective* dejection that pervades within the hearts and minds of people that are continually suppressed, disregarded, and ultimately – as apparent at the conclusion of the film – abandoned. In stark contrast, though a friend, Hubert appears as a philosophical rebuttal to Vinz's rage and unrestrained violent tendencies; a *pacifist*. At most turns in the film, Hubert shows restraint during situations that may result in an explosion of violence or outburst of rage – a point of contention between the conflicting philosophies of Vinz and him. Hubert, at the start of the film, represents hope; a hope that unfortunately never arrives for him. Failed in his pursuit for freedom, unwillingly selling drugs to make money for his family, Hubert's *dramatis personae* is one reflective of a malfunctioning social order that pushes people to anti-social behaviors. Finally, we have Saïd. Often the comic relief, Saïd serves as a personification of *acceptance* and *mediation*. He is often placed within many conflicts throughout the film – most of which were among the other two protagonists – and does his best to curb any tension that arises. Instead, Saïd resorts to self-expression in the form of *graffiti*, as we see in his introductory scene. A means of silent protest – civil disobedience – has been prevalent among a plethora of socio-political revolutions in history, especially in France. Yet, Saïd's temperament cycles between volatility and calm – this allows Kassovitz to frame him as somewhat of an *audience surrogate*. His character most accurately reflects and echos potential reactions and sentiments of the spectators.

The dramatic structure of the film is coded by *causality*. The events of the film, both climactic and placid, unfold in relation the ones previous – a common feature of many *banlieue* films. *La Haine*'s temporal structure is marked by a ticking clock that starts our characters' day and follows through from day to night time – from beginning to end. This inclusion creates palpable tension and the threat of 'explosion' throughout the film. The suspense within every

interaction and event that we see our characters involved in heightens due to this clock, since we do not know when it will conclude its function as a means of narrative cohesion. This technique plays into Kassovitz' intention to dispel the idea that the film follows any form of plot-like proclivities. In an Interview *with Mathieu Kassovitz* as part of their *Projections* collection, Kassovitz explains to Noël Herpe and Michel Ciment that “there is no plot, it is like a diary or a news report” (Herpe and Michel 189). In this way, his manipulation of temporal expectations within this film – both confirmation and subversion – allows the spectator to follow the events of the film with some *disunity*. By incorporating deliberate disunity between the narrative elements of the film, but relative unity within the core motivations and dispositions of its characters, *La Haine* created a tightly woven narrative that plays on our expectations of time while also providing us with certain indicators of plot trajectory.

La Haine's ‘look’ and ‘feel’, affected most saliently by its *mise-en-scène* and cinematography, impart very specific meaning to the core of its narrative. These elements serve as appendages to the meaning that the film attempts to create. The shot selection features both static and dynamic ones; a distinction that very clearly indicates the mood and intentionality of every scene. Sequences in the movie that involve heightening of emotion and escalation of conflict often start static, rather, they are *smooth*. As tensions heighten within the many *mini-climaxes* of the film, the camerawork shifts to a more handheld tendency and attaches more of an impromptu, *vérité* feel. These transitional cues present in many narrative beats in the film serve as indicators of the tangible realism the film is founded on. Kassovitz allows the spectator to be a *true* on-looker – an observer of the unfolding injustices we see our characters continually be subjected to within the narrative. The dichotomy of the camera being distanced from the events and conversely, closing in on them, strikes a meticulous balance between unity and

disunity within the realism that *La Haine* depicts unapologetically. The film's visual style is effectively characterized by mirroring character emotions and motivations, and placing them within spaces that accentuate the most extreme versions of their personalities. They are free, while not comfortable, in the tight, dark, gray underbellies of the *banlieues*, yet when in the metropolis of Paris, as Ginette Vincendeau points out, it can be construed that the characters "carry the *banlieue* aggression with them...highlighting their greater exclusion from the city center" (Vincendeau *La Haine: French Film Guide* 42).

The *mise-en-scène* of *La Haine* boasts wide, sweeping compositions, emphasizing the scale of these 'peripheries' that the story takes place in and establishing a similitude between different settings within the narrative so as to place the characters and scenes in way that they can be seen through the same lens throughout. This method succeeds in essentially pushing the spectator to indulge in a goal-oriented process of inference-making and adjustment that assists the interpretation of messages and meaning within the film. Kassovitz makes a conscious effort to capture most of his characters in the same shot, even during confrontational conversational scenes and constructs long-take images of sweeping actions and movement. These long-takes are especially effective in organizing our characters' motivations and emotional stakes regarding the story beats wherein they take place. When Kassovitz does employ rapid editing and quick one-two shots, it is during episodes of high intensity that benefit from an obscured and disorienting encapsulation of action and the emerging stakes. Another purpose for which Kassovitz uses the *mise-en-scène* of *La Haine* is to accentuate the ever-increasing conflict between the characters and figures of authority in the film; moreover, this is reflective of real life since much, if not all, of *banlieue* rebellion centers around the mistreatment of lower class and minority communities by the powers that be – government, police, and the upper-class bracket of

Parisians. Sequences that consist of aggressive encounters between police and the protagonists inculcate a quality of homogeneity between the two sides. The shots that capture the movements of both groups feature similar temporal presence and share motivations of camera movement, yet Kassovitz succeeds in favoring his protagonists during these encounters and provides for compelling scenes of tension that ultimately lead us to the explosive, unfortunate climax of the film – the murders of Vinz and Hubert.

Circling back to *La Haine*'s incorporation of a tangible cultural hybridity, in her essay for *Camera Obscura*, Erin Schroeder elucidates *La Haine*'s intertextuality and cross-culturalism with regard to music and visual and narrative patterns. She contends that “*La Haine* visibly engages[s] in a conversational dynamic with American films...” and that the film “dramatize[s] larger issues of access to cultural capital and of multicultural visibility” (Schroeder 147). It is clear to see, in terms of both music and visual style, that *La Haine* pays homage to many other Western cultures and their contribution to the status of revolution and resistance to authority. The use of Bob Marley's *Burnin' and Lootin' (1973)* in the opening credits, acting as a backdrop for archival footage montage previously addressed as showcasing instances of rioting and violence as responses to oppression by authority, marks more than just a non-diegetic mood setter – it forges a tacit connection between attitudes of rebellion and social justice in others parts of the world to those in France. Kassovitz places his story in a larger context initially, and then eventually magnifies a singular story of a few youths in a small part of the world. Vincendeau points out the use of similar such conjunctions of cultural signifiers in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing (1989)*, a film that can be seen as an influencer of *La Haine*, and their function as “providing an ethnic rallying point rather than a divisive one” (Vincendeau *La Haine: French Film Guide* 57).

Conclusion

In general, it can be said that *La Haine* suffices as an important and poignant piece of cinematic history that effectively constitutes a “warning” for the effects of socio-economic difficulties faced in the *banlieues* of Paris. The film compellingly expresses sentiments of socio-political and cultural resistance to oppression, while conversely unforgivingly showcases the harsh realities that plague residents of these ‘peripheries’ of society – often ignored, always sidelined. The incitement of the 2005 Clichy-sous-Bois riots led to a renaissance of *La Haine* within the cultural consciousness – one that recalled and emphasized film’s exceptional representation of the “precariousness of existence felt in the suburbs” (Austin 80). Mathieu Kassovitz goes to great lengths in order to portray this ‘precariousness of existence’ in his film and utilizes a plethora of cinematic techniques in order to closely examine and project notions of rebellion, resistance, and political repression felt within these spaces. The use of space, color, sound, character, and most importantly, palpable cultural syntheses allow him to create a world that engrosses the spectator and captures a painful, volatile day in the life of three youths in the *banlieue*. The film stands the test of time as an extremely relevant representation of youth and rebellion in Contemporary French society; a representation that can be recalled countless times, and serves as a cultural *moment* that, in modern times, seems more pertinent than ever.

Works Cited

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