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# The Representation of North African Immigrants in French and Spanish Film

Julie Blazar

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

**The Representation of North African and Sub-Saharan African Immigrants  
in French and Spanish Cinema**

**By: Julie Blazar, Connecticut College**

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Part 1: The Representation of North African and Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in Spanish Migration Cinema</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>North African Migration to Spain: Conquest, “Convivencia” and Sea Crossings</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Spanish Migration Cinema: “Road Movies,” Border Crossings and Adopted Community</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Immigration, Erasure and the Landscape through Chus Gutiérrez’s Poniente</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Poniente and the Role of North African Immigrants in Spanish Cinema</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Adbenbi, Curro and the Power of Friendship</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The Landscape as a Place of Violence and Community</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Poniente Conclusion</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Chapter 2: A Return to Roots—Immigration, the Landscape and Adopted Family in Retorno a Hansala</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>The Beach as a Place of Death, Exit and Entry in Retorno a Hansala</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>The Role of Women in Retorno to Hansala</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Retorno a Hansala Conclusion</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Immigration, Discrimination, Community and Border Crossing—The Story of Las Cartas de Alou</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Border Crossings and Changing Identities in Las Cartas de Alou</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>The Informal economy, Waste and Community in Las Cartas de Alou</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Las Cartas de Alou Conclusion</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The Representation of Immigrant Masculinity in Contemporary Spanish Cinema through Imanol Uribe’s Bwana</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>The Sexualization and Exoticization of Ombasi and the Bodies of Undocumented African Immigrants</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Uribe’s Depiction of Violence and Racism in Bwana</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Bwana Conclusion</b>	<b>57</b>

<b>Part 2: The Representation of North and Sub-Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in French Banlieue Cinema</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Banlieue Cinema: A Cinematic Perspective on the French Suburbs</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Chapter 5: La Haine—Hate, Violence, and the “Banlieue” Film</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Vinz, Saïd, Hubert and the Police in the Banlieue</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>The Police and the Banlieue: Violence and Crime in a Hostile Environment</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>The Spatial Separation of the Banlieue</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>La Banlieue as a Gendered and Racial Space: Class Solidarity and the Racialization of the Banlieue</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>La Haine Conclusion</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Chapter 6: L’esquive—A Different Kind of Banlieue Film</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Verlan as a Language of Identity: Elite and Popular Culture in the Banlieue</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Violence and the Police in L’esquive</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>L’esquive Conclusion</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Chapter 7: Violence and Burning Cars—Ma 6-T Va Crack-er and Youth Culture in the Banlieue</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Violence, Destruction and Revolution: The Creation of Social Space in the Banlieue</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Ma 6-T Va Crack-er Conclusion</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Chapter 8: Girlhood and The Representation of Women in Banlieue Cinema</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Female Mobility in the Banlieue: Gender Relations in a Male-Dominated Space</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Identity and Community in Girlhood</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Girlhood Conclusion</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>113</b>

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# INTRODUCTION

In France and Spain, the history of contact between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa created a tradition of domination, discrimination and racism towards those who immigrate to these places. As the movement of people around the world increases, a multicultural global society and community is created. Migration cinema, particularly in France and Spain, depicts the struggles, opportunities and discrimination faced by immigrants as they integrate themselves into their adopted countries. By studying these films, there is that hope that xenophobic and racist attitudes can change with the positive representation of immigrants in cinema, as they bring light to important economic, social and political issues through the lives of their characters, humanizing them and making them more accessible to the audience. The analysis of migration films from two different national traditions allows the viewer to see the broader implications of immigration, and it becomes clear that this is an issue across Europe and all over the world. Through these migration films, border crossings, changes in identity, growing up and integration into new communities are shown through the nuanced and complex perspectives of bold and brave immigrants fighting for their place in their adopted countries.

Through migration cinema, the evolution and nature of this complex relationship between these countries and North African and Sub-Saharan African immigrants is clear. The first part of this thesis explores the experiences of immigrants in Spain and their desire to assimilate to their adopted communities, and the second part focuses on the struggles of second and third generation immigrants living in the suburbs of Paris, who although French citizens, also face intolerance and prejudice.

The films chosen for this work show a wide range of the situations of immigrants and immigration in France and Spain. In *Poniente (West)*, Gutiérrez, 2002) and *Retorno a Hansala (Return to Hansala)*, Gutiérrez, 2008), we see immigrants and Spaniards trying to co-exist in the same space, as well as the importance of acceptance and adopted community. In *Las Cartas de Alou (Letters to Alou)*, Armendáriz, 1990), Montxo Armendáriz tells Alou's story through letters, emphasizing Alou's perspective and his voice through writing. *Bwana* (Uribe, 1996) is an example of the escalation of racist and xenophobic attitudes and what happens when these perspectives are taken too far. *La Haine (Hate)*, Kassovitz, 1995) shows a grim and depressing vision of the Paris suburbs and the violence and crime that its residents often participate in, while *L'esquive (Games of Love and Chance)*, Kechiche, 2003) shows a different view of the banlieue with adolescence and young love. *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er's (My suburb's going to crack)*, Richet, 1997) violent perception of the banlieue shows the viewer the prominence of revolution and protests in French society, as well as the creation of social space. Finally, *Girlhood* (Sciamma, 2014) gives the woman's perspective on the banlieue and its intersectional identity and focus.

# **Part 1: The Representation of North African and Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in Spanish Migration Cinema**

## **North African Migration to Spain: Conquest, “Convivencia” and Sea Crossings**

The Muslim-Arab and Spanish-Christian worlds have overlapped and co-existed for centuries, starting in 711 when Arab armies conquered the Spanish city of Toledo from the Visigoths, completing their goal of Western expansion. This conquest led to a period known as “Convivencia,” which refers “...to the ‘coexistence’ of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities in medieval Spain and by extension the cultural interaction and exchange fostered by such proximity.”<sup>1</sup> This period solidified Spain’s multicultural identity until the Reconquista (Reconquest) of Spain by Christian armies with the fall of Granada in 1492. Although traces of Jewish and Muslim identity can still be seen in Spanish cities today, Spain’s Christian and monocultural identity comes to the forefront, especially in the period of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975). In the book, *Spanish Legacies: The Coming of Age of the Second Generation*, Alejandro Portes, Rosa Aparicio and William Haller write, “The first distinguishing characteristic of Spain-bound immigration is that, although flows of foreigners to the country started very late, they increased rapidly. It started late because when its European neighbors began to receive immigrants in the mid-1950s, Spain was pushing millions of its rural population

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Baxter Wolf, “Convivencia in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea,” Wiley Online Library (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, December 4, 2008), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2008.00119.x>.



to emigrate.”<sup>2</sup> Franco’s isolationist policies reduced the number of immigrants coming into the country but increased the number of Spaniards seeking work outside of it due to the economy. During the 21st century, the number of immigrants coming to Spain grew because of growth of the economy in the 1990s and flexible visa requirements. David Gossels writes in his text “Countering Irregular Immigration: Spanish Model 1989-2011,”:

The vast majority of Moroccans arrived in Spain with visas and then overstayed them. The 1990s in Spain were a time of rapid economic growth, especially in construction. Many Moroccans went to Spain in the 1990s to work construction, and, seeing a better economic future in Spain, decided to remain there indefinitely. Many of these workers, who were predominantly male, then arranged for their families to join them.<sup>3</sup>

However, these journeys are dangerous, expensive and many migrants die at sea before they even reach Spanish shores. Statistics show that, “...at least 10% of those who attempt the crossing do not survive. Over 1,000 bodies were recovered from the Atlantic Ocean between 2006 and 2007 alone....”<sup>4</sup> These numbers show the great and desperate desire of those immigrating to find work, support their families and create a better life for themselves.

Unfortunately, these efforts to assimilate and integrate themselves into Spanish society are often met with discrimination, racism and poor working and living conditions. The films in this thesis

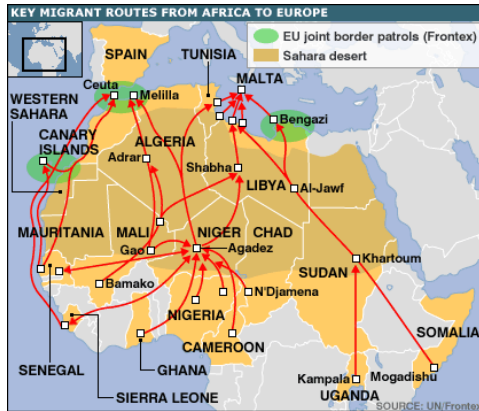
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<sup>2</sup> Alejandro Portes, Rosa Aparicio, and William Haller, “The Recent History of Spain-Bound Immigration,” in *Spanish Legacies: The Coming of Age of the Second Generation*, 1st ed. (University of California Press Press, 2016), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Gossels, “Countering Irregular Immigration: The Spanish Model 1989-2011” (2016). Government and International Relations Honors Papers, <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/govhp/46>, 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 67-8.

show the struggles that immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan African experience when adapting and assimilating to life in Spain.



**Key Migrant Routes From Africa to Europe<sup>5</sup>**

## **Spanish Migration Cinema: “Road Movies,” Border Crossings and Adopted Community**

Spanish migration cinema depicts the journeys and hardships of immigrants coming to Spain from other countries. These types of films came into prominence following Franco’s dictatorship, “...the disappearance of Francisco Franco had the effect of “re-politicizing film language” or, in other words, “to speak the unspeakable, confronting the realities of everyday living, acknowledging the inseparability of art from the frameworks of history and tradition.””<sup>6</sup> When Franco died in 1975, the Spanish government relinquished its control on art, enabling filmmakers to create films depicting the realities of important social and political problems,

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<sup>5</sup> “Europe | Key Facts: Africa to Europe Migration.” BBC News. BBC, July 2, 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6228236.stm>.

<sup>6</sup> H Rosi Song, “Migration, Gender, and Desire in Contemporary Spanish Cinema,” in *Border Interrogations: Questioning Spanish Frontiers* (Berghahn Books, n.d.), 43.

including immigration. Starting in 1990 with Monxto Armendáriz's *Las Cartas de Alou*, Spanish cinema shifted to tell the stories of North African and Sub-Saharan African immigrants. With this shift comes stories of arrival and integration into their new lives but also of their triumphs and struggles becoming accepted as Spanish. In this section pertaining to Spanish film, the role of immigrants from North Africa in Spain and discrimination and racism they often face will be used show how they adapt to their new community and adopted country through self-exploration.

# Chapter 1: Immigration, Erasure and the Landscape through Chus Gutiérrez's *Poniente*

*Poniente* (2002) was directed by Chus Gutiérrez, a Spanish filmmaker born in Granada in 1962. She is the director of numerous short and feature length films, television shows and documentaries including *Alma Gitana* (1996), *Retorno a Hansala* (2008), *Sexo Oral* (1994), *El Calentito* (2005) and *Poniente* (2002). Many of Gutiérrez's films, including *Poniente*, have received multiple nominations, awards and positive reviews both in Spain and internationally. *Poniente* (2002) won the Premio Mejor Guión at the Festival Toulouse Cinespaña in 2002 and Fipresci Prize in the Ibero American Competition at the 2003 Festival de Cine de Guadalajara Mexico. *Poniente* was well-received by critics for the most part. Jonathan Holland calls *Poniente* "[Gutiérrez's]... strongest film to date."<sup>7</sup> Although he does have some criticism for Gutiérrez, "However, the... favoring of immigrants over Spaniards gives it an emotional imbalance and leads to good guy/bad guy oversimplification. Also, the harsh punishment meted out to Miguel seems disproportionate."<sup>8</sup> Holland calls Gutiérrez's work strong, but he also questions her fictionalization and potential distortion of real world issues and the portrayal of Spaniards, especially Miguel and the greenhouse workers. Although these depictions may seem oversimplified or overdramatized, Gutiérrez bases her films on reality and the real life struggles of immigrant workers in Spain. Another critic, Geoffrey Macnab writes, "There's no humour or formal flamboyance here, but Gutiérrez tells a dour and depressing story with conviction."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Holland, "Poniente." *Variety*, 17 Sept. 2002, <https://variety.com/2002/film/reviews/poniente-1200546175/>, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, "Poniente," *Sight and Sound*; London Vol. 12, Iss. 11, (Nov 2002): 13, 3, 1.

Gutiérrez's simple account of immigrant struggles and racism and discrimination faced by them is both a respectful and accurate analysis of a difficult topic, while also providing entertainment for her audience. *Poniente* explores the meaning of community and belonging through the lens of immigration and discrimination.

### ***Poniente* and the Role of North African Immigrants in Spanish Cinema**

*Poniente* is roughly based on an incident in February 2000 when a Moroccan immigrant killed a Spanish woman in the village of El Ejido, in Almería, Spain. Spaniards retaliated by killing Moroccan immigrants who worked in the greenhouses, and the Spanish police only intervened after three days. The film explores the relationship between Spaniards and North African immigrants in a small fictional coastal town in southern Spain called La Isla. The film begins with Lucía (Cuca Escribano), one of the protagonists, returning to La Isla after her father dies, from Madrid where she was working as a teacher, and she inherits his greenhouse and business. She begins to integrate herself into the community, although it is clear she feels like an outsider. She also begins to notice the tense relationship between the Spaniards in La Isla and the North African greenhouse workers which is highlighted throughout Gutiérrez's careful exploration of identity and belonging, as well the role of immigrants in their adopted country.

The majority of the greenhouse workers are immigrants of North African and Sub-Saharan African origin. They are constantly placed in the category of "Other" and degraded and disrespected by many of the Spaniards in the film. In the article "United Spains? North African Immigration and the Question of Spanish Identity in '*Poniente*,'" Raquel Vega-Durán writes, "...Adbembi and Saïd, immigrants of Berber origin who feel uprooted—because of their lack of papers they are *Others* who have no rights. They are also seen as a threat to 'Spanish identity'

because they are Muslims.”<sup>10</sup> The fictional immigrants in *Poniente*, as well as real life immigrants living in Spain, are seen as invaders—those who do not belong—therefore are a threat to Spanish culture and identity. As a result, they are treated poorly, are forced to endure unfair and dangerous working conditions as well as a lack of overtime pay.

Economic mobility and finances are a prominent theme throughout the film. When Miguel (Antonio Dechent), Lucía’s cousin, and Curro (José Coronado), the greenhouse accountant, are at the greenhouse, Miguel argues with Adbenbi (Farid Fatmi), one of the workers, about overtime pay, because he wants the other workers and him to work more, but he claims he can’t afford to pay them. Later he complains to Curro about the workers wanting overtime pay, implying that this request is not something he would ever grant or that they deserve. Lucía also notices this discrepancy between the workers’ hours and how much they are paid. She questions this when the foreman, Paquito, wants to deny the workers overtime pay again, “Your father never paid overtime. When it’s time to finish, it’s time to finish.”<sup>11</sup> Paquito explains that Lucía’s father never paid the workers working overtime. It is clear both from Paquito’s insistence and the attitudes of the other people in La Isla, including Lucía’s late father, that the greenhouse workers are only tolerated because they are the greenhouse owner’s source of income. They don’t want to give them any benefits or pay them fairly; they want a cheap labor source that they can abuse and then dispose of when it no longer serves them.

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<sup>10</sup> Raquel Vega-Durán, “United Spains? North African Immigration and the Question of Spanish Identity in ‘Poniente.’” *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2013, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Chus Gutierrez, *Poniente: guión cinematográfico*. Ocho y Medio, Libros De Cine, 2002, 69.

Although the immigrants are treated badly, the Spaniards who are considered outsiders are also marginalized and made to feel like an “Other.” Curro grew up in Switzerland and returned to Spain as an adult. He talks to his friend Pepe about feeling displaced and mentions he never felt accepted in Switzerland, but also he doesn’t feel completely accepted in Spain either. He feels like he doesn’t really fit in anywhere. Lucía arrives in La Isla, a place she is unfamiliar with, and has to adapt to her new life. They can understand and empathize to some extent with the immigrant workers for the greenhouse, because they, too, feel like outsiders, “Both Curro and Lucía experience a sense of displacement but, whereas Lucía is returning to a place where she lived and felt compelled to leave, Curro is living in a place that he hardly knows.”<sup>12</sup> Lucía and Curro feel like outsiders in different ways than the greenhouse workers and each other, but this feeling of otherness bring them together. They don’t understand why the other Spaniards treat the workers so unfairly, when they are doing a strenuous job for many hours that helps the Spaniards make money. They identify with and relate to the workers’ sense of otherness, because they feel the same way. Curro defends the immigrants when the other Spaniards try to blame them for the fire in the greenhouse, which results in him getting badly beaten. Throughout *Poniente*, it is clear that those who are different are not accepted into the wider community and are labelled as outsiders, and in many ways, Curro and Lucía are outsiders just as much as the greenhouse workers.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Daddesio, “Poniente and the Questioning of Spanish National Identity.” *Cincinnati Romance Review*, vol. 28, 2009, 56.



**Lucía in the greenhouse<sup>13</sup>**

## **Adbenbi, Curro and the Power of Friendship**

Curro's friendship with Adbenbi, one of the greenhouse workers, is an important part of *Poniente*, because it shows that meaningful relationships can be created between those that come from different backgrounds. One scene shows Adbenbi and Curro sitting on the beach discussing their future plans for opening a bar together. They talk about window placement and whether or not they should have air conditioning. The conversation then turns to Adbenbi's ancestry as he is writing in his native language in the sand with a stick, "My roots are your roots. Our ancestors were the same. Spain was a Berber country for many centuries."<sup>14</sup> Adbenbi is very proud of his identity, and he knows that he and Curro, as well as the other Spaniards of La Isla, are more similar than people want to believe. He reminds Curro that his community has its own culture, identity and language, which brings them together. Gutiérrez affirms this idea in an interview about *Poniente*, "If people put their fears aside and looked into each other's eyes, they would understand that in some way it is also the other's eyes."<sup>15</sup> If the other Spaniards in La Isla put

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<sup>13</sup> "Poniente (Película De 2002)," EcuRed. Accessed April 15, 2020. [https://www.ecured.cu/Poniente\\_película\\_de\\_2002](https://www.ecured.cu/Poniente_película_de_2002).

<sup>14</sup> Chus Gutierrez. *Poniente: guión cinematográfico*. Ocho y Medio, Libros De Cine, 2002, 83.

<sup>15</sup> "Poniente," *Chus Gutiérrez & Revolution Lab: Detalle*, <http://www.chusgutierrez.es/es/directora/detalle/obra/poniente/>, 1.



their fear of differences and hate aside, they would see that they are not so different from each other after all, as Curro and Adbenbi did. Everyone is an outsider in some way, and everyone knows what it feels like to not belong. Vega-Durán writes, "...the conversation between Spanish Curro and Berber Adbembi brings both shores together, presenting a view of Spain as a country that starts to recognize the complexity of its identities through...the dialogue with other languages and cultures."<sup>16</sup> Even if not all of the Spaniards in the film can recognize that embracing other cultures and people different from them is important, Gutiérrez does show that a shift in attitudes is happening. More people are becoming accepting of difference in whatever form it takes, and that it does not have to divide a community, but rather it can bring people together. However, complete acceptance is not something everyone sees as important as seen throughout the film in the attitudes of many of the Spaniards in La Isla.

Although Curro accepted Adbenbi, it is clear that most of the other Spaniards living in La Isla are not as tolerant. Miguel, Lucía's cousin, is one of the Spaniards who discriminates against the North African immigrant workers. His comments throughout the film make his racist attitudes clear. In her article, "Globalization and African Immigration in Spanish Film: Chus Gutiérrez's *Poniente* (West, 2002)" Linda Materna introduces him well, "Set in opposition to the immigrant population are the greenhouse owners...Lucía's cousin Miguel is the most individuated. He embodies their economic difficulties, fears, anger and racial prejudice. His problems are both personal and economic, and the two intersect in his need to make ends

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<sup>16</sup> Raquel Vega-Durán, "United Spains? North African Immigration and the Question of Spanish Identity in '*Poniente*.'" *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2013, 156.

meet.”<sup>17</sup> Miguel is the representation of all the prejudice and fear of differences felt by the greenhouse owners. He is angry that Lucía has control of the greenhouse, because he feels it rightfully belongs to him, and he is also frustrated by economic issues, “Despite their general prosperity, the greenhouse growers struggle to compete in the global market and the irony is that they simply can't match the low prices of products from Morocco, where labor costs are one third of what they are in La Isla.”<sup>18</sup> Miguel and the other greenhouse workers are struggling financially, so he decides hire people to burn down Lucía's greenhouse and blame it on the immigrants. This accusation confirms stereotypes about them to the community, and he can blame his economic problems on someone else. His hatred and frustration towards his own life creates hate for others. As a result of the accusations of arson, the greenhouse workers are forced to leave La Isla. Vegan-Durán writes, “As a consequence of the riots the immigrants are forced out of the village, and in the closing scene of *Poniente*, we see the immigrants in a line against the background of the Mediterranean Sea, walking from right to left until no one is left in the frame.”<sup>19</sup> The immigrants are literally erased, both from the screen and from the town, as if they were never there, and the beach and the ocean is all that is left. By eliminating them physically from the film, Gutiérrez highlights the disposable nature of the immigrant workers and their invisibility. As Davies writes, “...the immigrants act like ghosts in another sense as well: in their virtual invisibility. They haunt the space in which they are seen as fleeting traces. They will be

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<sup>17</sup> Linda Materna, “Globalization and African Immigration in Spanish Film: Chus Gutiérrez's *Poniente* (West, 2002).” In *Reflections on Europe in Transition*, Peter Lang, n.d, 66.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Daddesio, “*Poniente* and the Questioning of Spanish National Identity.” *Cincinnati Romance Review*, vol. 28, 2009, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Raquel Vega-Durán, “United Spains? North African Immigration and the Question of Spanish Identity in ‘*Poniente*’.” *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2013, 170.

erased from that space, leaving Spaniards to occupy the space and the film; and yet the plots of the films come about precisely because of their trace across the landscape.”<sup>20</sup> Gutiérrez uses the physical erasure of the immigrants to emphasize their stories and struggles. In this way, what they are going through is the focus of the film and not minimized or forced into the background. Adbenbi comments on the invisibility of the immigrants during a meeting where the workers are fighting for better working conditions and fairer wages, “In reality, what you would like is if we were invisible.”<sup>21</sup> Adbenbi and his coworkers feel invisible, and people only notice them when something goes wrong. The Spaniards see them as replaceable, and their expulsion from La Isla is not significant for their superiors, because they can find other workers very easily to fill their places.

### **The Landscape as a Place of Violence and Community**

The landscape, the beach in particular, plays an important role in the film. It is used to show a literal division between Spain and Africa and is a space for inclusion and exclusion, as well as a point of entry and exit for the immigrants. Davies writes that “In *Poniente*, the beach is a site of hybrid encounter between Moroccan and Spaniard, those Spaniards who already recognize themselves as potentially other. It is notable that those who do *not* explicitly recognize themselves to be on the margins of Spanish society are never found on the beach...”<sup>22</sup> Those who go to the beach, Curro, Adbenbi and Lucía, find a space where their identity is not

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Davies, *Spanish Spaces: Landscape, Space and Place in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, Liverpool University Press, 2012, 144.

<sup>21</sup> Chus Gutiérrez, *Poniente: guión cinematográfico*. Ocho y Medio, Libros De Cine, 2002, 130.

<sup>22</sup> Ann Davies, *Spanish Spaces: Landscape, Space and Place in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, Liverpool University Press, 2012, 149.

questioned, and they are not made to feel like an outsider. Curro and Adbenbi are able to dream about the business they want to build together on the beach and spend time together. In addition, Lucía and Curro are invited to a party by Adbenbi that his community is having on the beach. They are able to spend time together as a couple but also with people who know what it feels like to feel out of place.

The beach is often seen as a place of loss. At the end of the film, Curro is severely beaten by Spanish men for his connection to the greenhouse and friendship with the immigrant workers. He is dumped on the beach where Lucía finds him in the morning. The beach is now a place of pain and fear for Lucía, because the person she loves is hurt. She is unable to do much more than hold him in her arms and show him how much she loves him. Lorenzo Torres writes in the article “En España no hay racismo,” “The landscape is no longer pastoral, there has been suffering and love...”<sup>23</sup> La Isla has been touched by racism and discrimination, people have been hurt, and they have suffered. However, Lucía and Curro found love there, and Curro and Adbenbi were able to form a beautiful friendship despite their perceived differences. Although ugly beliefs and ideas lurk beneath the surface, the good can still be found with the right people.

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<sup>23</sup>Lorenzo Torres, “ ‘Poniente’ (2002) De Chus Gutiérrez. ‘En España No Hay Racismo,’” *Research Gate*, Jan. 2008, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40268671\\_Poniente\\_2002\\_de\\_Chus\\_Gutierrez\\_En\\_Espana\\_no\\_hay\\_racismo](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40268671_Poniente_2002_de_Chus_Gutierrez_En_Espana_no_hay_racismo), 9.



### **Curro on the beach with children from the North African immigrant community<sup>24</sup>**

The very last scene of the film shows the immigrant workers on the beach leaving the town. Davies describes this scene, “When the camera pauses on Adbenbi as he looks back at the deserted beach he is leaving behind, we might guess his thoughts but we are not privy to them; and the fact that the camera captures him in medium long shot rather than close-up, the preferred camera shot for revealing emotion, underscores the sense that what matters in this sequence is the shot of Adbenbi disappearing from the screen.”<sup>25</sup> Adbenbi’s pain about what happened to Curro is palpable, because he has to leave behind the dreams they had together. This is coupled with the uncertainty of trying to find somewhere else to live and work and being uprooted from a place he felt fairly comfortable. However, as Davies says, what matters most is that the immigrants, including Adbenbi, must leave again. Once again, they must leave in order to find work and adjust to another new place and job. Their story and physical presence are once again being erased, and they have no voice with which to say what really happened, to tell their own story. Materna explains Gutiérrez’s intentions behind the film, “...Gutiérrez insists her film is more about migration than immigration, a tale about the rootlessness of people. For her, the

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<sup>24</sup>“ Poniente,” Chus Gutiérrez & Revolution Lab: Detalle. Accessed April 18, 2020. <http://www.chusgutierrez.es/es/directora/detalle/obra/poniente/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Davies, *Spanish Spaces: Landscape, Space and Place in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, Liverpool University Press, 2012, 152.

problem depicted “has a universal dimension...The conflict originates in the fear of difference and...in a loss of memory: those who were emigrants have forgotten their past.”<sup>26</sup> For Gutiérrez, *Poniente* is about people and their stories, and she wants the untold stories to be told and for the voiceless to have a voice. She says, “What happened in La Isla, the place where my film took place, can happen in any city, town or neighborhood of any European metropolis.”<sup>27</sup> As issues of integration and assimilation are happening worldwide, not just in La Isla or in Spain, it is important that stories like *Poniente*’s are told, because as people move around the world, cultural competence becomes even more important in order to understand and coexist with those who come from different backgrounds. Vega-Durán writes, “The film manages to depict different views of Spain, from a Spain where the immigrant is the *Other* par excellence to a quasi-hybrid space where both Spaniards and immigrants share a common origin, always revealing the problem of defining Spain.”<sup>28</sup> Spain’s identity comes from people of many cultural and religious backgrounds and is fluid and evolving over time.

### ***Poniente* Conclusion**

*Poniente* asks important questions about the meaning of identity, what it means to belong to a group or a community and who gets to decide this. The greenhouse workers, in many ways, are just as Spanish as the Spaniards in the film, but their intersectional identity means that they are marginalized and pushed to the edges of society. Gutiérrez’s portrayal of Spain shows a

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<sup>26</sup>Linda Materna, “Globalization and African Immigration in Spanish Film: Chus Gutiérrez’s *Poniente* (West, 2002),” In *Reflections on Europe in Transition*, n.d, 68.

<sup>27</sup> “*Poniente*.” *Chus Gutiérrez & Revolution Lab: Detalle*, <http://www.chusgutierrez.es/es/directora/detalle/obra/poniente/>, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Raquel Vega-Durán, “United Spains? North African Immigration and the Question of Spanish Identity in ‘*Poniente*,’” *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2013, 174.

multicultural place with people of different identities which changes the traditional idea of what community means. It is now flexible, fluid and open to those who may have not been accepted in the past. The depiction of La Isla in the film shows it to be a very divided place but also a place of understanding, acceptance and love. La Isla's conflicting identities are representative of the contrasting attitudes towards immigrants in the film; they are accepted and excluded by the same people. This shows the wide range of opinions about immigrants but also the potential for these opinions to evolve over time. The way in which Gutiérrez portrays the shifting nature of identities alters how Spain and Spaniards view themselves and their national identities, while also asking important questions about future definitions of community.

## Chapter 2: A Return to Roots—Immigration, the Landscape and Adopted Family in *Retorno a Hansala*

*Retorno a Hansala* (2008) is another film directed by Chus Gutiérrez highlighting the experiences of North African immigrants in Spain. *Retorno a Hansala* was nominated for the Goya Award for Best Original Screenplay in 2009 and also won awards at multiple international film festivals. It is partially based on the real-life drowning of 37 Moroccan migrants on October 23, 2003 in Rota, Cádiz in Spain, one of the worst incidents of migrants drowning in Spanish history. The film follows Martín (José Luís García), a funeral parlor director who helps the police identify and recover bodies that have washed up on the beach in his town of Los Barrios in Cádiz, Spain. He finds a phone number in the pocket of one of the drowning victims and decides to call it. The man's (Rashid) sister, Leila (Farah Hamed), answers the phone, and she comes to claim his body and bring it back to their hometown of Hansala, Morocco to bury him, so the rest of their family can say goodbye to him and lay him to rest. Martín decides to travel to Morocco with her, and as the two become closer, he comes to better understand the difficulties and struggles of immigrants who come to Spain.

*Retorno a Hansala* received many positive reviews and critiques. One critic wrote, “Chus Gutiérrez treats cultural shock with exquisite sensibility and portrays [it] with realism and great respect to the lives of those on both sides of the strait. She has constructed a simple plot that serves...[to] show reality, weighing personal motives as a portrait of distinct societies.”<sup>29</sup> Gutiérrez treats this sensitive subject respectfully in order to show the realities of undocumented

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<sup>29</sup> Babel, “Retorno a Hansala, De Chus Gutiérrez.” *Puerta De Babel*, 30 Mar. 2009, <https://babel36.wordpress.com/2009/03/30/retorno-a-hansala-de-chus-gutierrez/>, 1.



immigration to Spain for North African immigrants. She acknowledges the cultural differences between Spain and North Africa, while also bringing Martín and Leila together despite their external differences. Another review notes, "...Chus Gutiérrez makes us confront and look at the life we have on the other side of the strait with our eyes as first class citizens. She shows us lives that are more simple, loaded with scarcities, but in turn, filled with values and humanity."<sup>30</sup> All of Gutiérrez's choices in *Retorno a Hansala* are intentional and aim to create a clear and accurate depiction of life in Hansala as well as the harsh realities of immigrating to Spain. Gutiérrez confirms this in an interview at the Festival Internacional de Cine de Valladolid in 2008, "What I really wanted to do was to go to the place of origin and see how life really was on all sides."<sup>31</sup> Gutiérrez went to Hansala in order to create a film that depicted life in Hansala and North African immigration to Spain accurately and honestly. *Retorno a Hansala* examines the nature of discrimination faced by North African immigrants to Spain through the themes of the beach and the landscape and the meaning of adopted family and community.

### **The Beach as a Place of Death, Exit and Entry in *Retorno a Hansala***

The landscape is an important theme throughout *Retorno a Hansala*, just as in *Poniente*. The beach in particular is significant, because it is where the deceased immigrants, including Rashid, are found by the Spanish authorities and first responders at the beginning of the film. Fiona Noble writes in her article "Beyond the Sea: Seascapes and Migration in Contemporary Spanish Cinema," "...the film commences with a dramatic credit sequence in which the sea

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<sup>30</sup> Javi Álvarez, and Revista Digital, "Retorno a Hansala, El Otro Lado Del Estrecho, Visto Con Nuestros Ojos." *LaRepúblicaCultural.es - Revista Digital*, 25 Mar. 2009, <https://larepublicacultural.es/article1517,1>.

<sup>31</sup> Seminci 2008. 53ª edición, Rueda de prensa de 'Retorno a Hansala' " *YouTube*, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nELMYtu\\_MhY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nELMYtu_MhY).

appears to claim the life of a migrant, specifically we later surmise, Leila's brother, who drowns while view of the Spanish coast."<sup>32</sup> In the opening sequence, we can see only the water and the bubbles as an unknown migrant is drowning, but the dead body, along with the bodies of other immigrants, eventually becomes visible to the spectator when they wash up on the beach. In a broader sense, the beach and the ocean are representations of the cycle of life. Some migrants survive the trip across the ocean, and when they reach the shore, it becomes the start of a new beginning and life for them. However, for those who do not survive, the ocean takes away this chance at a new life. It is both beautiful and deadly, as it can give life but also take it away.

Noble writes, "*Retorno a Hansala* not only immediately positions the beach as a site of death but also makes visible the dead body of the migrant. That the beach is the site in which the body of the migrant becomes visible...[and] is a site of grotesque corporeal exposure..."<sup>33</sup> Immigrant deaths can no longer be ignored, and they must take responsibility for what is going on. The bodies of migrants are now visible and are no longer hidden by the water. She adds, "...*Retorno a Hansala* underlines the way in which it is often through death and specifically corpses strewn across Western beaches, that migrants become visible, not just in Spanish cinema but also in Spanish society more generally, and indeed, beyond, given the current pervasiveness of the migration crisis."<sup>34</sup> The migration crisis can no longer be ignored, and the "Other" can no longer be pushed to the outskirts of society. As we can see in the film, the Spanish authorities are forced to confront immigration issues directly and find solutions to the problem that they can no longer

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<sup>32</sup> Fiona Noble, "Beyond the Sea: Seascapes and Migration in Contemporary Spanish Cinema." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, vol. 95, no. 6, 2018, 643.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 643.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 645.

ignore. Understanding and acceptance of different cultures and people of different backgrounds can be achieved through experiences like the one Martín and Leila have, and hate can lessen or evaporate. The migrants can be seen as human beings trying to find a better life for themselves and their families, not malicious invaders trying to take away or corrupt Spanish culture and values. They can become a part of the culture of their adopted country, as so many already have.



### **Martín on the beach<sup>35</sup>**

The theme of death is also present when Martín and Leila reach Hansala. During the second half of the film, Leila, Martín and her younger brother Saïd, drive from village to village with clothes of the seventeen other immigrants that washed up on the beach with Rashid to see if their family members could identify their bodies. Their reactions to the clothes is very powerful, “In order to visually reinforce the social commentary, Gutiérrez incorporates two recurrent motifs that function as metaphors for the immigrants’ precariousness, anonymity, and lack of identity: drowned bodies or clothes floating or sinking underwater and the hung or displayed

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<sup>35</sup> “Retorno a Hansala,” Andalucía Destino de Cine, April 3, 2018, <http://andaluciadestinodecine.com/pelicula/retorno-a-hansala/?lang=en>

clothes of the deceased.”<sup>36</sup> The immigrants’ identities are now confined to what they were wearing when they died, showing how desperate and how dangerous their situation is. It also reinforces the idea that their individual identities do not matter; who they are is defined by their larger community and also by those who have come before them. They are only seen as another statistic and not a person. Their families have no body to bury sometimes, because of the cost of repatriation, and all that is left of them are the clothes they were wearing.

### **Leila and Martin’s Journey to Hansala: “Road Movies” and Self Exploration**

As the film progresses, Martin grows closer to Leila, and he begins to see her as a person and not a way to make more money. They face many challenges during their journey to Hansala, including problems at border control and their van’s windshield being broken and then stolen by the thieves, but these struggles only bring them closer together. Leila’s family become Martín’s adopted family and community as his own family life back in Spain is falling apart due to his impending divorce, “Leila’s moral center contrasts sharply with Carmen’s infidelity and their daughter Alba’s unconcerned consumerism, making her a more appropriate partner.”<sup>37</sup> As Martín’s own family is falling apart, he searches for those who will understand him and accept him, and he finds these people in Leila and her family. He and his wife, Carmen, have grown apart and no longer want to be together, and although he has a relationship with his daughter, Alba, it is not as strong as it could be due to their circumstances. Indeed, “...stress is placed on

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<sup>36</sup> Isolina Ballesteros, “Border-Crossing Road Movies: Inverted Odysseys and Roads to Dystopia,” in *Immigration Cinema in the New Europe* (Chicago, IL: Intellect, the University of Chicago Press, 2015), 185-6.

<sup>37</sup> Julia C Barnes, “Immigrants and National Anxieties in 21st-Century Spanish Film.” *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, vol. 43, no. 2, Mar. 2019, 12.

Martín's dysfunctional and isolated existence: he is virtually living in his office in the funeral parlor following the discovery of his wife's affair, blamed by her on his workaholic tendencies. His chaotic personal life and financial troubles work against the idea of Spain as embodying an unmitigatedly desirable version of modernity."<sup>38</sup> Martín has a very unhappy existence in Spain, he has lost those who he once called his family, and he has immersed himself in his work in order to try to forget and avoid his problems, even though his business is having financial difficulties. Leila and her community live much simpler lives, and despite Martín's economic and social privilege, they are much happier than he is. Once he is able to spend more time with them, although on the outside their way of life may seem wrong for Martín, it is perhaps a better fit for him than his own family.

Martín is adopted into Leila's family and community, because they are thankful to him for bringing Rashid home. In the article, "Seeing (as) the Eroticized and Exoticized Other Spanish Im/migration Cinema: A Critical Look at the (De) Criminalization of Migrants and Impunity of Hegemonic Perpetrators," Maureen Tobin Stanley writes, "...Martín (the male, privileged, European funeral home proprietor) comes to identify with Leila (the female, migrant fish factory worker)...he ceases to view her and her culture as exotic or Other."<sup>39</sup> Martín realizes that Leila and her community are not so different from his, and he comes to respect and admire

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<sup>38</sup> Hayley Rabanal, "Rethinking Integration in Contemporary Spanish Film: Convivencia and the Cosmopolitan Outlook in Chus Gutiérrez's *Retorno a Hansala*(2008)," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, Apr. 2014, 150.

<sup>39</sup> Maureen Tobin Stanley, "Seeing (as) the Eroticized and Exoticized Other in Spanish Im/Migration Cinema: A Critical Look at the (De)Criminalization of Migrants and Impunity of Hegemonic Perpetrators," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, vol. 43, no. 2, Mar. 2019, 19.

her. Her family is incredibly grateful to him for bringing Rashid's body back to Hansala, and they give him clothes and food as well as a place to sleep. The windshield of his van is broken by thieves during their journey to Hansala, and Leila's dad tries to fix it by covering the open space with plastic, but when Martín can't see through it to drive, they take him to a mechanic to get it fixed. Stanley adds, "Martín's authentic gratitude is evidence that he understands the depth of his host's intentions and also the difference of his perspective. The result of the plastic windshield through which one cannot see is the metaphorical and paradoxical seeing—that is, understanding, how another sees. Through the empathetic connection, judgement is not only suspended, but also eliminated."<sup>40</sup> Martín's windshield breaking and spending time with Leila and her family opens his ways to a different way of life and a different culture, which he no longer judges but accepts because he cares about Leila and her family. The death of immigrants becomes personal to Martín and something that is no longer just part of his job. He understands the reasons why people are immigrating, and he now cares about some of the people who are doing so. He becomes part of their community, "Martín's desire to join the fasting and efforts to speak a few words of Arabic, together with his growing ease among, and compassion for, the inhabitants of Hansala, suggest that he, and others like him, have to re-educated into the different recognition of the other."<sup>41</sup> He no longer sees Leila, her family and their community as "Other" but as kind people who must make impossible and heartbreaking choices in order to survive.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Hayley Rabanal, "Rethinking Integration in Contemporary Spanish Film: Convivencia and the Cosmopolitan Outlook in Chus Gutiérrez's *Retorno a Hansala*(2008)," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, Apr. 2014, 150.

Martín’s journey is twofold: one part is the physical journey to Hansala and the second is a journey of acceptance and growth which centers on the use of the word “retorno” or “return” in the title of the film. Rabanal writes, “The multi-layered notion of “return” in the film also functions to question the inherently criminalizing notion of “illegal” immigration, and instead situates irregular entry within a more cosmopolitan understanding of the human rights of every individual regardless of State citizenship...”<sup>42</sup> The word “return” has many meanings in the film and reminds of the audience of the privilege of mobility. Martín has more mobility than those immigrating to Spain, and his journey is one of self-discovery, not survival. He has the privilege to be able to travel, because he wants to, not because he has to, and his national and racial mobility and privilege play a large role in this journey being possible. He is able to travel to a new environment in order to change unhappy and undesirable aspect of his life, which speaks to his ability to move freely in and out of different spaces. Martín becomes part of the effort to rebuild after a tragedy occurred. His journey to Hansala is one of personal growth but also one that enables the growth and rebuilding of a community. Through their interactions with one another, both Martín and the community in Hansala grow, evolve and change, creating a mutually respectful relationship between them. This relationship also benefits the one between Leila and Martín and allows them to overcome their differences and become friends.

*Retorno to Hansala* is framed as a road or border crossing movie which often are “... inspired by the quintessential American genre that emerged in the 1960s as a vehicle of anti-

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 144.

genre sensibilities and countercultural rebellion...”<sup>43</sup> Martín’s journey is his own form of rebellion; he leaves behind everything he knows to travel to an unknown place with essentially a stranger. He is forced to make changes and to rebel against his mundane and familiar former life. Road movies also deal with issues “...of ‘home,’ be it the escape from it, the search for a new one or the tension between ‘home’ and ‘away,’ turning the trope of the road and vehicles into peripheral homes, places of semi-belonging and of transformation structuring its absence.”<sup>44</sup> This idea of home and return aligns with Martín’s search for a new community and finding a place where he belongs. He wants to transform his unhappy existence, and his journey to Hansala allows him to do this. The film, “...also works with road movie conventions as it presents a journey of self-exploration, revelation, and realization for both travelers while friendship and possibly romance develops between them...”<sup>45</sup> The trip to Hansala is an eye-opening experience for both Martín and Leila, and it changes their perceptions of each other and of themselves. It allows them to come to terms with the differences that divide but also connect and unite them. Ballesteros writes, “As in many road movies, the trip turns out to be an experience of learning and self-exploration for the two characters, who embody the dichotomy of the Moroccan immigrant and the Spanish national and the prejudices each group holds towards the other.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Isolina Ballesteros, “Border-Crossing Road Movies: Inverted Odysseys and Roads to Dystopia,” in *Immigration Cinema in the New Europe* (Chicago, IL: Intellect, the University of Chicago Press, 2015), 178.

<sup>44</sup> Verena Berger, “ ‘Going Home’: Mobility and Return Journeys in French and Spanish Road Movies,” *Transnational Cinemas*, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 170.

<sup>45</sup> Isolina Ballesteros, “Border-Crossing Road Movies: Inverted Odysseys and Roads to Dystopia,” in *Immigration Cinema in the New Europe* (Chicago, IL: Intellect, the University of Chicago Press, 2015), 184.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.



Martín and Leila recognize, through their journey to Hansala, that although they come from different backgrounds, they are on the same journey, and they need each other in order to complete it. Their prejudices and preconceived notions of each other fall away over the course of the film, and what is left is mutual respect and appreciation.



**Leila and Martín share an emotional moment in *Hansala***<sup>47</sup>

### **The Role of Women in *Retorno to Hansala***

Stereotypical ideas about Muslim women are questioned and examined both through the character of Leila and her connection with Martín throughout the film. Rabanal writes, “In Leila’s case, her positive characterization certainly counters common stereotypes about Muslim women as submissive, dependent or repressed...”<sup>48</sup> Leila is a strong woman who loves her

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<sup>47</sup> “Retorno a Hansala,” Andalucía Destino de Cine, April 3, 2018, <http://andaluciadestinodecine.com/pelicula/retorno-a-hansala/?lang=en>

<sup>48</sup> Hayley Rabanal, “Rethinking Integration in Contemporary Spanish Film: Convivencia and the Cosmopolitan Outlook in Chus Gutiérrez’s *Retorno a Hansala* (2008),” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, Apr. 2014, 152.

family and wants to help them, and she is Martín's guide in Hansala. Although she has a marginalized position in society, she adapts and thrives in her adopted country. During their journey to Hansala, Martín must rely on Leila to translate and for food, clothing and water.

Rabanal writes:

...Leila, who in no way sees her own culture as inferior, provides a robust counter-discourse on immigration to the one associated with Martín...Leila's fluent spoken and written Spanish – at the beginning of the film, we see her refusing assistance to complete a money transfer form – also enable her to have an agency sometimes denied to filmic depictions of immigrants. Indeed, in Morocco, far from being reliant on Martín, he is largely dependent on her.<sup>49</sup>

Leila's independent life in Spain defies stereotypes about Muslim women and women in general. Martín relies on Leila for everything when they are in Hansala, because he does not speak Arabic and is unfamiliar with the area. Gutiérrez's portrayal of Leila shows someone with strong morals who is committed to helping her family and those she cares about, which grows to include Martín. She does not degrade or dehumanize Leila by using her as a sexual object but instead shows her as someone who has more depth to her than just the way that she looks, "As we get deeper into the life of the village and its inhabitants, we learn more about Leila's sense of family duty, her upbeat personality, and her feelings by means of effective reaction shots, closeup and medium long shots. She is...an individual whose story and emotions are revealed by an omniscient narrator."<sup>50</sup> Leila is an incredibly important piece to the story of *Retorno a Hansala*, and Gutiérrez highlights this throughout the film by showing her reality both in Spain and in

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>50</sup>Fatima Serrat, " 'My Home is Your Home' / The Maghreb Intersectionality in *Retorno a Hansala* by Chus Gutiérrez," In *Transnational Orientalisms in Contemporary Spanish and Latin American Cinema*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing , 2016, 60.

Morocco. She is not just another immigrant but someone whose story and perspective is incredibly valuable and important.

### ***Retorno a Hansala* Conclusion**

*Retorno a Hansala* teaches lessons about community, acceptance and self-exploration. It shows us that we are not so different from one another, and our biggest prejudices are most often false. Leila and Martín's journey to Hansala shows that mutual acceptance and understanding is possible but also that leaving your familiar surroundings is sometimes the only way to gain clarity. The border crossing and road movie aspects of film show the importance of place to identity but also how changes in environment can create shifts in identity. Martín and Leila both grow and change over the course of the film, and journey together is a part of this. As Martín's family life falls apart, he is able to find a new community in Leila and her family, even though their lives are so different from his. They give him hope that he will not always be so alone, and that it is possible for him to find those who accept him for who he is. Gutiérrez redefines the viewer's perception of what it means to be part of a community but also what it means to be Spanish. She shows the flexibility and fluidity of these identities and how important their identities are to society's view of them. Those who wash up on the beach are more than a statistic and the clothes that they leave behind; they are people whose hopes and dreams have been washed away by the ocean.

## Chapter 3: Immigration, Discrimination, Community and Border Crossing—The Story of *Las Cartas de Alou*

Montxo Armendáriz was born Juan Ramón Armendáriz Barrios on January 27, 1949 in Olleta, Navarra in Spain. He is a Spanish film director and screenwriter who has won many awards for his work. *Las Cartas de Alou* (1990) won Best Film at the San Sebastian Film Festival in 1990 also won the Goya Award and Spanish Guild Award for Best Screenplay in 1990. The film tells the story of a Senegalese man named Alou who immigrates to Spain in search of work and a better life. He faces discrimination due to his race, national origin and legal status. *Las Cartas de Alou* is framed by four letters he sends to friends and family, which tell the story of the challenges he faces while trying to navigate a new country. Film critics were receptive to the film and praised Armendáriz's storytelling and treatment of difficult and controversial themes. Anne Kieffer writes, "*Letters from Alou* is an engaging and playful picture of the illegal immigrant in a European Union country. If the basic problems - difficulties of adaptation of the illegal workers, victims of racism and exploitation in a rich country - remain posed, Montxo Armendáriz tackles them without an ounce of miserabilism and complacency, moderating with harmony the force of direct cinema and the ethics of the documentary investigation."<sup>51</sup> Armendáriz tells Alou's story in a direct way and does not avoid the challenges faced by immigrants in a new and unfamiliar place. The film takes on an almost documentary-like quality because of the realistic situations it portrays. Another critic, Didier Roth-Bettini praises Armendáriz's portrayal of Alou, writing that, "Montxo Armendáriz...[makes] Alou our

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<sup>51</sup> Anne Kieffer, "Lettres D'Alou," *Jeune Cinema*, n.d, 42 .

guide in...a country which, for the past few years...has been the confluence of migrations.”<sup>52</sup>

Alou and his story are the focus of the film, and they allow the viewer to understand the complexities of immigration policy and the often negative or discriminatory attitudes towards undocumented immigrants from North Africa in Spain. Although this film is a work of fiction based on upon real events and occurrences, “...it also served a political function. Armendáriz used his film to help promote the interests of an organization that fights racism (including against gypsies) called SOS Racismo.”<sup>53</sup> Armendáriz wanted to use *Las Cartas de Alou* to not only tell Alou’s story but also bring to light the real life struggles of immigrants and other marginalized communities in Spain. He says in an interview that, “For me, the film is not as harsh as the reality that I lived, but I knew that if I exaggerated and accentuated the most xenophobic aspects, I was in danger of not seeing it as a reflection of reality...I was more interested in hidden racists, because I think they are the most widespread and where the racist behaviors of our society are based. They are the root cause of clearly racist attitudes.”<sup>54</sup> Armendáriz’s interest is the subtle xenophobia and racism towards immigrants in Spain through the lens of Alou and the immigrant community, and his goal is to tell their stories in the most realistic and accurate way possible. *Las Cartas de Alou* is a story of mobility, identity, adopted and created community that highlights the experience of North African immigrants in Spain.

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<sup>52</sup> Didier Roth-Bettini, “Lettres D’Alou,” *La Revue De Cinema: Image Et Son* 37 (1990), 63.

<sup>53</sup> Diana Q. Burkhardt, “The Disposable Immigrant: The Aesthetics Of Waste In *Las Cartas De Alou*,” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 153–65.

<sup>54</sup> Jesús Angulo, Concha Gómez, Carlos F. Heredero, and José Luis Rebordinos, *Secretos De La Elocuencia: El Cine De Montxo Armendáriz*, Donostia: Filmoteca Vasca, 1998, 254.

## **Border Crossings and Changing Identities in *Las Cartas de Alou***

Social and geographic mobility as well as border crossing are important aspects to Alou's journey to Spain. The crossing of borders creates identity changes in Alou, both interior and exterior, as he adapts to a new culture and way of living. The immigrant workers, like Alou and others in his community, do not have social mobility and are often stuck in their marginalized position in Spanish society, which makes the adjustment to living in a new place and culture much harder. The journey to Spain is often long, difficult and expensive, and the immigrants' geographic mobility is limited to going to a place where they can find work in the informal economy. In addition, they do not always find the opportunities they thought they would, as their legal status and discrimination makes it harder for them to find jobs.

The beginning of the film shows Alou along with other immigrants traveling to Spain in a "patera" or small boat. There is a storm while they are on the boat, and it almost capsizes due to high waves and rain. These type of crossings are dangerous but necessary in order for them to find a better life in Spain. María Lourdes Casas writes in the book *Border Visions: Identity and Diaspora in Film*, "The crossing is not only a geographical border but also one of identity. This border separates Alou as an individual, with a distinct identity, personal history, and social context in his homeland, from Alou as an immigrant in Spain, subject to brutal conditions, racial prejudices, and a collective identity an undocumented 'Other.'"<sup>55</sup> The border crossing and Alou's journey to Spain are symbolic, because they represent a shift and change in his identity. He goes from a respected member of his community in Senegal to an immigrant worker who is discarded

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<sup>55</sup> Maria Casas, "What the Images Cannot Show—The Letters in Montxo Armendáriz's Letters from Alou," In *Border Visions: Identity and Diaspora in Film*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2013, 222.

and marginalized. This is shown throughout the film in many different ways, including Alou's interactions with Spaniards and their treatment of him. He feels that he will never be seen as truly part of the community, even though he has adopted some Spanish cultural values, has Spanish friends and a girlfriend. Alou does make attempts to fit in, however:

Alou is aware that he needs to know the language to work, and he makes great efforts to learn it. However, when he tells his parents about the deep-rooted Spanish custom of socializing in bars, the film reveals that this is cultural knowledge he possesses, but does not put into practice. Alou may recognize the custom, but neither nor any other Senegalese in the film adopt this habit—all continue to drink tea at home, following their culture's tradition.<sup>56</sup>

In many ways, Alou is still in touch with his culture's traditions, and these traditions and those he has adopted during his new life in Spain blend together to create his new identity. Despite his efforts to assimilate into Spanish society, he cannot move socially or economically upward, because he is undocumented, and he is legally kept in poverty and on the margins of society, even though by the end of the film, he speaks fluent Spanish. When he tries to get citizenship or documentation, he is denied even though his Spanish employer vouches for him. He travels around to various Spanish cities doing different jobs. He does not have the privilege of relaxing or feeling comfortable, because in some ways, he will always be an outsider, no matter how well he speaks Spanish, how many Spanish friends he has or how integrated he is into the community. His identity will never be fixed in Spain, because it is the result of many different experiences and aspects of his life. Alou's story in his own words comes through in the four letters that he writes over the course of the film and demonstrates to the audience the multicultural nature of his new identity.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 223.

## Language and Letter Writing: Alou's Story In His Own Words

Alou writes four letters to his family back in Senegal and to his friend Mulai over the course of the film. Armendáriz says of the letters:

The first letter served to tell why he [Alou] comes to Spain and how that initial journey begins, which is marked by the hope of finding his friend [Mulai]... I wanted it to be a reflection of that brutal contrast. I used the two middle letters as components of transition to provide information to his family and so the spectator knew through the letters about the evolution and journey of the character. The last one is used as a synthesis between what happened and the new journey that will begin.<sup>57</sup>

These letters help the audience understand the plot of the film and serve as a reminder of Alou's past, present and future. As they are from Alou's perspective and relay different information to different people, they show his desire to represent his experience in his own way, "Furthermore, the four letters denote Alou's command of various narrative registers; they carefully filter information, depending on to whom they are addressed; the letters sent to his parents are formal and intimate in contrast with the ones sent to his friend Mulai, in which he reflects on his social and cultural experiences as an immigrant."<sup>58</sup> Alou tells Mulai a separate version of the story to the one he tells his parents, because he does not want his parents to worry about him. These letters are incredibly important to the film, because Alou tells his own story in his own words without the filter of anyone else's perspective.

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<sup>57</sup>Jesús Angulo, Concha Gómez, Carlos F. Heredero, and José Luis Rebordinos, *Secretos De La Elocuencia: El Cine De Montxo Armendáriz*, Donostia: Filmoteca Vasca, 1998, 251.

<sup>58</sup> Maria Casas, "What the Images Cannot Show—The Letters in Montxo Armendáriz's Letters from Alou," In *Border Visions: Identity and Diaspora in Film*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2013, 221.



The first letter Alou writes to his friend Mulai, who is already living in Spain and married to a Spanish woman, telling him that he is leaving Senegal to come to Spain to try to find work. He says that he can help his family and give them more financial stability by doing this. Alou states that others he knows have done this (like Mulai), and it has benefited them. However, he talks about his parents missing him and his mother not wanting him to leave. This letter shows his mixed emotions about leaving his home and coming to Spain but also his need to do so in order to create what he hopes will be a better life for himself and his family.

The second letter Alou writes to his parents is to tell them how he is doing in Spain. He starts out by asking them mundane questions about the amount of rain they have gotten that year and the harvest. However, he also tries to reassure his parents about his new life in Spain and eliminates the details that show how difficult his transition has been. Casas writes that, “However, the content of this second letter introduces interesting aspects in Alou’s assimilation process. First, to avoid causing them pain, Alou lies to his parents and says he is working without problems. However, the images associated with the letter tell a different story...Alou selling cheap watches, bracelets, and other trinkets at the bars and nightclubs in Madrid and running from the police.”<sup>59</sup> What Alou writes and what the film shows paint a different picture of his life in Spain than the one he tells his parents about in the letter. He reassures them that everything is fine, and that he is doing well, while in reality, he is struggling and cannot find a stable job due to his immigration status. He feels that his fabrications will assuage his parents’ worries and to some extent his own. By creating a reality where everything is okay, he hopes that this will become his actual reality.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 223.

The third letter is one that Alou writes to his parents. He asks after them and their health, and then he goes on to talk about his job, which during this part of the film is working in a factory sewing clothes. He also talks about living with his friend Mulai and his wife. Casas writes:

There are, however, other issues in this third letter not rendered visible by the film's images. These center on Alou's stories involving Mulai: his exploitation of Alou and his fellow Africans in addition to the dangers of the immigrants' overidentification with the dominant group in their host land. Mulai has jumped over racial borders, as he behaves, in Alou's words, like a white man, using the same racial insults used by Spaniards in reference to Africans (*moreno*, black skinned).<sup>60</sup>

Mulai and Alou's friendship is an interesting part of the film and connects to the theme of assimilation. Speaking Spanish and understanding Spanish cultural values is important to immigrants' survival and success in their adopted country. However, Mulai has assimilated to a point where he looks down on those who are in the same position he was once in. It's almost as if he forgot the struggles and challenges he went through, because his life is "easier" now. He wants forget his old life and completely assimilate, because he knows it will be more beneficial to him to do so. Casas adds that, "The letters, which have, until now, been the register of intimate experience and memories of his homeland, are no longer at a disconnect from the visual register, reinforcing commentary on Alou's working conditions, and exploitation and erasing the border between the two."<sup>61</sup> Alou's words and thoughts have blended together with the images in the film and are no longer just thoughts in his head. He can no longer hide from his reality or lie to his parents anymore but is faced with the realities of discrimination and racism. He realizes that,

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 224-25.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 225.

in many ways, he is alone in his experience and even those who are supposed to be part of his community do not try to help others who are now in the same situation they once were in.

Alou's fourth and final letter "...reflects on his stay in Spain, characterized by alienation and persecution because of racial prejudices."<sup>62</sup> He writes about being deported and the lack of acceptance and tolerance in Spain, as well as the racism and discrimination he faced there. Casas writes:

During this reflection on intolerance, background images shows a group of illegal immigrants exiting a police station and being forced into a law enforcement van that will take them to the airport. These images are well-known to Spanish viewers and do not require explanation, so rather than verbalizing this scene through Alou's letter, Armendáriz uses the text of the letter to emphasize his social criticism by adding the layers of Alou's intimate reflections about his innocence, on top of the stereotyping criminalization.<sup>63</sup>

Alou's reflection on his time in Spain shows the difficulties of life there for undocumented immigrants but also how common these struggles are and how often they occur. Armendáriz critiques and criticizes Spanish immigration policy through Alou's fictionalized story and experience. This letter also shows the circular nature of the film, "In fact, the last scene portrays Alou on a North African beach, paying a man to help him crossing over to Europe for a second time, starting the cycle of immigration again."<sup>64</sup> Alou wants to return to Spain and be with Carmen, his Spanish girlfriend but also be able to support himself and his family, despite the intolerance he faced there. His reflection shows the nuanced relationship between Spain and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 226.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 226.

Africa and his commitment to helping his family. Alou's experience in Spain is very similar to the experiences of other immigrants, and it gives them a community of people to rely on and relate to.



**Alou being apprehended by the Spanish police<sup>65</sup>**

### **The Informal economy, Waste and Community in *Las Cartas de Alou***

The immigrants in *Las Cartas de Alou* are part of a marginalized community of workers in the informal economy. It is clear throughout the film that their work is undervalued, and they are disposed of when the next group of workers is available. Diana Burkhart compares the situation of the immigrants in *Las Cartas de Alou* to waste disposal, “The immigrants in the film *Las cartas de Alou* are sometimes immersed in places that are designated for waste, as if they themselves were objects that have been consumed and expelled by Spanish society.”<sup>66</sup> Many of the immigrants’ employers do not value their contribution to their work or business, and these jobs involve waste in various forms. Because of their legal status and lack of education, it is much more difficult for undocumented immigrants, like the ones portrayed in *Las Cartas de*

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<sup>65</sup> “Sánchez-Mesa Martínez, Domingo, “CVC. Inmigración: Nuevas Lenguas, Nuevos Hablantes, Nuevas Perspectivas. El Análisis De Las Imágenes De La Inmigración En El Cine Como Estrategia En El Aula De E/LE, Por(3 De 5).” Instituto Cervantes, December 12, 2016. [https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca\\_ele/inmigracion/didactica\\_inmigrantes2/sanchez-mesa03\\_4.htm](https://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/inmigracion/didactica_inmigrantes2/sanchez-mesa03_4.htm).

<sup>66</sup> Diana Q. Burkhart, “The Disposable Immigrant: The Aesthetics Of Waste In *Las Cartas De Alou*,” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 156-57.

*Alou*, to get more desirable or safer jobs. Because they do the least desirable jobs, they are viewed as disposable, because there will always be someone who wants the job if they leave. Burkhart explains that, “As there is a surplus of laborers and the availability of work is unpredictable, the immigrants are viewed as expendable commodities. Armendáriz emphasizes this perspective by capturing the hoards of immigrants surrounding the foremen. Some of the immigrants attempt to jump into the work truck before it has even stopped moving, thus underscoring their desperation for work.”<sup>67</sup> The immigrants need the work more than their employers need them, and this creates an imbalance of power. The employers are able to hire a select number of workers and dispose of them after a job is done, while this loss of a job impacts the immigrants’ ability to eat and pay bills. In the film, the workers often live together in cramped and small spaces, because this is all they can afford, which does not give them privacy or their own space. For example, “Moncef [Alou’s friend], only able to find temporary jobs in the informal economy, constantly travels back and forth between Spain and his native country and thus is figuratively consumed and regurgitated by the Spanish economy. Similarly, Alou, constituting a surplus or expendable commodity in the Spanish economy, becomes symbolically absorbed into the waste of Spanish society when he takes up residence in its refuse.”<sup>68</sup> Moncef and Alou do not have many choices in the work that they do and must rely on the informal economy. The work they do is thankless, difficult, in unhygienic places, and they are seen as disposable by their employers. At the end of the film, Moncef and Alou find themselves on the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 157.

same “patera” heading back to Spain. This shows both the desperation of undocumented workers and how disposable they are to the Spanish economy. Burkhart writes:

...immigrants are identified with filth and “match” their environment, then one must ask how and why they (and their physical surroundings) came to be that way. In the most literal sense, the poor hygiene of the immigrants in this film is a direct reflection of their economic marginalization. As they are unable to find regular jobs, it is difficult for them to afford decent living conditions that would enable them to maintain better hygiene.<sup>69</sup>

They depend on a society and on an informal economy that does not accept them but that they need in order to survive. They must live in unsanitary living conditions and are kept in poverty by legal status. The immigrants in *Las Cartas de Alou* must find ways to assimilate and become part of Spanish society, even if it does not completely accept them, “Facing a cold, unwelcoming environment, as much in terms of the weather as the cool reception he receives from many Spaniards, Alou strives to find physical and emotional warmth. Just as a broken heater may be transformed into a purveyor of physical warmth, the work at the dump could become a pathway to acceptance into Spanish society, first in legal terms and eventually in social terms as well.”<sup>70</sup> Alou finds his community in Spain through the other immigrants that he meets and his girlfriend, Carmen. He finds work and an employer willing to vouch for him to get citizenship. He learns Spanish and about Spanish customs and traditions, he tries to become “more Spanish” and comply with social norms. By assimilating to Spanish society in these ways, he hopes that one day he will fully accepted.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 161.



**Alou and Moncef** <sup>71</sup>

### ***Las Cartas de Alou Conclusion***

*Las Cartas de Alou* is a film about acceptance, tolerance and created and adopted community. It shows the struggles and challenges of undocumented immigrants and workers in Spain and their journey towards cultural and social assimilation. It is clear from this film and others like it that Spain is becoming more and more multicultural. This means that different definitions of what it means to be Spanish will continue to change, evolve and hopefully the idea of a more multicultural and intersectional Spain will become more accepted. Armendáriz writes:

...I wanted to synthesize a basic idea about the problem of emigration: that by the many laws that are put in place, by the immigration police that watch the coast, by many intercepted boats... I don't know how it will solve the problem. The solution has to be of another nature, because as long as they continue to go hungry and are miserable in their countries, migrants will enter

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<sup>71</sup>Luis E. Hernández, “Las Cartas De Alou (Montxo Armendáriz, 1990),” *Las cartas de Alou* (Montxo Armendáriz, 1990) (Blogger, August 29, 2018), <http://imbgdb.blogspot.com/2018/08/las-cartas-de-alou-montxo-armendariz.html>.

once and a hundred times where they expect to find food and work.<sup>72</sup>

Armendáriz shares his worry that harsh immigration policies and a focus on politics may not be the way to create a harmonious relationship between immigrants and the Spanish authorities. Acceptance, tolerance and education as well as policies to help migrants is the only way that this issue can be handled peacefully and with regard to human life. Armendáriz hopes that films like *Las Cartas de Alou* can be part of that solution; the representation of immigrants in a positive light can help to change people's perspectives.

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<sup>72</sup> Jesús Angulo, Concha Gómez, Carlos F. Heredero , and José Luis Rebordinos, *Secretos De La Elocuencia: El Cine De Montxo Armendáriz*, Donostia: Filmoteca Vasca, 1998, 251.



## Chapter 4: The Representation of Immigrant Masculinity in Contemporary Spanish Cinema through Imanol Uribe's *Bwana*

*Bwana* (1996) was directed by Imanol Uribe, a Spanish director of Basque origins born in El Salvador on February 28, 1950. It won the Concha de Oro and the Jury Prize at the San Sebastián International Film Festival in 1996 and the award for the Best Score at Toulouse Cinespaña in 1997. It was also nominated for the Goya Awards for Best New Actor, Best Film and Best Director in 1997. The film is based on the 1992 play by Igancio de Moral, *La mirada del hombre oscuro*, which tells a similar story. *Bwana* focuses on a xenophobic Spanish family (Maria Barranco, Andrés Parajes, Alejandro Martinez and Andrea Granero) who encounter an undocumented African immigrant, Ombasi, (Emilio Buale) while on a road trip to a remote beach. They have a dangerous run in with some neo-Nazi skinheads camping on the beach who accuse Dori, the wife and mother, (Maria Barranco) of sleeping with Ombasi and threaten to castrate him. The film ends with the family fleeing from the beach and refusing to rescue Ombasi from his attackers and leaving him to his certain death. In a review of *Bwana* in *Variety*, David Rooney writes, "Asking an audience to go with a film that addresses a subject as serious as xenophobia by starting out as a broad comedy and gradually morphing into confrontational drama requires a much more sophisticated mechanisms than the ones employed in 'Bwana.'" <sup>73</sup> Rooney writes that the way the film addresses sophisticated topics reinforces stereotypes about Neo-nazis and immigrants and does not do justice to this serious subject. The film, although it has some humorous and softer moments, relays a serious message about power, immigration and

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<sup>73</sup> David Rooney, "Bwana." *Variety*, October 14, 1996. <https://variety.com/1996/film/reviews/bwana-1200447348/>, 1.

race relations. *Bwana* addresses the themes of undocumented immigration and racial discrimination through its portrayal of Ombasi's masculinity.

## **The Sexualization and Exoticization of Ombasi and the Bodies of Undocumented African Immigrants**

At the beginning of the film, the protagonist family, Antonio, Dori, Iván and Jessy, discover Ombasi and his deceased friend Yambo on the beach when they are looking for clams. From this moment on, their fear and fascination, and for Dori, desire towards Ombasi, is evident. They don't know quite what to make of him, and their perception and fears towards the unknown come out in their comments and attitudes. However, Ombasi's role is clear; he is a sexualized and eroticized "Other" who represents the worst fears and secret desires of the Spaniards. Maureen Tobin Stanley writes in her article, "Seeing (as) the Eroticized and Exoticized Other Spanish Im/migration Cinema: A Critical Look at the (De) Criminalization of Migrants and Impunity of Hegemonic Perpetrators," "The projection not only makes Ombasi out to be a menace, which he certainly is not, but he is also construed as a sexual object for Dori and a perceived threat to Antonio's self-image as a virile man."<sup>74</sup> Ombasi represents both Dori's hidden desires and Antonio's fears about not being masculine enough. Dori's fascination and desire for Ombasi is apparent throughout the film, she views him as exotic and more sexually interesting than her husband. Her perception is that he is more "masculine" than Antonio, and thus more sexually desirable must be hidden because of their differences and the fact that she is married. Antonio and Ombasi's masculinity are defined and portrayed very differently in the film:

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<sup>74</sup> Maureen Tobin Stanley, "Seeing (as) the Eroticized and Exoticized Other in Spanish Im/Migration Cinema: A Critical Look at the (De)Criminalization of Migrants and Impunity of Hegemonic Perpetrators," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, vol. 43, no. 2, Mar. 2019, 8.

...we contemplate through Dori's eyes the silhouette of the black man's elongated, erect figure set against the backdrop of a rising sun—the ultimate traditional symbol of male potency—the black man's instinctual, primitive energy set him in stark contrast to Antonio, whose fragile and uncomfortable masculinity has found comic expression through his obsession with his adopted symbols of patriarchal power, the lighter and the spark plug, both artificial, flawed replicas of the elemental life force of fire...<sup>75</sup>

Dori's dream in which she has oral sex with Ombasi directly affirms her perception of her husband's masculinity in contrast to Ombasi's, who attracts Dori to him because of his exotic nature. Diana Palardy writes in her article, "Lust and Disgust: The Rhetoric of Abjection in the Spanish Immigration Films *Bwana*, *Flores de otro mundo* and *Princesas*," "...Dori tells her husband not to fall asleep because she is scared of the immigrant. When, however, she herself falls asleep, she dreams that Ombasi crosses over to her side of the fire to perform oral sex on her. Her dream reflects her subconscious desire to invite him into her territory to become intimate with her, thus removing the physical and cultural barriers between them."<sup>76</sup> Dori's secret sexual yearnings for Ombasi comes out in her dream where her fear of him does not exist. This fear turns into power, and she knows she could exercise her power to sleep with whoever she wants to as a more "dominant" member of society. Towards the end of the film, she notices Ombasi swimming naked in the ocean and stands on the beach for a while, trying to decide whether or not to join him. When she eventually decides to, she makes him stand with his back to her so that he cannot see her undress. In the daylight, the logical, rational and more

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<sup>75</sup> Isabel Santaolalla, "Close Encounters: Racial Otherness in Imanol Uribe's *Bwana*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 76, no. 1 (1999): 117.

<sup>76</sup> Diana Palardy, "Lust and Disgust: The Rhetoric of Abjection in the Spanish Immigration Films *Bwana*, *Flores De Otro Mundo* and *Princesas*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 92, no. 7 (2015), 830.

conservative sides of her mind and brain take over. She knows it is forbidden for him to see her naked, because she is married to someone else, but she still wants to go in the water with him because of her curiosity and her desire to exercise control over him and his actions. Paladry writes that, “Ironically she is accused of being impure and filthy, even though she is cleaner when she is not wearing the soiled dress and is bathing in water, which literally purifies her.”<sup>77</sup> The neo-Nazis accuse Dori of sleeping with Ombasi and say that this sexual act makes her impure. Her desire for Ombasi is not accepted, and although she cleaned herself in the water and took off the dress with vomit on it, she is still viewed as sexually impure.

Ombasi’s naked body is highlighted throughout the film. There is an implication that his value or worth or lack thereof lies in the way he looks, as it is perceived as either exotic or unnatural. He swims in the ocean naked, and Uribe highlights Ombasi’s nakedness and vulnerability when he is being chased by the skinheads, and there is a clear emphasis on his body and his physicality, and even when he is wearing clothes, his body is highlighted. Verena Berger writes in her text “Mediterranean Perspectives: Early Spanish and Italian Contributions to the Cinema of Irregular Migration” that, “The narrative tension of *Bwana* is not only structured by the xenophobe attitude of the Spaniards towards the migrant protagonist: the beach also turns into an enchanted place of romance between Dori and Ombasi: for the Spanish woman the black body represents the attractive and exotic other.”<sup>78</sup> Dori is attracted both to Ombasi’s physicality but also to what his body represents. She most likely has never met a person of color before, so

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 831.

<sup>78</sup> Verena Berger, and Daniel Winkler, “Mediterranean Perspectives: Early Spanish and Italian Contributions to the Cinema of Irregular Migration (Giordana, Marra, Soler, Uribe),” *Cinemas: Revue Détudes Cinématographiques* 22, no. 2-3 (2012), 169-170.

his allure is in the unknown. Although her fear comes from a place of ignorance and misinformation, she is attracted to Ombasi for reasons that she cannot explain, and she uses her power and influence as a white woman to satisfy or justify satisfying her sexual desires. The viewer too, is attracted to and drawn to Ombasi, "...the alignment of the spectator's look with that of the characters, all of whom feel, at one point or another, attracted by the visual magnetism of the black male body, thus throughout the film the black man's body is fetishized in ways reminiscent of the female body's treatment in mainstream commercial cinema..."<sup>79</sup> Ombasi is sexually objectified throughout the film, and his depiction is confined to the way he looks and how this relates to Dori's physical and sexual attraction to him. The audience learns very little about him outside of his physical and sexual traits, and this plays a role in his dehumanization. The Spanish family does not view him as a person but something or someone to serve them or entertain their fantasies, and Uribe wants the viewer to understand this point of view and also to some extent, view him the same way. Santaolalla writes, "Unqualified in terms of national, cultural and family background, the black man even remains nameless throughout—although his repetition of the word *Ombasi* as he first meets the white family seems to suggest that it this is his name, neither Antonio nor Dori ever bothers to make such an inference and unembarrassingly call him '*el negro*' throughout."<sup>80</sup> The family not using Ombasi's name, despite him repeating it several times and making it obvious what he is referencing, shows their unwillingness to accept those who are different than them and who they do not understand.

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<sup>79</sup> Isabel Santaolalla, "Close Encounters: Racial Otherness in Imanol Uribes *Bwana*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 76, no. 1 (1999): pp. 119.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

## Uribe's Depiction of Violence and Racism in *Bwana*

Violence and racism are directly intertwined throughout *Bwana*, especially in the interactions between the neo-Nazi skinheads and the Spanish family. They assume Ombasi is dangerous because of his race and their preconceived notions about immigrants and people of color. When the Spanish family first meet Ombasi, they are scared of him, and they keep moving away from him, almost as if they are afraid he will attack them, because they don't understand what he's saying. Palardy comments that, "Most of Ombasi's utterances in the film (unlike in the play) are in his native tongue and are not subtitled, so the majority of the viewers are in the same position as the family members in regards to their inability to comprehend him. However, his body language and actions communicate his good intentions, which stand in stark contrast to the Spanish family's barrage of racist comments."<sup>81</sup> His use of a language they don't understand is frightening, and they perceive Ombasi as a threat because of this, in addition to his race and impressive stature. Although he makes it clear from his body language that he doesn't want to and won't hurt them, they are still wary of him and continue to make racist comments, even if he can't understand them, "...their attitudes toward the Other are not modern; at the beginning when Dori worries about what happened to Jessy, Ombasi carries the little girl in his arms, only to be threatened by Antonio..."<sup>82</sup> They treat Ombasi like he is stupid, even though he helped their daughter, and their racist and ignorant thoughts shine through. Their prejudice cannot be eliminated, even when they meet someone who falls outside the bounds of their stereotypical

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<sup>81</sup> Diana Palardy, "Lust and Disgust: The Rhetoric of Abjection in the Spanish Immigration Films *Bwana*, *Flores De Otro Mundo* and *Princesas*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 92, no. 7 (2015), 828.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas G. Deveny, *Migration in Contemporary Hispanic Cinema*, Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012, 312.

perceptions. What they think and how they feel about those who are different is fixed and unchanging. When night falls and the family have nowhere to sleep as their car broke down, they need Ombasi and the fire he builds keep warm for the night. What they have been taught and what they believe is in conflict with their natural instinct to want to survive, so they have to trust the one person they perceive to be untrustworthy in order to stay warm. Deveny writes that, “His charming smile, gestures of friendship when he beckons the family to the fire or Dori to join him in the water, his offer to share the clams, all win us over.”<sup>83</sup> Ombasi’s kindness towards the family, despite their apprehension and hostile nature, endears him to the viewer. In the face of racism, even if he can’t understand it, he is still generous and helps the family, even if they are underserving of his kindness.

The Neo-nazis also place their own beliefs and stereotypes about immigrants on Ombasi and use violence and threats to try to get rid of someone they perceive as dangerous and unnatural. They threaten to castrate Ombasi and rape Dori, because they think they slept together. They chase him across the sand dunes to try to kill him. Violence is used as a way to solve problems and conflicts and to eliminate those who they perceive as different. The skinheads think they can use violence as a tool to exert their power and status, and this strengthens their belief that they are better than the “Other.” Berger writes, “...he is hunted by skinheads through the sand dunes while the Spanish family is able to flee in their car. Ombasi’s body finally succumbs to the speed of his enemies driving heavy silver motorbikes.”<sup>84</sup> The family betrays him

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid, 310.

<sup>84</sup> Verena Berger and Daniel Winkler, “Mediterranean Perspectives: Early Spanish and Italian Contributions to the Cinema of Irregular Migration (Giordana, Marra, Soler, Uribe),” *Cinemas: Revue Détudes Cinématographiques* 22, no. 2-3 (2012), 170.

and leaves him to be violated and hurt by the skinheads. Their fear and racism wins, and they choose to save themselves, despite Ombasi's generosity towards them. This is also another reference to his body and its role in his characterization. His nakedness represents vulnerability and shows the viewer just how much Ombasi needs the family's help. Olga López Cotín writes in "*Memoria colonial e inmigración: la negritud en la España posfranquista*," ... "The transfer of the epicenter of family violence...to traffickers and neo-Nazis, socially marginalized groups, allows the viewer to align with the family and recognize that, although they are not a participant in xenophobic attitudes...they are accomplices, in their disregard and indifference."<sup>85</sup> Even though the family does not directly hurt Ombasi, they are willing participants in what happens to him. They have the power to at least try to save or help him, and they choose not to do that. Uribe highlights the drastic and dangerous situation in which the family and Ombasi find themselves. However, the family only has regard for their own personal safety, and this lack of empathy and care for someone else, even if he is different from them, leads to Ombasi's certain death or injury. Santaolalla offers a nuanced explanation for the skinheads wanting to castrate Ombasi:

...the black man has to be castrated not simply because dared eat the white man's *coquinas*, nor because his body made the white woman fantasize a sexual encounter with him, and even because he shared his nakedness in the sea with the white woman. The black man has to be castrated, because, once the realm of instinct is renounced for the civilized world, every reminder of that temporary subjugation to the dictates of desires has to be suppressed.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Rosalía Cornejo Parriego, and Juan Goytisolo, *Memoria Colonial e inmigración: La Negritud En La España Posfranquista*. Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2007, 153.

<sup>86</sup> Isabel Santaolalla, "Close Encounters: Racial Otherness in Imanol Uribe's Bwana," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 76, no. 1 (1999): 122.



The skinheads want to hurt Ombasi, because they want to rid the world of any trace he ever existed. Once someone has expressed their desire for him or any black person, this desire must be eliminated violently. They take on what they consider their duty: to eliminate unnatural and unacceptable sexual inclinations. This self-appointed responsibility is not limited to the context of the film but can also be applied to wider world. Throughout *Bwana* and indeed many films about immigration, immigrants are subjected to the laws, cultures and social practices of their hosts or adopted countries, often struggling socially and economically. Many citizens of these places take on the responsibility of either welcoming or rejecting those they perceive as other from their community informally. They take on the role of informal and unofficial law enforcement, often inscribing or assigning rules and social practices onto newcomers. Their skinheads' violent act is a way of rejecting and excluding Ombasi from their "community" and making it clear he is not welcome. They enforce their rules with violence and use fear to keep out those who they perceive as "Other."



**The family betrays Ombasi in *Bwana*<sup>87</sup>**

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<sup>87</sup> "Bwana," Andalucía Destino de Cine, April 2, 2018. <http://andaluciadestinodecine.com/pelicula/bwana/?lang=en>.

## ***Bwana* Conclusion**

The sexualization and fascination with Ombasi and his body in *Bwana* speaks to attitudes related to undocumented immigrants; they are tolerated if they serve a purpose, but once that purpose has been served, they are cast aside and discarded, just like Ombasi was by the Spanish family. Dori's sexual interest in Ombasi shows her need to control and have power over those who she deems inferior to her. Ombasi's physicality and perceived sexual abilities are the focus of his character, define his masculinity and what it means to be a man. The Spanish family also refuses to help him or save him from the skinheads because of the potential to interfere with their own safety. Their selfishness and unwillingness to help another human being shows the extent and impact of their racist attitudes. The racism and discrimination portrayed in the film shows the indifference and causal racism of the Spanish family and the violent and drastic actions of the neo-Nazis as well as the pervasiveness and depth of these attitudes. Films like *Bwana* raise awareness and bring light to important and complex issues, and watching films like these will help others to be more accepting, understanding and tolerant of those who are different from them.

## **Part 2: The Representation of North and Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in French Banlieue Cinema**

### **Immigration from North Africa to France: A Legacy of Colonial History**

Immigration from North Africa to France started in the 1900s but increased significantly from 1940-1970 with the end of World War II and the French colonial empire. Mary Dewhurst Lewis writes in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*, "...the country's immigrant population nearly doubled from 1870 to 1890 and increased another third by 1921...By the time its continental neighbors became net recipients of immigrants, after the Second World War, France had been an immigrant society for nearly a century. Yet ever-shifting social and economic circumstances continue to inject the immigration issue into public life in new ways."<sup>88</sup> As France's immigrant population increased, traditions from its immigrant population were incorporated into French culture and daily life. These contributions from different cultures bring immigration issues to the forefront and often encourage government intervention. However, Dewhurst-Lewis explains, these policies are not always immigrant-focused:

...the Republic has also promoted the universal rights of man, making France an apparent haven for workers and refugees and a country where the children of foreigners acquire citizenship with relative ease. Even so, the promise that republican egalitarianism holds for immigrants and their families has been forestalled repeatedly by reactionary political movements, labor protectionism, deportation drives, and discrimination.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Mary Dewhurst-Lewis, "Immigration," in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 232.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 232.

Traditional French values promise an egalitarian society and a place of economic mobility and acceptance. However, immigrant communities and populations are not always viewed in a positive light, as they threaten the idea of what it means to be French.

Table 2.1 Maghrib settlers in France, 1957-90			
	Algeria	Morocco	Tunisia
1957	313,000		
1962	350,484*	50,000*	
1967	562,000		
1975	710,690*	260,025*	139,735*
1980	792,000	299,900	147,100
1982	805,100*	441,300*	190,800*
1985	820,900	516,400	202,600
1990	614,207*	572,652*	206,336*

Source: Ministries of Interior and Labour figures, except for census figures, marked \*

### Maghrib settlers in France from 1957-90<sup>90</sup>

After World War II, as the economic situation in France improved, the need for workers in factories and other manual labor jobs grew, which encouraged the continued immigration of people from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. With this new wave of immigrants, different housing options were created in order to accommodate them. However, many of them contributed to or furthered the discrimination and racism faced by North African immigrants in France. Quentin Duroy writes in “North African Identity and Racial Discrimination in France: A Social Economic Analysis of Capability Deprivation,” “North African migrant workers and immigrants were traditionally housed in shanty towns in the 1940s and 1950s. They were offered more permanent dwellings and allowed to bring over their families in housing projects in the 1960s (mostly in urban areas which are known as *banlieues*, and which are located on the

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<sup>90</sup> Jørgen S. Nielson, and Jonas Otterbeck “France,” In *Muslims in Western Europe*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

outskirts of Paris and other large French cities.”<sup>91</sup> The living situation of these workers in the banlieue is indicative of the way in which the French government has spatially marginalized these groups. Pushing immigrants of North African origin to the margins of society both literally and figuratively allows the state to control its image, keep it homogenous and maintain alignment with traditional French values. Frustration towards these decisions often leads to the heightened presence of violence and crime in these areas which contribute to and affirm stereotypes that banlieue residents are violent criminals. Duroy writes, “An individual with a North African background in France... is more likely to face low social-structural capacities which would translate at best... into blocked abilities (i.e. the inability to fulfill one's own potential) and at worst into social exclusion (if that individual possesses low individual capacities).”<sup>92</sup> Political and social structures, real and invisible, prevent immigrants from moving socially and economically upward and keep them in a marginalized position. The image that the French state wants is homogenous, and although it purports values of freedom and equality, its policies can say otherwise, “Indeed, the very insistence that the Republic knows no differences within its citizenry has contributed to the frustration of citizens from minority populations whose everyday experiences tell them otherwise. Police profiling, educational tracking, and poor housing have all contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment on the part of some descendants of immigrants.”<sup>93</sup> The day to day realities of white French citizens and those of

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<sup>91</sup> Quentin Duroy, “North African Identity and Racial Discrimination in France: A Social Economic Analysis of Capability Deprivation,” *Review of Social Economy* 69, no. 3 (2011): 317.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Dewhurst-Lewis, “Immigration,” in *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 240.

North African heritage often differs, showing a contrast in their lived experiences. Banlieue films play a role in depicting these realities and bringing light to important political, economic and social issues.

## **Banlieue Cinema: A Cinematic Perspective on the French Suburbs**

Although cinema depicting the lives of mostly second-generation North African and Sub-Saharan African immigrants has existed since the 1960s, the terms “banlieue cinema” and “banlieue film” came into prominence in 1995 when six films depicting life in the French suburbs were released. These films, the most famous of which being Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine*, focused on “...the urban periphery as a site of social exclusion and ethnic difference.”<sup>94</sup> These films show the disparities between life for those in the banlieue and those outside of it, highlighting their experiences with social and spatial marginalization. They have different styles and ideologies, ranging from commentary on the French school system to the violence and crime taking place in the banlieue. These diverse perspectives demonstrate the capacity of filmmakers to capture the same space in various ways and highlight the experiences and stories of many different types of people.

Many of banlieue films are passion projects, independent films with small budgets and non-professional actors. Because of this, in 1960, in order to encourage independent filmmaking, the French government introduced “avances sur recettes,” which “...aim to encourage the creation [of] the making of first films and to support independent cinema...and which cannot

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<sup>94</sup> Will Higbee, “Re-Presenting the Urban Periphery: Maghrebi-French Filmmaking and the Banlieue Film,” *Cineaste*, Winter 2007, Vol.33(1), 38.

[happen] without public financial aid.”<sup>95</sup> By supporting these independent projects, the French state appears to be taking steps to encourage and promote the representation of the banlieue in cinema. Barbara Lehin also notes in the article, “Giving a voice to the ethnic minorities in 1980s French and British cinema,” “The state also contributed indirectly to films produced by associations through the Social Action Fund (FAS), but here again there was no straightforward link between public allocation and film production.”<sup>96</sup> Organizations like these help to establish housing initiatives and promote social and cultural activities, which enabled the making of some of these films. Although the French state did not directly finance or encourage the making of banlieue cinema, its financial assistance facilitated the creation of them. The range of themes represented in these films shows the diversity and evolution of the banlieue film, as well as the experiences of the immigrants depicted in them. The focus on the section about French banlieue cinema will include the discussion of the cinematic reinforcement of stereotypes about North African and Sub-Saharan African immigrants, as well as how the banlieue film shows the continued physical separation of certain communities.

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<sup>95</sup> “Avance Sur Recettes Avant Réalisation,” CNC, accessed April 17, 2020, [https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/aides-et-financements/cinema/production/avance-sur-recettes-avant-realisation\\_191260](https://www.cnc.fr/professionnels/aides-et-financements/cinema/production/avance-sur-recettes-avant-realisation_191260))

<sup>96</sup> Barbara Lehin, “Giving a Voice to the Ethnic Minorities in 1980s French and British Cinemas,” *Studies in European Cinema* 2, no. 3 (2005): 217.

## Chapter 5: *La Haine*—Hate, Violence, and the “Banlieue” Film

*La Haine* (1995) is considered one of the most famous and influential examples of French banlieue cinema. The director, Mathieu Kassovitz, was born on August 3, 1967. He is also an acclaimed actor, screenwriter, editor and producer. Kassovitz has been nominated for and won many awards, including the César award for *La Haine* in the categories of Best Film and Best Editing and the Cannes director award both in 1995. His inspiration for the film was the death of 17 year old Makomé M’Bowole, who was originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. M’Bowole was fatally shot while in police custody in the 18th arrondissement in Paris on April 6, 1993. In the text, “Culture as a Tool of Exclusion: An Analysis of Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*,” Abigail MacCumber writes “Kassovitz grappled with the notion of someone waking up one morning as usual, and dying tragically and unexpectedly hours later...”<sup>97</sup> The film takes place over a 24 hour period, marked by times shown at intervals throughout it, which exemplify the notion that time is precious, and M’Bowole’s sudden death reminds the viewer that it is impossible know when it will run out. Because of the events that inspired *La Haine* and others like it, Kassovitz wrote an letter to the minister of the interior at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, expressing his dissatisfaction with the French government’s inaction in regards to the violence happening in the banlieue, “In light of the unrest, Kassovitz wrote an open letter to Nicolas Sarkozy, then minister of the interior, in which he stated, “As much as I would like to distance myself from politics, it is difficult to remain distant in the face of the deprivations of

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<sup>97</sup> Abigail MacCumber, “Culture as a Tool of Exclusion: An Analysis of Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*” (2017). Scripps Senior Theses. 949. [http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps\\_theses/949](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/949), 7.



politicians.”<sup>98</sup> Kassovitz feels the suffering in the banlieue is an issue the French government should be concerned about, but he also sees how the government and Sarkozy in particular view immigrants as “scum,” which points to a clear reason for their inaction. He uses film as a medium to tell the stories of those who cannot tell their own, and much like Gutiérrez, he has given the voiceless a voice. It is important to note that because Kassovitz came from an educated, filmmaking background and is a white man, the French public saw him as credible, and he became a spokesperson for the crisis in the banlieue through his films.

*La Haine* received positive feedback from critics for its accurate representation of the banlieue and its portrayal of Vinz (Vincent Cassel), Saïd (Saïd Taghmaoui) and Hubert (Hubert Koundé), the three main characters. Kevin Elstob writes:

*Hate* shows French society up against serious problems: suburban ghettos rocked by menacing bouts of vandalism and battles with the police; gang activity; and a dramatic growth in drug activity and unemployment. It is clear that Kassovitz intends that *Hate* not only investigate but also attempt to come to grips with the social tensions tearing at working-class suburbs or *banlieues*...of France’s big cities.<sup>99</sup>

Kassovitz offers a nuanced perspective on a difficult and polarizing issue in France, and *La Haine* emphasizes the importance of understanding social and political issues and how they are often overlooked or cast aside in French society. Elstob adds, “Although it may seem one-sided, one of the strengths of *Hate* is that it does not gloss over the harshness in the suburbs.”<sup>100</sup> *La*

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<sup>98</sup> Marc Angélil and Cary Siress, “The Paris ‘Banlieue’: Peripheries of Inequity.” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2012, 63.

<sup>99</sup> Kevin Elstob, “Hate (La Haine) Mathieu Kassovitz Christophe Rossignon.” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1997, 44.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

*Haine* does not sugarcoat the situation in the banlieue but instead attempts to find solutions to these problems. Kassovitz wants to make his audience aware of social, political and economic inequities through the portrayal of his protagonists. Elstob also has a positive response to Kassovitz's representation of Saïd, Vinz and Hubert, "...Kassovitz avoids the pitfall of cozily portraying misguided teenagers with hearts of gold under their tough outer shell."<sup>101</sup> The film does not gloss over the main characters' flaws but instead portrays as them as real people living in a harsh environment. For many young people living in the banlieue, a life filled with crime and violence is something they think is inevitable, because it is all they know. Another critic, Chris Darke agrees with Elstob's assessment of the way the three main characters are represented in the film, "Although *La Haine* ends bleakly, it doesn't set out to provide a liberal overview, opting instead to go with what Kassovitz knows best. It's a mark of his skill as a director that he manages to avoid over-indulging his sympathies for the trio."<sup>102</sup> Although sympathetic to the dilemmas faced by banlieue residents, Kassovitz shows the harsh reality of the banlieue and the mistakes that they make, because he believes it will force people to pay attention to an issue so often ignored or overlooked. Through the portrayal of Vinz, Saïd and Hubert, *La Haine*'s depiction of the banlieue shows the spatial separation of marginalized communities and their contentious relationship with the police.

### **Vinz, Saïd, Hubert and the Police in the Banlieue**

*La Haine*'s protagonists, Saïd, Hubert and Vinz, are the audience's guides to the banlieue, and their lives are the lens through which the viewer sees and experiences what is happening

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>102</sup> Chris Darke, "La Haine." *Sight and Sound*, vol. 5, no. 11, 1995, 43.

there. Kassovitz's portrayal of his three protagonists demonstrates his own views on the banlieue. He wants these characters to be relatable and sympathetic to the audience. By involving the local community in the filming process, Kassovitz was able to accurately represent the struggles and lives of those living in the banlieue. Will Higbee writes in his article "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T va Cracker*," "Kassovitz chooses to focus on Vinz, Hubert and Saïd as representatives of the *banlieue*'s alienated youth. The characters are introduced one by one to the spectator at the beginning of the film with some form of visual signature—Saïd's graffiti, Vinz's personalized ring, a poster advertising Hubert's most recent boxing bout—thus highlighting their central importance within their diegesis."<sup>103</sup> In French society, banlieue residents are often lumped together as a group. Kassovitz's focus on the three friends makes it clear that they are unique, individual people and not just fictional representations of stereotypes, "... We identify (and possibly empathize) with them as they desperately negotiate and attempt to survive their victimization and racial exclusion."<sup>104</sup> Although the challenges of banlieue residents may seem foreign to those who live outside of it, their attempts to navigate through a society that shuns them and pushes them to edges of it, but feeling out of place and alone is a relatable and common feeling for many people despite their economic or social circumstances. However, those outside of France are often unaware of their struggles, "For many, especially those outside of France, *La Haine* is the sole cinematic reference point concerning relations between young people and the

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<sup>103</sup> William Higbee, "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T Va Crack-Er*," *Modern & Contemporary France* 9, no. 2 (2001), 205.

<sup>104</sup> Sanjay Sharma, and Ashwani Sharma, " 'So Far So Good...' *La Haine* and the Poetics of the Everyday," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2000, 106.

police in France's *banlieues*.”<sup>105</sup> As *La Haine* is potentially many people's only reference point for what life in the banlieue is like, it is all the more important that Kassovitz's narrative is relatable and compelling, so people can identify with and empathize with young people like Saïd, Hubert and Vinz.

## **The Police and the Banlieue: Violence and Crime in a Hostile Environment**

Throughout the film, Kassovitz highlights the tense relationship between Vinz, Saïd, Hubert and the police. Young men in the banlieue, like Kassovitz's protagonists, are often seen as aggressors or criminals by the French police, which leads to animosity between them. In *La Haine*, the viewer can see that the relationship between the police and the residents of the banlieue has become so fractured and broken that there is almost no hope for reconciliation. During one scene, the police interrogate and torture Saïd and Hubert, because they suspect them of criminal activity. During the interrogation, one of the policemen says, “We can shoot you like the Arabian dogs that you are and tomorrow, we will shoot the assholes who will come to demonstrate outside the police station.”<sup>106</sup> The police threaten them, insult them and say they're going to shoot anyone who comes to protest in front of the police station the next day. They use their power to intimidate the young men and exercise their control of their bodies and their home, the banlieue. This shows how the police think about those who live in the banlieue, particularly men of color. Many times, they only see violent criminals, who they refer to as dogs.

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<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Ervine, *Cinema and the Republic Filming on the Margins in Contemporary France*, University of Wales Press, 2013, 90.

<sup>106</sup> Mathieu Kassovitz and Gilles Favier, *Jusquici Tout Va Bien: scénario Et Photogr. Autour Du Film “La Haine,”* Actes Sud, 1995, 124.

They do not see them as young people struggling in a world that is against them. Tom Conley addresses this in his article “Web of Hate,” “...did the policeman blow his fuse because of the endlessly heated confrontations, occurring day after day, hour upon hour, in the suburbs between delinquent children and the police?”<sup>107</sup> The police are frustrated with the violence taking place in the banlieue, and they are taking out this anger on Saïd and Hubert, showing how abuses of power can lead to violent actions based on prejudice and discriminatory policies. They are unable to communicate in an effective way, understand another perspective and how to resolve their differences, leading to the continuation of this violence and contentious relationship. As Hubert says, “...c’est que la haine attire la haine.”<sup>108</sup> Hate attracts hate, and it creates an environment where these differences divide people. In the case of the banlieue, the police and the banlieue residents are still at odds. By pushing this violence and crime to the edges of society, the police think they can contain it, as it threatens to spill over into mainstream society, however, this can lead to the proliferation of violence and crime, making the problem worse.

### **The Spatial Separation of the Banlieue**

The spatial separation of the banlieue from the rest of Paris is clear throughout the film and serves a reminder of the literal and figurative divide between those who live in the banlieue and those outside of it. Kassovitz shows through the characters of Saïd, Vinz and Hubert how the banlieue contributes to the continued physical separation of certain communities, how space can separate literally and figuratively, how it can divide and how it can unite. Higbee writes:

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<sup>107</sup> Tom Conley, “A Web of Hate.” *South Central Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2000, 90

<sup>108</sup> Mathieu Kassovitz, and Gilles Favier, *Jusquici Tout Va Bien: scénario Et Photogr. Autour Du Film "La Haine"*. Actes Sud, 1995, 114.

...the failure on the part of French media (and certain French filmmakers) to challenge such representations of the deprived *cités* within the urban periphery merely serves to reinforce the attitude that, as the site of marginalisation, alterity and deviance, such areas are a ‘lost cause’ —allowing for the failure of government initiatives to tackle exclusion and acute social deprivation in such ‘problem areas’ to be excused.<sup>109</sup>

The spatial marginalization and negative media portrayals of the banlieue residents ensures that unfavorable stereotypes about the banlieue persist, and the government is less willing to create programs or initiatives to integrate and incorporate the banlieue into the rest of society. Excuses can continue as to why social and spatial inclusion is not being promoted and facilitated by the government, because politicians can state that it is a lost cause or there is no way to make positive changes. Olivier Mongin writes in his article “Regarde-les tomber—A propos de la Haine de Mathieu Kassovitz,” “...it’s a paradox for someone who lives outside the suburbs - that the questions of the suburbs are those of the city...”<sup>110</sup> The banlieue residents lack the political or social mobility to solve the issues within the banlieue, and they need the government to implement policies to correct structural problems, but their differences impede collaboration and compromise. The spatial division between the French state and the banlieue residents can be seen not only in Kassovitz’s choice of protagonists but in how he portrays them through film techniques.

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<sup>109</sup> William Higbee, “Screening the ‘Other’ Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T Va Crack-Er*.” *Modern & Contemporary France* 9, no. 2 (2001), 199.

<sup>110</sup> Olivier Mongin, “Regarde-Les Tomber—A Propos De La Haine De Mathieu Kassovitz.” *Esprit*, no. 214 (August-September 1995), 183.

This spatial separation shown through film techniques reinforce Kassovitz's ideas about spatial and racial marginalization. In the book, *Je T'Aime...Moi Non Plus: Franco-British Cinematic Relations*, Jim Morrissey writes, "Characters in *La Haine* are regularly photographed from below: Kassovitz's use of low angles of framing can be seen to communicate a sense of confinement which, rather than distancing the spectator from the protagonists, aligns him or her with them."<sup>111</sup> These shots allow the viewer to be literally closer to what is going on in the film, and this ensures they are able to better understand the banlieue residents' struggles. The scenes shot in Paris and those shot in the banlieue are distinct and show two different sides of the larger metropolis. The wide shots in the banlieue show an open space with apartment buildings and walls covered in graffiti, highlighting both the background behind the three men but also them sitting as a group and talking. These shots emphasize the mobility and freedom of the young men to travel anywhere within the banlieue. The shots in Paris, however, are closer up and when the trio is standing on a balcony talking, only a small portion of the city in the background can be seen, and the focus is Vinz, Saïd and Hubert. This along with the black and white aesthetic of the film demands that the audience's attention be focused on the trio. Higbee writes, "The effect is to isolate the youth from their immediate environment, thus accentuating the sense of alienation they feel in the central hegemonic of the city."<sup>112</sup> The confinement of the shot to the three men accentuates their feelings of isolation and frustration towards a system that is created to exclude

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<sup>111</sup> Jim Morrissey, " 'In the Ghetto': Space, Race and Marginalization in French and British 'Urban' Films *La Haine* and *Bullet Boy*." In *Je T'Aime...Moi Non Plus: Franco-British Cinematic Relations*, edited by Mazdon Lucy and Wheatley Catherine, 258.

<sup>112</sup> William Higbee, "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T Va Crack-Er*." *Modern & Contemporary France* 9, no. 2 (2001), 201.

them and keep them in a marginalized position. In Paris, they feel out of place, because they do not belong, which exemplifies their feelings of alienation and separation from the rest of society. The close-up shots emphasize their lack of mobility outside of the banlieue and how they are not welcome in certain spaces and are confined to the banlieue most of the time by society's gender and racial norms.



**The trio and a friend in the banlieue<sup>113</sup>**

## **La Banlieue as a Gendered and Racial Space: Class Solidarity and the Racialization of the Banlieue**

Many banlieue films focus on the experiences of men and their struggles, and this influences the audience's perception of the banlieue and its residents. Higbee writes that, "The *cit * is qualified as a gendered space, focusing almost exclusively on the experiences of male youth within the disadvantaged urban periphery."<sup>114</sup> The male perspective is most often the one that the audience is given, influencing their perception of the banlieue, its population and its

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<sup>113</sup> "La Haine," SF URBAN FILM FEST 2018. Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://sfurbanfilmfest.com/2018a/films/la-haine/>.

<sup>114</sup> William Higbee, "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T Va Crack-Er*," *Modern & Contemporary France* 9, no. 2 (2001), 199.



spaces. He adds that, “In *La Haine*, (with the exception of the female journalist and newscaster) women occupy peripheral roles as mothers and sisters, revealed to the spectator through a limited number of scenes based primarily in the family apartment of Vinz and Hubert.”<sup>115</sup> Women’s perspectives on life in the banlieue are not usually included in banlieue cinema, so although Kassovitz is using his film to amplify some voices, women’s stories are silenced. Women depicted in traditional roles as homemakers and are placed in the background of these narratives; their voices, stories and perspectives are pushed to the side. Mongin also writes about the role of gender in *La Haine*, “*La Haine* is a film without women, without girls, without lovers or mistresses, a film where seduction is not practiced...but also a film where the disappearance of fathers leaves a place for mothers that no one is allowed to touch.”<sup>116</sup> The erasure of women from the film also erases their experiences and their viewpoints, and the interactions between men and women, romantic or otherwise, are not included. Instead, Kassovitz focuses the film on Vinz, Saïd and Hubert and brings out their personalities and experiences through the lens of the banlieue.

*La Haine* can be characterized not as a film about race but as a film about class. Vinz, Saïd and Hubert’s backgrounds are different but what unites them is that they are all from the same underprivileged community. As Sharma and Sharma write, “*La Haine*, by locating itself in a poor multi-racial suburb outside Paris, draws attention to a volatile racial and class situation in contemporary France. The injustice of this situation is made more compelling by the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>116</sup> Olivier Mongin, “Regarde-Les Tomber—A Propos De *La Haine* De Mathieu Kassovitz.” *Esprit*, no. 214 (August-September 1995), 184.

film attempting to reflect actual events in the banlieues of France.”<sup>117</sup> Although the trio come from different backgrounds, their economic realities are the same. Their shared experience of being economically disadvantaged binds them together and helps to create and maintain their strong bond. Their neighborhood is racially mixed, but most people are the same economic position regardless of race.



**From left to right: Hubert, Saïd and Vinz in Paris**<sup>118</sup>

### ***La Haine* Conclusion**

The concept of a falling society is often associated with the banlieue. At the beginning of the film, Hubert says, “This is the story of a man who falls from a fifty story building. On each floor, as he falls, he repeats himself over and over to reassure himself: “So far so good, so far so good, so far so good ...”<sup>119</sup> The banlieue is the man on the edge of the building, and it is falling because of economic, social and political issues. Its residents are reassured by the fact that it has

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<sup>117</sup> Sanjay Sharma, and Ashwani Sharma, “ ‘So Far So Good...’ La Haine and the Poetics of the Everyday,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2000, 105.

<sup>118</sup> Adam Scovell, “Project Surrealism: the Urban Spaces of La Haine,” British Film Institute, July 2, 2019, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/la-haine-project-surrealism>

<sup>119</sup> Mathieu Kassovitz, and Gilles Favier, *Jusquici Tout Va Bien: Scénario Et Photogr. Autour Du Film “La Haine”* Actes Sud, 1995, 17.

not completely collapsed yet. However, it is clear that French society needs to come to terms with those perceived as the “Other,” as differences can tear people apart. Although they are inevitable, it is the way in which they are handled and resolved that matters. MacCumber writes:

The film’s ending is fiercely jarring and unexpected while at the same time completely real and believable. We hear the news of Abdel’s death, but Vinz himself is killed before ever managing to seek his vengeance, all in the span of less than a day. Neither Vinz’s death nor the film at large is a call-to-action or a cry for help, but simply a depiction of reality that was unknown to many.<sup>120</sup>

Kassovitz depicts reality in the most raw way possible, and he uses *La Haine* to show that events like the deaths of Abdel, the trio’s friend, and Vinz will continue to happen if reconciliation and a mutual understanding, acceptance and respect are not achieved between the banlieue residents and the French government. However, he does not glorify violence but rather shows its negative effects on people and their communities. He is spreading awareness about an issue that no one wants to talk about. By doing so, *La Haine* and other films like it help those in the banlieue to publicize injustices and unfairness as well as fight for inclusion and an end to racism and discrimination. It is reminder to us that without significant structural changes and reforms, hate will persist, and it will win.

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<sup>120</sup> Abigail MacCumber, “Culture as a Tool of Exclusion: An Analysis of Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine*” (2017). Scripps Senior Theses. 949. [http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps\\_theses/949](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/949), 8.

## Chapter 6: *L'esquive*—A Different Kind of Banlieue Film

*L'esquive* (2003) is a banlieue film by Abdellatif Kechiche, who was born in Tunis, Tunisia in 1950. He has made other films about the experiences of young people and immigrants in France, such as *La Faute à Voltaire* (2000), *La Graine et le Mulet* (2007) and *La vie d'Adèle* (2013). *L'esquive*, which won the César award for Best Film in 2005, tells the story of a group of high school French students living in the banlieue who are performing in their school play, Pierre de Marivaux's *Le Jeu de L'amour Et du Hasard* (The Game of Love and Chance). Krimo (Osman Eikharraz), the main character, falls in love with his childhood friend, Lydia (Sarah Forestier), and he wants to participate in the show to spend more time with her. Critics were quite receptive to *L'esquive*, especially Serge Kaganski in his review, "L'Esquive, Un film Subtil et Électrisant." Kaganski notes *L'esquive's* unique qualities, Kechiche's ability to subvert stereotypes and his strategic use of Marivaux's play in the film, "Consequently, the film compares the classic language of the 18th century with contemporary adolescent language, and this oral match is fantastic in terms of humor, creativity and political relevance, because Kechiche does not choose between these two stylizations of the French language, which are witnesses to its evolution and its liveliness."<sup>121</sup> Kechiche is able to combine 18th century French theatrical language and the verlan or slang of the banlieue in order to depict the lives of the protagonists. He confronts and questions classic representations of the banlieue, showing how it can push marginalized communities to the edges of society. A.O. Scott's positive review of *L'esquive* in the *New York Times* states that, "Mr. Kechiche's naturalistic, almost documentary style certainly does not

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<sup>121</sup> Serge Kaganski, "L'Esquive: Un Film Subtil et Électrisant" Les Inrocks, March 21, 2012. <https://www.lesinrocks.com/cinema/films-a-l-affiche/lesquive-2/>, 3.

relieve the ugliness of the housing projects, and a late confrontation temporarily jolts the pictures from its youthful reverie.”<sup>122</sup> In Scott’s view, Kechiche does not shy away from the serious nature of the issues in the banlieue, and although the film focuses on the lives of adolescents, it does not hide its more serious problems. He adds that the film is a “...a dizzying series of collisions between the hip-hop influenced, Arabic-inflected staccato of working-class youth slang and the decorous melodies of Marivaux’s prose.”<sup>123</sup> Kechiche is able to combine different components of French and Francophone culture into a film that is relatable and easily understood by a range of people with different interests and backgrounds.



**Krimo reading *Le jeu d’amor et d’hasard***<sup>124</sup>

## **Marivaux in the Banlieue: Dodging, Adolescence and Young Love**

The main focus of *L’esquive* is the everyday life of the students, particularly the love interests in the film, Krimo and Lydia. Many of the scenes take place at their school and in the banlieue where they practice for the show after school. Kechiche’s choice to locate the film in the banlieue is important, since theater and performing in a play is often considered to be

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<sup>122</sup> A O. Scott, “A Classic French Tale Echoes In the Gritty Paris of Today,” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Aug 31, 2005; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, E5

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, E5.

<sup>124</sup> “L’esquive,” IMDb. IMDb.com. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0338977/mediaviewer/rm2196803841>.

something for the highly educated and not for the students who live in the banlieue, who often come from low-income or minority families. This shows that theater is not just for the wealthy, and it is an opportunity for the students to escape their reality while they are performing. He uses Marivaux's play to construct the plot for the film and uses the same techniques that Marivaux used to show the teenage realities of the banlieue. In the article, "Exit Voltaire, Enter Marivaux: Abdellatif Kechiche on the Legacy of the Enlightenment," Louisa Shea writes, "By focusing on the lives of very young adolescents, and reducing his plotline to a Marivaudian minimum, Kechiche manages to dodge many of the clichés associated with films about the cites: chronic unemployment, rampant crime and drug use, racism..."<sup>125</sup> Kechiche uses the ordinary nature of both the subject of his film and Marivaux's play to question the subjects of other banlieue films and the genre of banlieue cinema itself. By not engaging with stereotypes many banlieue films portray and glorifying violence, drugs and crime, Kechiche succeeds in depicting the students' lives without exaggeration, while also bringing attention to an important social issue.

Even the title of the film, *L'esquive* has meaning and contributes to Kechiche's message. In French, the verb "esquiver" means "to dodge" or "to avoid," and Kechiche dodges or evades in the film. Shea writes, "...The verb [esquiver] applies to the film's protagonists, Lydia and Krimo, and their feelings for each other, but also, and perhaps most significantly, to the conventions of the cinéma de banlieue—its themes and visual codes—which Kechiche sidesteps with precision and purpose."<sup>126</sup> Krimo and Lydia are just any other young people falling in love: awkward and unsure. Their relationship adds an interesting dimension to the film, allowing

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<sup>125</sup> Louisa Shea, "Exit Voltaire, Enter Marivaux: Abdellatif Kechiche on the Legacy of the Enlightenment," *The French Review*, vol. 85, no. 6, May 2012, 1142.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 1142.

Kechiche to dodge the conventional serious themes of banlieue cinema and tell his story in a different way. Krime and Lydia's relationship as well as their development as characters and people are vital to *L'esquive*. Kechiche is able to show another side of young people in the banlieue that is devoid of crime and violence. For example, we see how the play frees Krime from the confines of society's expectations for him, and by being exposed to the play, there is hope that he will be able to creatively express himself in a new way. Marivaux's play gives the students a safe space to express themselves and channel their emotions. In some ways, those outside of the banlieue would benefit from being exposed to the play or something similar.

Lydia's participation in the play allows her to dodge the limited opportunities of her economic and social situation:

Lydia is an evader in another sense as well. She lives for the theater and is completely consumed by her part in the school play. It is there that Lydia lives out a fantasy of escaping from her drab and modest life in the working-class suburbs, or *banlieues*. When the film ends, Lydia still has not responded to Krime's declaration; the terms of their relationship remain unsolved. The denouement, or lack thereof, constitutes yet another way in which the film evades the very concept of dodging proposed in the title. It evades clear resolution.<sup>127</sup>

Theater is a way for Lydia to escape normalcy and live an exciting or more interesting life for the duration of the play rehearsal. It allows her to transform herself into someone else and try out a new identity for a while. Kechiche ends the film on a cliffhanger and avoids a clear or satisfying ending for the viewer. As Lydia never responded to Krime telling her about his romantic feelings

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<sup>127</sup> Leon Sachs, *The Pedagogical Imagination: the Republican Legacy in Twenty-First-Century French Literature and Film*, University of Nebraska Press, 2014, 119.

for her, there is no resolution at the end of the film, and the viewer is left to wonder what happens to the characters and how their lives continue.

Kechiche also dodges the conventions of traditional banlieue cinema with his cinematographic choices, challenging traditional images and depictions of the banlieue. Shea writes:

Kechiche also rescripts a number of the visual codes that have come to dominate cinematic representations of the cités: ‘crane shots of empty expanses of street, always limited by blank concrete walls or fences’ ... establishing shots that isolate the cité against an empty background, marking the banlieue as a separate space, a concrete wasteland on the fringes of society; camera pans over endless tower blocks; shots of crumbling facades crisscrossed with graffiti.<sup>128</sup>

Kechiche’s shot choices are different from other banlieue films, because he shows the characters practicing the play in open spaces in the banlieue, their school and their apartments, but his main focus is their emotions and not their surroundings. Shea points out that this choice has a particular goal, “Kechiche's near erasure of the setting from the visual field renders, cinematically, the point of the view of the youngsters, who simply do not see their cité, because it is their everyday setting: not something to gawk at, not something they even notice anymore, simply the backdrop to their everyday lives.”<sup>129</sup> The viewer is able to focus on what is important and not on traditional representations or aspects of the banlieue that are not relevant to the plot. He wants the audience to forget the location of the film and only focus on the lives of Krime, Lydia and their friends, rather than the perceived stereotypes about them or their environment.

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<sup>128</sup> Louisa Shea, “Exit Voltaire, Enter Marivaux: Abdellatif Kechiche on the Legacy of the Enlightenment.” *The French Review*, vol. 85, no. 6, May 2012, 1143.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 1143.



## Verlan as a Language of Identity: Elite and Popular Culture in the Banlieue

The blending of the culture of the banlieue and Marivaux's play challenges the audience to think about elite culture differently through the use of verlan, slang used by North African communities living in the banlieue, which connects and unites young people through a common "language." Shea writes about the mixing of elite and popular culture, "...Marivaux's play belongs to Lydia, Rachid, Frida, even Krimo, more than to the spectator: it is a play, a lived experience, not a set piece in France's literary patrimoine."<sup>130</sup> Theater can be understood, performed, or watched by anyone, and it is an escape for both the audience and the performers, no matter their backgrounds. Their experiences are important to their performances, even if they are not traditionally included in productions. Although the banlieue seems an unlikely setting for the performance of an 18th century play, Kechiche challenges the viewer to see the performance in a new light and how it is important to the students and relevant to their lives and experiences. Kechiche himself says, "I wanted to talk about the theater, and to make a love story, to talk of the suburbs in a different way, without the stories of forced marriages or the headscarf debate..."<sup>131</sup> By taking away the usual ways of depicting the banlieue and its residents by removing politics from the film, Kechiche is able to focus on the lives of the young people and tell their stories.

Kechiche uses *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard* to break the conventions of banlieue cinema through language. Verlan or slang is used throughout the film by the students, while more traditional French is used in the performance of the play and talking to adults. It is noted in the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 1144.

<sup>131</sup> Joan Dupont, "Game of love and chance in a Paris suburb," *International Herald Tribune* 12 Feb. 2004: 9. *Business Insights: Essentials*, 1.

article, “Être et Parler: Being and Speaking French in Abdellatif Kechiche’s *L’Esquive* and Laurent Cantent’s *Entre les murs*” by Diana Strand that, “...the alternative French spoken by a population that is both physically and socially excluded from the dominant society allows for an expression of an alternative identity.”<sup>132</sup> Using slang both unites the students and sets them apart from other people, giving them a sense of individuality in a world where they are often lumped together and labelled inaccurately. Their North African heritage and roots are also incorporated with the influences of Arabic and Wolof on verlan. Strand also points out:

In addition, their linguistic acrobatics prove that they can shift with ease from the ritualistic *tchatche* that secures for them a niche in their adolescent subculture, to standard French in conversation with their teacher or parents of friends, to the elegant, if idiosyncratic, language of the Marivaux play. The students’ successful code switching from eighteenth-century *marivaudage* to mainstream twenty-first century French to adolescent back-slang, serves to belie the inevitable link between Frenchness, social class, and verbal expression inscribed in the French national consciousness...<sup>133</sup>

The students’ language mobility blurs the lines between social classes and the traditions of the French language, and this code-switching is what their teacher is trying to accomplish with their participation and performance of the play. If those who are considered outcasts in society can use the same language as those with power, it questions the meaning of Frenchness and being French, because oftentimes those of North African origin in France are not considered French or as French as those with solely French roots. The formal language used in the play is not

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<sup>132</sup> Dana Strand, “Être Et Parler: Being and Speaking French in Abdellatif Kechiche’s *L’Esquive* (2004) and Laurent Cantet’s *Entre Les Murs* (2008,” *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2009, 263.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 264.

exclusively reserved for non-immigrants or those come from “French” backgrounds. The performance of the play gives them a new identity and role, which is a process of acculturation and assimilating to French society. They assume the identities of French characters in the play, shedding their identities as banlieue residents. When the practice or performance is over, they shed their character identities, and they are their “real” selves again. This constant shifting and changing of identities show how fluid and arbitrary they can be, thus eliminating the narrative or argument of what it means to be truly “French.” They assimilate to societal norms by performing the play, thus combining their ethnic and national identities into one that represents all aspects of them.



### **Lydia and her friends in the banlieue<sup>134</sup>**

The verlan is an important tool for understanding youth culture in the banlieue. In another article, “Alternative French, Alternative Identities: Situating Language in *La Banlieue*,” Meredith Doran states:

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<sup>134</sup> Laura Clifford, “The Movie Review Show's Review of L'Esquive (The Game of Love and Chance),” Reeling, accessed April 18, 2020, <https://www.reelingreviews.com/thegameofloveandchance.htm>).

...banlieue youth language may represent a valuable alternative to mainstream French precisely as a tool for forging, negotiating, and expressing identities which stand outside the binary categories of mainstream discourse, allowing youths to define and express themselves through a linguistic bricolage that mirrors their sense of identity as mixed, evolving, and drawing from multiple linguistic sources.<sup>135</sup>

Krimo, Lydia and their friends use verlan to communicate in a way that they can understand which allows them to reconcile with and understand their complex identities. They keep their sense of identity through conversations with peers, because they are using language they all understand and that is exclusively theirs. However, they also learn in school how to understand more formal language and situations, which enables them to be able to interact with many different types of people. Doran says that, "...by creating a new set of terms for race and ethnicity through verlanization and other means, youths were able to endow them with alternative meanings, ones that 'belonged' to the local community and lacked the kinds of racist and stigmatizing connotations that they might have in the dominant language."<sup>136</sup> Kechiche does the same thing with *L'esquive*; he changes the image of the banlieue by making a film that questions and confronts stereotypes and misunderstandings. In other words, "Kechiche's crafty comparison brings a fresh historical perspective...to the vulgar acrobatics of the adolescents... The art of detour works two ways: the lens of the banlieues renews our reading of Marivaux, and the Marivaudage casts the language of contemporary youth culture in a new, and perhaps more

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<sup>135</sup> Meredith Doran, "Alternative French, Alternative Identities: Situating Language In la Banlieue," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2007, 500.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 503.

dignified light.”<sup>137</sup> By combining *Le Jeu d’Amor et du Hasard* and the lives of the students living in the banlieue, Kechiche is able to offer a new perspective on the banlieue while also giving new meaning to Marivaux’s play. His story gives the banlieue residents their own identities back and releases them from the confines of an identity placed on them by other people. Their lives are not defined by the crime and violence around them, which is largely absent from the film until the very end.

### **Violence and the Police in *L’esquive***

The protagonists in *L’esquive* are normal teenagers, with crushes, dreams and homework. They behave like young people who live in anywhere in the world. However, when their normal teenage lives collide with the violent and discriminatory authority of the police, the differences between their realities and those who live outside of the banlieue become more apparent. Ilaria Vitali writes in the article “Marivaudage ou Tchatche? Mask Games and Linguistic Travesties in ‘L’Esquive d’Adellatif Kechiche,” “The pressure of the social group is seen at first in the intrusion of the girlfriends in the ‘Krimo affair’ (they comment, debate, inquire and worry), because in the banlieue relations are eminently public and strictly coded by rules of social behavior.”<sup>138</sup> The pressure to fit into the main social group is still there even though they live in a place where there are many more intense and harder issues than the typical problems of adolescents. Because of this, they mimic the social behavior of adults in their relationships with their friends. They see violence perpetuated by adults, and they think it is acceptable for them to

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<sup>137</sup> Leon Sachs, *The Pedagogical Imagination: the Republican Legacy in Twenty-First-Century French Literature and Film*, University of Nebraska Press, 2014, 122.

<sup>138</sup> Ilaria Vitali, “Marivaudage ou Tchatche? Jeux de Masque et Travestissements Linguistiques dans ‘L’Esquive’ d’Abdellatif Kechiche,” *Francofonia*, vol. 56, 2009, 10.

use violence in their everyday lives. For example, Fathi, a friend of Krimo's, is angry with Frida, a friend of Lydia's, about the situation between Krimo and Lydia. He takes her phone, yells at her and then attacks her. This scene shows that young people think that violence is an acceptable way of dealing with and solving problems, which can escalate very quickly and spill over into real life with potentially serious consequences. Although the young protagonists of *L'esquive* are shielded most of the time from the violent world of adults, its collision with theirs at the end of the film makes it all the more shocking and heartbreaking to watch part of their innocence fade away.

Interactions between banlieue residents and the police are a common occurrence both in real life and in many banlieue films. The police use their power and authority to intimidate the young people in *L'esquive*. Towards the end of the film, there is a confrontation between the police and the students. The police find Krimo, Lydia and their friends in a secluded area in the banlieue, and although they may be in possession of a stolen car, nothing they did should result in the level of violence and intimidation used by the police, especially given their ages. However, the group was there, because Krimo and Lydia wanted to talk and figure out their feelings for one another. The police act on their suspicions, and they use violence to exercise their authority. As Ari J. Blatt writes in the article, "The Play's the Thing: Marivaux and the 'Banlieue' in Abdellatif Kechiche's 'L'Esquive,'" "Their meeting, however, is suddenly interrupted by a squad of local policemen...Seemingly drunk with power, the officers strong-arm the alleged perpetrators with an utter disregard for their age, quickly assuming guilty even before unearthing a tiny joint and

threatening them with a swift punishment.”<sup>139</sup> The police scare the young people with violence and make them feel that they are not important in society, because of where they live or the color of their skin. It is during the students’ interaction with the police that Kechiche makes some interesting cinematographic choices. The camera zooms in on a book of Marivaux’s play on the hood of one of the students’ cars. The book represents the innocence of Krimo, Lydia and their friends, even though their environment makes difficult not to grow up very quickly, they are still fairly innocent young people with hopes and dreams. They don’t have a lot of drugs or weapons, they just have the book for their school play. The viewer can very clearly see the faces of the students when they are pressed against the hood of the car by the police and how scared they are. The police misunderstood who the students are and what their intentions were, what looked like a dangerous situation was just teenagers figuring out life and what they want. No matter how much the students adopt different kinds of languages or identities, the police will always see them as kids from the banlieue. They can never hide or conceal who the police think they really are because of their prejudiced preconceived notions.

### ***L’esquive* Conclusion**

*L’esquive* offers a very different perspective of the Paris suburbs than many banlieue films, one where the problems of adolescence and young love are more prominent than gun violence, drug deals and gang fights. Kechiche’s more subdued version of the banlieue is important, because it shows that there is more to life in the banlieue than violent crime. Many banlieue films seem to depict a reality where all banlieue residents are gang members with guns

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<sup>139</sup>Ari J. Blatt, “The Play’s the Thing: Marivaux and the ‘Banlieue’ in Abdellatif Kechiche’s ‘L’Esquive,’” *The French Review*, vol. 81, no. 3, Feb. 2008, 521.

and who solely use violence to solve their problems. *L'esquive* shows that it is more nuanced than that; banlieue residents have the same hopes and dreams as those who live outside of it. The film offers a humanizing perspective of the banlieue, one that allows the viewer to empathize with its inhabitants and recognize their individuality, as well as the shifting and changing nature of identity. As the students grow up and encounter and find themselves in different situations, they will come to understand how all their identities mesh and come together. The police see them as potential or already violent criminals, just as many others in French society do. What matters is what comes next, how they view themselves, despite the stereotypes and assumptions placed upon them.



## Chapter 7: Violence and Burning Cars—*Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* and Youth Culture in the Banlieue

Jean-François Richet was born in Meaux, a suburb of Paris on July 2, 1966. He is a French screenwriter, director and producer who has been nominated for many César awards for his films in the categories of Best Film, Best Feature Film and Best Writing: Adaptation. He also won the César award for Best Director in 2009. His films include *États des lieux* (1995), *Assault on Precinct 13* (2005), *Ma 6-T va Crack-er* (1997) and *Mesrine* (2008). *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* centers on two teenage gangs living in a Parisian banlieue that terrorize their neighborhood by burning cars and enacting violence on the other residents of it. The violence culminates in a nightclub where a huge gunfight breaks out and ends in the death of one of the members of the gangs at the end of the film.

Strong opinions about the film were clear in critics' reviews. Annie Coppermann writes in "Encore les violences en banlieue," that "...this film which, under a title in the form of a schoolboy pun, wants to be 'proletarian' and '[the] bearer of [a] message.' It was filmed...in the suburbs where he [Richet] lives himself, in Meaux, with locals..."<sup>140</sup> It is clear that the film wants to convey a strong message, and Richet's banlieue origins enrich its realistic nature. In addition, the title of the film, "Ma 6-T Va Crack-er," references the use of slang in the banlieue and highlights the existence and importance of youth culture in these spaces. Another critic writes, "It could be... Richet's intention to claim this violence as his solution to a deadlocked situation -and then we would be frankly in disagreement with him."<sup>141</sup> The violence shown

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<sup>140</sup> Annie Coppermann, "Encore Les Violences En Banlieue." *Les Echos*. *Les Echos*, July 1, 1997. <https://www.lesechos.fr/1997/07/encore-les-violences-en-banlieue-816719>, 1.

<sup>141</sup> Olivier Kohn, *Positif*; Jul/Aug 1997; 437/438; Performing Arts Periodicals Database, 131.

throughout the film, fights, both physical and with guns, riots, burning and destroying cars, can be interpreted as Richet endorsing this as the best way for banlieue residents to express their frustrations with their situation. However, it could also be seen as his depiction of what is going on in the banlieue and the ways in which the residents of these places react to and deal with the harsh conditions of their environment. In *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*, Richet draws from personal experience in order to show the often violent nature of protests and riots in the banlieue through his representation of youth culture.

### **Violence, Destruction and Revolution: The Creation of Social Space in the Banlieue**

It is clear from *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* and other banlieue films that destruction and violence is often viewed as a way to solve problems. The exclusion of banlieue residents from economic and social opportunities often leads to poverty and frustration, which can culminate in violent acts. The banlieusards, those who live in the banlieue, are angry at the police and those in authority for their often discriminatory ways of solving conflict, so they take conflict resolution into their own hands, often leaving destruction and violence in their wake. The most common form of destruction shown in *Ma 6-T Va Cracker* is of public telephone booths and cars. Young men in both gangs throughout the film can be seen smashing the windows of cars, beating car hoods with baseball bats and lighting them on fire. Destroying technology and the cars cuts the banlieue residents off from the rest of society, especially the police. James F. Austin describes this destruction in “Destroying the banlieue: Reconfigurations of Suburban Space in French Cinema” as a “...an act of financial aggression against those relatively prosperous inhabitants of

the suburbs who can afford a vehicle.”<sup>142</sup> The banlieue residents are angry at the system that keeps them in a marginalized position. They take out their anger, frustration and fear on objects that to them represent the people and system that is oppressing them. By destroying things that are expensive, they inconvenience the owners of these things but also demonstrates their power against those who often have more. Austin writes, “...the young men of the suburban housing project, who are mostly of North African origin, are eminently conscious of their status and the resulting lack of economic opportunity, noting that unemployment is so extreme that they see little prospect for their future.”<sup>143</sup> This perceived lack of permanent social and economic immobility adds to their frustrations in a society that already does not understand or want them. They find solutions, although they are often violent, in order to contend with the problems and challenges of being a marginalized and misunderstood group in French society.

The connection between that violence and the creation of social space in *Ma 6-T Va Cracker* is also evident. Removing the reminders and indicators of wealth or the French state (e.g. cars, telephone booths) allow the banlieue residents to create a new space both literally and figuratively. Austin writes, “The banlieue is not, in this light, a spatial accident or fatality, but is rather generated a spatial function of some larger system.”<sup>144</sup> The banlieue was created both by the French state and its residents. Although its original function was to house newly arrived factory workers to France in the 1960s and 70s, it quickly became a tool of social and economic

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<sup>142</sup> James F. Austin, “Destroying the Banlieue: Reconfigurations of Suburban Space in French Film,” *Yale French Studies, New Spaces for French and Francophone Cinema*, no. 115, 2009, 84.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid*, 82.

exclusion and marginalization. These conditions cause violence, uprisings and riots, resulting in the destruction of capitalist symbols and the creation of a new social space:

*Ma 6-t* is careful to show us the destruction of that public telephone along with the automobiles. By destroying cars and telephones, technologies of communication and mobility (of people, of voice), produced by icons of French industry and capitalism such as Renault and Peugeot or France Télécom, the characters are (seditiously) cutting themselves off from the *polis* and its economic order, constituting a separate space.<sup>145</sup>

The removal of these objects from the banlieue means that a new space is created, one that is free of symbols associated with the French state. However, these acts of violence may not actually help the cause of the banlieue residents. Austin explains,

In this way, in affecting the physical space of the *banlieue*, which they do by punctuating it with burned vehicles and buildings, its inhabitants may be playing a role in producing their own social space and condition, albeit negatively. In the cinema and in the actual suburbs, riots can also be considered not merely reactive delinquency but also bids for power, or even nascent revolutions, especially in a nation where revolution is considered legitimate, and is even glorified, both in the school curriculum and in the mainstream press.<sup>146</sup>

Indeed, revolution and revolutionary ideas are often the most common way to influence societal changes in France. In this way, the riots in the banlieue have a deeper meaning to French media and the wider public than just the disgruntled complaints of young people, they are seen as as “...bids for power, or even nascent revolution.”<sup>147</sup> Therefore, they are taken more seriously and handled with greater force than revolutions or protests in other places. Their need for revolution

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 85.

and revolt is indicative of the banlieue residents' sense of national identity. Although of many of the young men in *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* and those depicted in other banlieue films are of North African immigrant origin or heritage, most of the banlieue youth grew up in France, speaking French and learning about the French Revolution in school, so they have a certain context and knowledge of this history which informs their protests and riots, in addition to the influence of the glorification of revolution and revolutionary violence in the French media and society. However, these riots and protests may be contributing to the "...underdeveloped character of the banlieue."<sup>148</sup> The riot and revolution does not allow for infrastructure or industrialization to make positive changes in the banlieue, such as the creation of jobs and the reduction in crime and violence. The use of violence to express their frustrations and the need for substantial structural and social revisions to the banlieue means that there is a lack of positive and constructive dialogue between the police, the French state and the banlieue residents, which means problems are unable to be solved, and persistent issues continue to fester and get worse. At the end of *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*, there is a quotation from Article 35 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen, which states, "When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is, for the people and for each portion of the people, the most sacred and the most essential of the rights." It is clear from this and from the actions of banlieue residents that revolution and revolutionary change are important ideals in French society. The eruption of violence in the banlieue is part of the larger need to reform French society and the way in which the banlieue residents are treated.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 86.

## **The Banlieue and Masculinity: Representations of Youth Culture in *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er***

*Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*'s focus is on the lives and actions of young people in the banlieue. The gangs shown in the film are mostly young men, some who are still in high school and some who are in their early twenties of different ethnicities, "Richet makes no attempt to privilege any particular ethnic group: the cité as a multiethnic space is accepted as a given fact, rendering any discourse surrounding ethnicity in *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* non-existent."<sup>149</sup> Richet's film depicts a homogenous space where violence does not have an ethnicity or race, which shows the frustrations of all people living in the banlieue and removes stereotypes about violent tendencies in people of color. In addition, it is clear throughout the film that the banlieue is a masculine space dominated and controlled by men. The perspective and experience of women is erased, leaving the viewer with only one perception of life in the cité. Will Higbee writes in his article, "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in La Haine and *Ma 6-T Va Crack-Er*." "In *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*, the *banlieue* is qualified as a masculine space through the use of violence (which permeates every level of life in *cité*) and the extremely limited subjectivity offered to female protagonists..."<sup>150</sup> The only way that young people express their frustration and their masculinity in the banlieue is through the use of violence and force. They are trapped in an endless cycle of poverty and discrimination, which causes them to lash out and use violence as a way to solve conflicts. By limiting the viewer's

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<sup>149</sup> William Higbee, "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in La Haine and *Ma 6-T Va Crack-Er*," *Modern & Contemporary France* 9, no. 2 (2001): 199.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

perspective and perception of the banlieue to that of the male or masculine experience, the absence of female characters is noticeable and contributes to the trajectory and themes of the film. Higbee adds that, “The inclusion of female characters invested with authority derived from the state such as the head teacher, or the plain clothes police woman (who takes an active role during the aggressive identity check and search of the young males from the *cité*) is, therefore, highly significant.”<sup>151</sup> The addition of female characters with authority in the film is in direct contradiction with the male domination and perspective in the banlieue, so these women are shown very briefly, and their impact on the rest of the film is minimal. However, what is significant is that they appear at all and in positions of power and authority.



**The destruction of cars in *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*<sup>152</sup>**

The revolution and riots of the banlieue shown in *Ma 6-T va Crack-er* are those of young people. The youth play a large role in the formation and consolidation of the culture of their surroundings, which includes revolutionary activity, and they are proud and defensive of their territory. Higbee writes:

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>152</sup> Glenn Heath Jr, “Ma 6-T Va Crack-Er (Richet, 1997),” Match Cuts, July 19, 2009, <https://matchcuts.wordpress.com/2009/07/16/ma-6-t-va-crack-er-richet-1997/>)

*Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* also places a clear emphasis on the *banlieue* as the site of marginalised *youth*. The film focuses on the delinquent activities of young teenagers from the *cit * as well as the slightly older, unemployed, male population. Although in their early twenties, the latter group still qualify as ‘youth’, since...they have neither the economic status nor the social ‘responsibilities’ (a job and a family to support) associated with adulthood.<sup>153</sup>

*Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* places a clear emphasis on youth and youth culture in the *banlieue*. There are almost no parental or authority figures in the film, except for the teachers shown at the beginning. The older youth of the *banlieue* never really grew up, because they are unable to get a job or move upwards in society, so they are still participating and active in the same activities as those who are younger than them. The cycle of poverty and oppression keeps these young men from living productive and healthy lives, so they end up participating in dangerous and illegal activities. As *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* takes place solely in the *banlieue*, this shows the importance of it to its residents and to the film, in addition to the fact that many of them may never leave it. Higbee states that, “In contrast, an initial reading of *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* suggests an absence of the *cit /city* binary that is so central to the representation of the *banlieue* offered in *La Haine*. The hegemonic space of central Paris does not feature, nor does it alluded to by any of the characters in *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*.”<sup>154</sup> By confining the action of the film to the *cit *, Richet forces the viewer to focus completely on the lives of those in the *banlieue*, who are so often ignored, misrepresented and misunderstood by the media. He casts non-professional actors, many of whom are from the *banlieue*, in order to more accurately represent the real life challenges of *banlieue* residents. Richet wants to be sure that the perspectives of

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 201.



underrepresented people are heard, “Richet frequently positions the camera in *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* amongst the protagonists from the *cité*—either moving within the group from one individual to another, or else following directly behind the characters. The spectator thus adopts the point of view of the young *banlieusards*.”<sup>155</sup> In this way the viewer is able to understand and empathize with the banlieue residents and follow their journeys. As *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* draws from Richet’s personal experiences, the audience gets more intimate and particular insight into the topic of the film. Higbee articulates this clearly:

In a style which Richet claims mirrors the rhythm of life in the *cité*, the plot seems to move randomly from one group to incident to the next, with characters drifting in and out of the narrative. Rather than functioning to advance the narrative or reveal the motivations of the protagonists, the improvised dialogue of *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* often appears as a more personal reflection on life in the deprived *banlieue*, with the non-professional actors (who themselves originate from Meaux) investing their own emotions and experiences of life in the *cité* into the diegesis. In many respects, then, the intensely personal nature of *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*—for both Richet and the cast—blurs the boundaries between realist fiction and documentary in the film.<sup>156</sup>

Although *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* is a work of fiction, Richet relies on both his and the other actors’ personal experiences to create his narrative. By not concentrating on one particular character or group of characters, he is able to depict the larger picture of life in the banlieue. And as Higbee says, Richet is able to blur the line between fiction and documentary in order to tell his story but also raise awareness about life in the banlieue.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 205.



**Youth of the banlieue in *Ma 6-T va Crack-er*<sup>157</sup>**

### ***Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* Conclusion**

*Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* is a dramatic and impactful narrative about life in the Paris banlieue. The representation of violence and youth culture shows the impact of the lack of resources and understanding of disenfranchised young people living in a harsh environment. Richet depicts the marginalized spatialization of the banlieue and its connection to revolution and riots. However this interpretation could also be harmful, "...it could be argued that *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* adds to the already exaggerated media representation of the disadvantaged urban periphery as the site of violence and delinquency which warrants the repressive police presence."<sup>158</sup> Richet's portrayal of the banlieue could perpetuate its image as a violent and dangerous place and impact future cooperation or collaboration of banlieue with the French state in order improve living conditions and infrastructure. This could prevent the banlieue residents from receiving services and the infrastructure they need to improve their financial situations. In addition, it will maintain

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<sup>157</sup> "Ma 6t Va Cracker," Facebook, Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/pg/Ma-6t-va-cracker-163118820393909/photos/>.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 202.

stereotypes about the banlieue in the media and encourage the continuation or installation of policies that hurt people who live there. In order to reverse this stigma, filmmakers can acknowledge the violence and hardship of life in the banlieue and expose the realities of a difficult living situation, while also depicting the humanity and resilience of its people.

## Chapter 8: *Girlhood* and The Representation of Women in Banlieue Cinema

*Girlhood* or *Bande de Filles* is a 2014 film is directed by Céline Sciamma, a French film director born on November 12, 1980 in Pontoise, Val d’Oise, France. Sciamma is best known for her trilogy of films, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), *Tomboy* (2011), *Girlhood* (2014) which center on the themes of growing up, girlhood, gender, sexuality and race. *Girlhood* was well received by critics and has won many awards at international film festivals, including the “International Ecumenical Award” at the Jameson CineFest -Miskolc International Film Festival in 2014, Best Film at the 2014 Stockholm Film Festival and the Award for Outstanding Foreign Film at the Black Reel Awards in 2016. It was also nominated for several awards in France including the “Queer Palm” at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014 and the César award for Best Director in 2015. Reviews of *Girlhood* have also been positive. One critic, Peter DeBruge writes that *Girlhood* is “[a]n engrossing look at the way a young woman of color defines her own identity vis-a-vis the various spheres of support in her life—family, school, friends and so forth...”<sup>159</sup> The film’s focus is Marieme, the protagonist, as she finds her identity and her own way as she is growing up. Marieme is being pulled in many different directions and must decide where she fits in and what her path will be through life. Over the course of the film, Marieme’s identity shifts and changes, and she redefines herself as she interacts with new people and learns about new ways of being. Another review states that, “*Girlhood*'s girls are complex, capable of seemingly contradictory behaviours: innocent and adept at intimidation, playful and violent,

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<sup>159</sup> Peter DeBruge, “GIRLHOOD.” *Variety* 324, no. 2 (May 19, 2014), 1.

loyal and competitive, juvenile and maternal.”<sup>160</sup> Sciamma’s characters are multi-faceted, and the many details and aspects of their identities show both the difficult process of growing up and how discovering who they are allows Marieme and her friends to strengthen their bond and to make sense of their unpredictable environment. Marieme’s evolution and changing identity throughout the film is representative of the experience of young black women growing up in the French banlieue.

### **Female Mobility in the Banlieue: Gender Relations in a Male-Dominated Space**

*Girlhood* focuses on Marieme (Karidja Touré), a young black teenager living in the banlieue in the northwest of Paris. It follows her as she navigates adolescent life in the suburbs and makes a new group of friends or “girl gang” which includes Lady, Adiatou and Fily (Assa Sylla, Lindsay Karamoh and Mariétou Touré). Through these new experiences, Marieme deals with her abusive brother, makes new friends and falls in love for the first time, all while figuring out who she is and where she fits in. *Girlhood* is reminiscent of other banlieue films in that the protagonists’ mobility allows them to leave the banlieue in the search for their identity. As the film starts, we see the differences in the attitudes of Marieme and her friends as they enter and exit the banlieue, “...as soon as the young women hit the border of the *banlieue* and the girls see the figures of young men, the young women fall completely silent. The paradigm of male dominance and female subordination with intermittent freeing moments of girl bonding occurs throughout Marieme’s journey.”<sup>161</sup> When the young women return to the banlieue after their

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<sup>160</sup> Wakefield, Thirza, Girls in the Hood. Sight and Sound, June 1, 2015, Vol. 25, Issue 6, 5.

<sup>161</sup> Ouma Amadou, “Constructing (Black) Girlhood: Americanization, Assimilation, and Ambivalence,” *Film Matters* 7, no. 3 (2016): 8.

American football game, their freedom and sense of independence is no longer there, and they must conform or revert back to the roles and identities given to them by men. They fall silent, and they stop laughing, because their joy and their freedom is not allowed there. Female mobility is only possible outside of the banlieue, where men do not have control over the young women and what they do. Sciamma's focus is women's experiences living in the banlieue, and how this experience is different to the one lived by men. Isabelle McNeill writes in her article " 'Shine Bright like a Diamond': music, performance and digitextuality in Céline Sciamma's *Bande de Filles* (2014)," "So while Marieme initially tags along with the girls to become more visible to Ismaël, their trip to central Paris opens up broader potential. The *métro* dancing follows other public interactions in which the girls assert their power to be heard."<sup>162</sup> Leaving the banlieue allows the girl gang to begin to explore their identities and grow up. Marieme's new life gives her space and freedom and does not confine her to the traditional set of rules that she has always lived by. Marieme only gains her autonomy and freedom when she makes new friends and is able to leave her abusive and controlling home life behind, and her lack of mobility in the banlieue encourages her to seek freedom and different experiences outside of it, because young women and girls in the banlieue live a life that is constantly monitored, surveilled and controlled by men. In the text, "Il y a des règles: Gender, Surveillance, and Circulation in Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles*", Claire Mouflard writes, "Through the film's geographical and visual narrative, Sciamma shows the girls to be under constant surveillance both in their *banlieue* as well as in underground Paris. This surveillance is depicted as hindering their mobility, and as a

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<sup>162</sup> Isabelle McNeill, "'Shine Bright Like a Diamond': Music, Performance and Digitextuality in Céline Sciamma's *Bande De Filles* (2014)," *Studies in French Cinema*, 2018, 333.

consequence, their ability to become independent as they are growing out of their teen years and entering womanhood.”<sup>163</sup> The banlieue hinders Marieme and her friends’ ability grow up, as it keeps them in the same life, roles and structure they have always known. They are always being watched by someone to make sure they are following the “right” path. Society and her family keep Marieme from leaving her current situation. It is harder for them to grow up and figure out who they are, when they live in an environment where their autonomy is suppressed. Her abusive brother but also her love for her younger sisters keeps her at home, even though she yearns to leave and start her own life. Emma Wilson writes in her text, “Scenes of Hurt and Rapture: Céline Sciamma’s *Girlhood*,” “These early scenes establish both that Marieme and Bébé are looking after their sister and that they live under the control of their brother... The film takes stock of her conflicted family situation but saves its outrage for the school system that fails Marieme.”<sup>164</sup> As the film progresses, the complexities of Marieme’s home life become clear, as she must take care of her younger siblings but also contend with Djibril’s abusive behavior. As Wilson says in the above quote, Marieme’s home and school situation hold her back from becoming independent. When Marieme meets with her teacher at the beginning of the film, she encourages her to go to vocational school instead of regular high school. The teacher, along with society, places Marieme in box that she cannot get out of and insinuates that she cannot chose what is best for her or what she wants to do. Although she is mobile, she is only so mobile when she is tied down by a situation that is difficult to leave. Wilson adds, “Marieme’s situation of

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<sup>163</sup> Claire Mouflard, “Il y a des Règles: Gender, Surveillance, and Circulation in Céline Sciamma’s *Bande De Filles*,” *Women in French Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 114.

<sup>164</sup> Emma Wilson, “Scenes of Hurt and Rapture: Céline Sciamma’s *Girlhood*,” *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2017): 14-15.

family violence and institutional neglect, a more entrenched and damaging system of hurt and painful love than any in the earlier films, affects all her choices. The first choice she makes is to join a girl gang. The system of the gang requires repetition of the violence and protection with which Marieme is familiar from her home environment.”<sup>165</sup> Marieme’s background shapes the decisions she makes, and she uses her mobility to replicate her home life. The girl gang requires loyalty, often uses violence to solve disputes, like her older brother Djibril does, but they also protect her from this world and allow her to exercise her mobility. This makes joining them appealing, because she can be mobile and independent but also feel comfortable, as the dynamic is one she is familiar with.



### **Djibril and Marieme in *Girlhood*<sup>166</sup>**

The journey towards finding her identity allows Marieme to become more confident in her mobility. She sees the world from a new perspective as she leaves the banlieue more and more with her girl gang. Mouflard writes, “As the *bande de filles*’ mobility is tampered with by the

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>166</sup> “Girlhood Blu-Ray Release Date May 19, 2015,” Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.bluray.com/movies/Girlhood-Blu-ray/128526/>.



notion of surveillance both from their economic and familial situation, they are only able to form a semblance of community through the realm of consumerism, *or* in finding spaces that are physically out of sight from the controlling male figures in their lives.”<sup>167</sup> The girl gang must leave the surveillance and control of the banlieue in order to experience freedom. They find this space in a hotel room, where they dance, play music and escape from their circumstances.

Wilson writes, “Vic dresses up in an electric blue dress, looking at herself with awe despite the heaviness of the security tag on the fabric. The girls smoke dope and share a bubble pipe, getting high. The scene as it develops is stretched out, made unreal, in line with their elated, languid, drugged perceptions.”<sup>168</sup> Marieme’s mobility means her identity can shift and change; she becomes a more grown-up version of herself with her new clothes and with her forbidden adventures with her new friends. Leaving the banlieue gives her a new space and place to express herself; she becomes someone else and tries on another identity. Wilson adds that, “This scene is a fantasy that sustains the film and characters even in their most traumatic moments of the real. Yet it is in the traumatic moments that the film comes indeed to be critically mindful about violence as well as sensitive to the enmeshing, sometimes, of hurt and love.”<sup>169</sup> Their temporary escape to the hotel room allows the girl gang to forget about their problems and their chaotic home lives. For a little while, worries and problems are in the background, and their

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<sup>167</sup>Claire Mouflard, “Il y a des Règles: Gender, Surveillance, and Circulation in Céline Sciamma’s *Bande De Filles*,” *Women in French Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 116.

<sup>168</sup> Emma Wilson, “Scenes of Hurt and Rapture: Céline Sciamma’s *Girlhood*,” *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2017): 15.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

friendship can flourish and grow. Although their separation from the world cannot last forever, it gives them a little taste of freedom.

## **Identity and Community in *Girlhood***

Throughout the film, Marieme and her friends are constantly searching for new identities, changing who they are and how the world perceives them. Their identities, especially Marieme's, shift as they have new experiences and encounter different types of people. Who they are is rooted in a fusion of banlieue, French and global identities. Music is prevalent throughout the film and plays a role in the girls' perceptions of themselves. Will Higbee writes in "Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France," "As in *La Haine* 20 years earlier, the cultural reference points that dominate the narrative of *Bande de filles* actually suggest a strong identification with an ethnically inflected, globalized youth culture, a point reflected in the clear distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music in the film's soundtrack."<sup>170</sup> The music of *Girlhood* both guides the plot and highlights important moments in the film but also influences the girl gang's identities. Like other teenagers all over the world, the music they listen to says something about who they are, who they want to be and where they come from. We, as the audience, are able to discern from the music who the girls think they are, but the girls also want to define this for themselves. Higbee adds, "They are, after all, the French-born descendants of immigrants who are distanced from the nostalgic pull towards the culture and location of the homeland. Moreover, though born and raised in France, the marginalized position occupied by many of these second- or third-generation 'immigrants' is based on both socioeconomic

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<sup>170</sup> Will Higbee, " 'Beyond Ethnicity' or a Return to Type? Bande Filles/Girlhood and the Politics of Blackness in Contemporary French Cinema," In *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, Liverpool University Press, 2018, 170.

exclusion and discrimination against ethnic minorities.<sup>171</sup>” Although the girls try to define their own identities, society already has a perception of who they are and who they will become as they grow up. They seem themselves as French, go to French schools and speak French, but their “immigrant” identity is sometimes the only one seen by those on the outside, even if they listen to the same music, wear the same clothes and grow up in much the same way as other teenagers around the world. Their complicated relationships with their friends and with their families show the difficult and complex nature of these relationships, especially those in the unique position of having to navigate two different cultures, societies and ways of life.



### **The bande de filles in the hotel room<sup>172</sup>**

Marieme’s desire to leave home and start her own life is a product of her abusive and dysfunctional family situation. She wants to “rise above” the status of immigrant worker and construct her own identity that is separate from her mother’s and the rest of her family’s. Higbee writes:

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 170-1.

<sup>172</sup> Sheila O'Malley, “Girlhood Movie Review & Film Summary (2015): Roger Ebert,” movie review & film summary (2015) | Roger Ebert, January 30, 2015, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/girlhood-2015>).

Marieme/Vic's response to her mother's attempt to secure work for her in the hotel could therefore be seen as a refusal to conform to the expected role of the immigrant worker...In this respect, Vic's rejection of this future, its limited horizons, and lack of social mobility suggests a refusal of both the cultural and socioeconomic conditions which she associates with the immigrant community, the socioeconomic milieu from which she originates, and the way both these facets of her identity are (negatively) viewed by wider society.<sup>173</sup>

Marieme wants to create her own future and identity, and she rejects the hotel job in hopes that she can do "better." She refuses to be limited or constrained to the stereotypes about her community and believes that she can overcome her circumstances. The construction of her own identity is what is most important to her, and this is what Sciamma portrays throughout the film, young women in search of their own identities while also contending with societal perceptions of them. Marieme, "...tries on different identities: gang member or drug dealer, hyper-feminized or masculine, leader or follower, all in an attempt to break free from the dominant masculine space that subordinates her female identity."<sup>174</sup> Marieme performs various identities throughout the film both in order to figure out who she is. She cannot be herself when she is monitored and controlled in the banlieue and escaping this environment allows her female identity to flourish as she gains back her sense of freedom and independence.

The theme of identity in *Girlhood* comes in many forms, and Sciamma had a specific vision of who she wanted the identities of the protagonists in the film to be perceived. Her focus on black young women in the banlieue deviates from the traditional narrative of banlieue cinema

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<sup>173</sup>Will Higbee, "'Beyond Ethnicity' or a Return to Type? Bande Filles/Girlhood and the Politics of Blackness in Contemporary French Cinema." In *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, Liverpool University Press, 2018, 173.

<sup>174</sup>Ouma Amadou, "Constructing (Black) Girlhood: Americanization, Assimilation, and Ambivalence," *Film Matters* 7, no. 3 (2016): 9.

which depicts a multi-ethnic space with men of different backgrounds submerged in the violence and poverty of their surroundings. *Girlhood* portrays an alternative to this, and Sciamma argued that she wasn't making a film about race but rather about being a girl in the banlieue. Higbee writes, "...in interviews surrounding the film's release, Sciamma preferred to focus on *Bande de fille*'s coming-of-age narrative as dealing with 'universal' themes of girlhood, gender, and identity, arguing that, whilst it may focus on a particular socioeconomic and ethnic space, *Bande de filles* is not 'about' the experience of being a black woman in the *banlieue*..."<sup>175</sup> Sciamma's claims that race is not an important factor in the experience of the girls' stories that *Girlhood* portrays, and that what is important is their experience growing up in the banlieue. Amadou explains that Sciamma's "...consistent choice to draw on French universalist ideology to explain the narrative choices in her film, thus to deny that *Girlhood* tackles the question of blackness in France: 'I'm making this universal, and I decide that my character, who represents the youth of today for me, can be black.'" <sup>176</sup> For Sciamma, race is not what she wants the audience to notice when watching the film. It is for, her, about the experience women in the banlieue, no matter their race. The French Republican perspective of blackness takes a more "colorblind" approach to race and race relations, as well as the way in which race is a factor or has an impact on the experience of people in different situations. Vanessa Eileen Thompson writes her article, "Black Jacobins in Contemporary France: On Identities on Politics, Decolonial Critique, and the Other Blackness," "...French Republicanism is not only constitutively undergirded by notions of

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<sup>175</sup> Will Higbee, " 'Beyond Ethnicity' or a Return to Type? Bande Filles/Girlhood and the Politics of Blackness in Contemporary French Cinema." In *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, Liverpool University Press, 2018, 175.

<sup>176</sup> Ouma Amadou, "Constructing (Black) Girlhood: Americanization, Assimilation, and Ambivalence," *Film Matters* 7, no. 3 (2016): 6.

racialization that reproduce the ‘particular other’ in order to sustain the notion of the universal, but furthermore operates, manages and mobilizes the ‘particular other’ to prove its universalist promise.”<sup>177</sup> French culture is traditionally nationalistic and homogenous, and these thought processes lead to the marginalization of minority groups and a focus on the collective rather than the individual, which excludes those who do not fit into societal norms. In the case of *Girlhood*, by removing the racial aspect of the unique perspectives of the girl gang, Sciamma reproduces this homogeneity and does not fully integrate the girls’ intersectional experiences into the film.

However, the intersectionality of *Girlhood*’s protagonists cannot be ignored and ultimately is a factor in the way in which society and the audience views them. Marieme, Fily, Lady and Adiatou are French, however, their second-generation immigrant and racial identities are influences their experiences as they grow up and leave the banlieue, and it is why they are living in the banlieue in the first place. Belonging to a minority group means they are pushed to edges and margins of society, where the government hopes they can be contained and not flourish or grow. Higbee posits that, “*Bande de Filles*’ conception of blackness is constantly at risk of reinforcing certain spectators’ facile stereotypes and one-dimensional perceptions of the girls as delinquent, marginal, and immigrant others; even if evidence within the narrative itself might suggest the contrary.”<sup>178</sup> The lack of focus on race may take away from Sciamma’s message, because it does not acknowledge that the challenges the girl gang faces come from an intersectional perspective. Their racial and ethnic origins mean that historically they are viewed

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<sup>177</sup> Vanessa Thompson, “Black Jacobins in Contemporary France: On Identities on Politics, Decolonial Critique, and the Other Blackness,” *Sociological Focus* 49 (January 1, 2016): 46.

<sup>178</sup> Will Higbee, “ ‘Beyond Ethnicity’ or a Return to Type? *Bande Filles*/*Girlhood* and the Politics of Blackness in Contemporary French Cinema.” In *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, Liverpool University Press, 2018, 179.

as violent criminals, but their gender means that they are seen as men's subordinates. The struggles they face and their lack of upward mobility in the banlieue comes from many sources and do not have one cause. Their varied identities and their fight to create their own, as well as Sciamma's conception of gender and race in the film, construct the way in which the girls grow up and find themselves.

## **Growing Up and *Girlhood* as a Bildungsroman**

*Girlhood* is a film about growing up, finding your own identity and learning how you and how you identify fit in with the world around you. Throughout the film, Marieme and her "girl gang" are constantly negotiating and re-negotiating their position in the world and in French society. Their identity changes and evolves as they have new experiences. Marieme's performance of identity and trying on new identities allows her to discover who she really is and is part of her process of growing up. Bildungsroman is a genre of literature and film that depicts coming of age stories of self-discovery as well as how young people integrate themselves into the wider community. Carol Lazzaro-Weis defines bildungsroman as "...the relation between individuals and groups, [which] provokes one of two answers from the indeterminate register: 'socially critical answers, in which the individual attempts to transform or transcend social relations, and utopian answers, in which social relations are beneficently arranged to foster the growth of the protagonist.'"<sup>179</sup> Bildungsroman are about the relationships and the interactions between the individual (in the case of *Girlhood*, Marieme, and her friends) and how they fit into more broadly into society. Marieme constantly tries to understand the world around her, and her

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<sup>179</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "The Female Bildungsroman." In *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968-1990*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, 98.

relationships allow her to grow and evolve. She “transform[s] or transcend[s] social relations”<sup>180</sup> as she breaks free of traditions of the banlieue, changes her identity and makes new friends. Marieme’s transformation from a girl into a young woman shows the importance of her surroundings and her connection to her chosen community to her growth and independence.

### ***Girlhood Conclusion***

*Girlhood* is a celebration and representation of varied identities, which translate into opportunities for new experiences. Marieme’s mobility and her growth throughout the film shows the changes of adolescence in an honest and direct manner, as well as how the environment she is living in will affect her life as she becomes an adult. Her constantly evolving identity and exploration of life beyond what she has always known are an interesting and unconventional look at the Paris suburbs and youth culture. She tries on many different identities before she finds that she cannot rely on anyone else or pretend to be anyone else in order to figure out who she is. Mouflard writes of the last scene in *Girlhood*, “As she walks away from the H.L.M door to the end of the walkway overlooking the *banlieue*, she is at first seen and heard sobbing before the camera zooms in on a blurry horizon, leaving Marieme out of the frame. Finally, Marieme re-enters the frame, swallows down her tears, abruptly walks away, leaving the spectator with a glimpse of the blurry *banlieue* before the screen turns black.”<sup>181</sup> Marieme attempts to return to her old life in her old neighborhood at the end of the film, but she cannot bring herself to do so, crying as she realizes she cannot go back. Her new identity does not fit in with her past and where she came from, so in essence she does not fit in anywhere anymore.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>181</sup> Claire Mouflard, “Il y a des Règles: Gender, Surveillance, and Circulation in Céline Sciamma’s *Bande De Filles*,” *Women in French Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016):123.



Although this might make it seem like the future is bleak for Marieme, she also has the opportunity to be able to evolve and adapt to many different situations. Her resilience and tenacity is clear throughout the film, and she is ready to fight for who she is and what she believes in as a young woman. Although Sciamma's focus is primarily on the life in the banlieue as it is experienced by young women, the nature of her subject gives an intersectional approach to how the banlieue and its environment can stifle growth but also allow it.

# CONCLUSION

Migration cinema in France and Spain shows the struggles of North African and Sub-Saharan African immigrants as they navigate their new lives in their adopted countries. These two national traditions of film show the different stages in the immigration process and the assimilation of people of various national origins into “mainstream” society. These films deal with the immigrant experience at different times; the Spanish films focus on first-generation immigrants’ experiences with displacement and undocumented status, while French banlieue cinema is looking at the second and third generations of immigrants, when they are citizens of the country but constantly reminded of their origins by society. The problems immigrants in both countries encounter stem from the same places, but they take on different forms with the passage of time. The films show the bravery and strength of immigrants searching for what they hope will be opportunities for them to support their families and themselves. Border crossing and changes in their mobility allow them to experience new spaces and cultures but also exposes them to the racism and discrimination that comes from society’s perception of their immigrant identities. These challenges reoccur and reemerge through the distinct experiences of immigrants in each film, no matter its country of origin.

The evolving multicultural realities of global society, but especially those portrayed in migration cinema, show how identity shifts and changes over time, as well as the need for tolerance and acceptance. Spanish migration films point to the importance of community, as well as the journeys of self-exploration and acceptance of those who are different. As Abdenbi says in *Poniente*, “Your roots are my roots.” We are not so different from the “Other” once we understand him. French banlieue films point to the ways in which immigration affects the

country over time, and how the assimilation and identities of immigrants contributes to violence and potential revolution. Although Spanish and French migration cinema cover different topics and themes, there is a common thread throughout: the racism and discrimination against immigrants of color will continue without acceptance and structures put in place by governments in order to reduce the negative view of immigrants in society.

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