

## A Political and Historical Movement: French “Banlieu” Culture Films

Perhaps most ironic about a country so focused on unification is the palpable divide within its separate – perhaps forgotten – factions. France has always prided itself on its unity from within; although origins may differ, a citizen of France has always been considered simply French. However, as this idealistic philosophy has deteriorated, the country is left with explicit divides within its subgroups. And perhaps the most displaced are the inhabitants of France’s “banlieu” culture, suburbs where social housing has fostered a diverse and distinctive community of Arabs, Muslims, North Africans, and French youths.

A recent wave of French films has captured the essence of this culture, which is built upon diversity versus national unity, integration versus assimilation, majority versus minority, youth versus authority, as well as struggles between races, sexes, and social classes. Essentially a counter-culture, the youths depicted in these films are the victims of a divide in French culture in which they feel abandoned and isolated. There is an obvious tension, then, between the banlieu inhabitants and the rest of France, most of whom do not empathize with them.

One of the most important films of this genre is Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* (1995)<sup>1</sup>. *La Haine*, or “hate” in English, depicts three teenagers – a Jew, an Arab, and French – over the course of a day in which they deal with their conflict against the police. The film was inspired by the death of Makome M’Bowole, a youth from the banlieu who was shot at point blank range by a police officer while handcuffed to a radiator in 1993. Evidently, M’Bowole’s words angered the officer, whose gun fired “accidentally,” killing the boy. One of the most important lines in the film is, “La haine attire la haine,” or *hatred breeds hatred*, which serves as its basis. A common theme in this genre of films, hatred is omnipresent in the banlieu, the unfortunate result of a ceaseless vicious cycle. While the youths hate the police for racist, condescending, brutal

behaviors – and in turn challenge them often – the police hate the youths for that very lack of respect.

Another important theme in this film is falling. In the film, France was in an obvious, unavoidable free-fall. Tension between police and the youth was mounting, and as microcosmic events spurred further controversy – a challenging look from the boys, an aggressive interrogation from the police – pressure continued to build. Several times throughout the film, the narrator states, “Jusqu’ici tout va bien...” or *So far, so good...*, not realizing that there was a problem because nothing had come to a front yet. Although in hindsight, something should have been done to resolve the issues as they occurred, they instead accumulated. And as the stability of the culture dissipated – as it *fell* – it was ignored. *So far, so good*—until finally, they “hit the ground,” so to speak, in which a police officer accidentally shoots one of the 3 boys. Consequently, one of the other boys points a gun at the cop, who points his gun right back. The screen fades to black as a final gunshot is fired. We do not know who fired their gun next; it does not matter. Rather, it is a commentary on unchecked anger between a stubborn authority and a displaced – yet nonetheless evolving – youth culture.

Another film from this genre is Karim Dridi’s *Bye, Bye* (1995), which focuses on integration, racism, and guilt in daily life<sup>2</sup>. In this film, two North African brothers, Ismaël and Mouloud, moved from Paris to Marseille following the tragic death of their disabled brother, Nouredine, in a house fire. While this tragedy is Ismaël’s primary source of pain, his younger brother, Mouloud, experiences different problems. He gets involved in drug trafficking and, in turn, is the recipient of racist threats by French whites for promoting such an unhealthy lifestyle in Marseille. The significance of having an older and younger brother is to portray the difficulties of *growing up* in the banlieu culture versus having grown up elsewhere. While Ismaël is nearly an adult, and only worries about his own problems, Mouloud is forced to deal with the

circumstantial problems forced upon him. This contrast, then, emphasizes the problems that this new subculture must face, and how it differs from the past.

An overwhelming theme of this film is, like *La Haine*, the struggle to belong. However, several times throughout the film, Mouloud encounters obstacles from a racist man named Ludo and his cronies. And so, the boy must cope with, “Algeria is over there. This is France,” “...France needs action,” and “It’s our country. I won’t let them overrun us.” Similar to the contention between the youths and the police in *La Haine*, there is an obvious and mounting tension between the white majority and North Africans in *Bye, Bye*. And so, just as the title of the film suggests, there is a constant ephemeral sense of transiency as the boys cannot handle the continuous battle to belong. As the film comes to an end, Ismaël and Mouloud take their inevitable leave of Marseille. Mouloud asks, “Where are we going now?” to which Ismaël responds, “I don’t know, we’ll see.” They are both fully aware that they do not belong in Marseille, nor will they be able to return after having experienced life there. Yet this is the essence of the banlieu culture; it is not based on a geographic location but a way of life. And so, the more difficulties they experience and the more differences that are surfaced, the stronger this subculture will be shaped and defined.

Finally, Abdel Kechiche’s *L’esquive* (2003) may be the most profound representation of the banlieu culture in French cinema<sup>3</sup>. *L’esquive*, or *dodge* in English, actually depicts a play within a “play” in which Krimo – a young Arab boy – falls for Lydia, a white French girl. She is the lead in their class’s performance of Marivaux’s *A Game of Love and Chance*, which inspires Krimo to try for the male lead. Almost immediately, racial distinctions are drawn, using the school play as a microcosm for their life in a Parisian banlieu. For example, Lydia acts as a royal lady in the play, while her Arab counterpart, Frida, serves as the maid. Moreover, there is a further divide in their actual acting of the play; whereas Lydia is quite able, Frida cannot capture

the essence of her character or her timing. Lydia accuses her: “Maids in my land wait to be called... you’re overdoin’ it.” Thus, not only do their parts in the play reflect social class structure, but even their acting ability within the play, as well. And so we learn quite quickly that the performance is a conveniently accurate depiction of the banlieu culture.

The most telling scene comes about 25 minutes into the film, in which the students are rehearsing the play in class with their teacher. She asks, “To what extent do you think that Marivaux in Act 1, Scene 5 favors the study of emotions at the expense of action?” Another microcosm of banlieu life, this represents the presence of intense emotion but ultimately inaction in terms of accomplishments or change within the society. Throughout the entire film, the youth in the banlieu are anger-ridden and speak in a form of French slang so colloquial that not even all francophone people can understand. “Everybody talks. It is going all directions. The film tries to capture that, the overflowing of sounds, the frenetic use of vocabulary which is part of the teenagers’ ordinary conversations [...]. There is a sport metaphor in these verbal jousts when insults, heckling, and swear words are shot out like bullets.<sup>4</sup>” And so, although there is no lack of extreme emotion by all of the characters, such sentiment only becomes more engrained in their cultural fiber, as opposed to a resolution being found.

In this same scene, the teacher further explains the concept of the play during a scene between the rich and poor, explaining, “We’re prisoners of our social condition.” These social class distinctions easily traverse into racial distinction with regard to whites (the French majority) and Arabs (the French minority). Krimo falls in love with Lydia, and even joins the play to be with her. This is the epitome of irony, however, for the play will show that such interaction between these two classes (racial, in this case) cannot work. And indeed, as Krimo tries to act as Arlequin (Lydia’s stately male counterpart in the play), he cannot capture the character. Thus, just as the rich and poor are easily differentiated within the play, the racial

differentiations are just as obvious outside of the play. In the end, however, Krimo does not star in the play, but relinquishes it to a more-able white French boy. And so, just as the play itself says, “We’re prisoners of our social condition... [We] fall in love within [our] own social class. ... We’re conditioned by our own milieu. We stick together. Even disguised, we cannot escape our origins.” Krimo could have tried to successfully act – or *integrate* – himself into the play, but his inability to do so successfully was inevitable. It is only fitting, then, that his love for Lydia *outside of the play* would also fail. However, this is yet another example of how the banlieu culture is built upon the obvious differentiation of its factions.

This genre of French film is constantly developing, for the sole reason that the banlieu culture itself is developing. Whether concerning the diverse – yet united – banlieu youth versus authority like in *La Haine*, a family of minorities versus the white French majority and their stereotypes like in *Bye, Bye*, or the different factions of the banlieu youth versus each other and their racial differences like in *L’esquive*, this genre is certainly not one-dimensional. In fact, what makes this culture different from all those that preceded it is that it does not rely on unity or equality, but rather gains its distinction from its internal divisions and struggles. In a way, its lack of a decisive character is its very character itself. Yet all 3 films do manage to share one similarity in their style, which is rough, solemn, and almost raw, in a way. This helps convey the cold, sobering, tough message that is representative of life in the banlieu. And so as this culture continues to evolve, so will French cinema with it.

## Works Cited

1. La Haine. Dir. Mathieu Massovitz. Canal +, 1995.
2. Bye, Bye. Dir. Karim Dridi. ADR Productions, 1995.
3. L'esquive. Dir. Abdel Kechiche. Lola Films, 2003.
4. Vanderschelden, Isabelle. Cornerhouse: "Film note for L'Esquive." 2004.  
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