



Spatial opposition and the gendered spectacle of social suffering in French films

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A SURVEY of French films from the beginning of sound cinema conducted by film specialist Susan Hayward demonstrates that almost half the terrain of Paris is excluded in French cinema. This shows that Paris, like all major cities, is based on the principle of exclusion and inclusion and that the city is the embodiment of power relations – “There are bodies that are in and others that are not” (Hayward 31) – and that cinema contributes to such a discourse of exclusion.

However, since the 1990s, French cinema has seen the renewal of social films, a “return of the political”, which deal with socio-political issues affecting contemporary France: racism, unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, and the areas traditionally excluded from representation in French films now figure prominently. In this paper, I will explore the representation of Parisian urban space and the gendered use of the space in two films, *La Haine* (*The Hate*) made in 1995 and directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, and *Chaos* made in 2001 and directed by Coline Serreau.

Both films seek to make contemporary social suffering visible by focusing on the local struggle of second generation migrant youth in Paris and the Parisian suburbs (the “banlieue”), and they have been applauded for bringing the plight of the “banlieue” to a wider audience. Because both films have adopted a documentary style, they have been thought to be transparent reflections of “banlieue” life – a private screening of *La Haine* was organised for French ministers so they would become aware of the





social situation of the “banlieue”. The facts that *La Haine* is solely about male youth and that the spaces represented in the film are essentially male domains have been almost entirely overlooked by audiences and film critics. *Chaos* offers in this regard an interesting point of comparison as the film focuses on female characters occupying the same urban spaces as the male characters in *La Haine*. In this article, I will explore how gender is embedded in the spectacle of social suffering and in its spatial representations. The films will be analysed not for their reflection of the real, but for the ways they “inscribe and produce place and space, and thereby participate in a form of geographic discourse”³ and contribute to institutionalizing a certain ideological “knowledge” about these places in which gender is always an intrinsic part.

Both films focus on individualised experience of suffering, although they clearly locate the root of this suffering in the social. In his book *La Misère du Monde*, Bourdieu stresses the importance of reconnecting individual suffering to the systemic, the local to the global in order to give adequate account of the origin and causes of such suffering. Both films have attempted to do that. However, while cinema is particularly apt at telling stories about individuals in concrete and spatial locations, to deal with the process at a systemic level is more difficult.³ In addition, the notion of individual is problematic as it is a gender-neutral concept which does not reflect the significance of male/female opposition in the representation of the experience of suffering.

This article will look at the filmic strategies used by Kassovitz and Serreau to articulate the local and the global levels in the occupation of space by male and female characters. As noted by Bourdieu, “The structure of social space shows up as spatial oppositions, with the inhabited (or appropriated) space functioning as a sort of spontaneous symbolisation of social space”. (124) Spatial oppositions, the to and fro from the “banlieue” to Paris in *La Haine* and from urban to natural space in *Chaos* represent attempts at the reframing of the local within a global context but this article will show that in this reframing gender is inextricable.

La Haine is the story of a day in the life of three youths. Following riots in a Parisian “banlieue”, Abdel, a sixteen-year-old teenager, is near death





in a hospital after being beaten during a police interrogation. His friends, Hubert an aspiring boxer of African or West Indian background, Saïd a young delinquent of Maghrebi origin and Vinz, a Jew fascinated by guns and violence, learn that Abdel is in a coma and might not survive. *La Haine* is about 24 hours of the life of the trio as they travel to Paris from their “banlieue”, get into trouble with the police, meet skinheads, sneak into an art gallery and meet an old man in the toilet of a café who tells them an anecdote on Jews in Soviet camps which they do not understand. During their aimless wandering through early morning Paris, they learn that Abdel has died. They return to their “banlieue” to be intercepted by a police patrol. During the check, an officer unintentionally kills Vinz. Hubert seizes Vinz’s gun and holds it against the officer. The screen goes black and a gunshot is heard.

La Haine is clearly divided into three parts geographically located: life in the “banlieue”, a trip to Paris, and the return to the “banlieue”. From the very first shots of the film, the “banlieue” is constructed as a sociological problem, a site of violence and riots, which threaten to spread to the rest of the world if not dealt with. There was something prophetic about it, as in 2005, riots did spread all over France.

The film limits the representation of the “banlieue” to the “cité”, an area of high density housing commission buildings, badly constructed with little infrastructure and out of reach of easy public transport. Throughout the film, the media, through the television screen, will function as a mirroring space framing the riots and the “cité” as a dangerous place. When seen through the eyes of the national media, the “banlieue” is a site of the other, reinforcing the process of exclusion. Hubert compares the journalists coming to film the inhabitants of the “cité” to visitors to a zoo.

The film represents the “cité” as an enclosed and marginalised place under surveillance, a panoptic space. One of the first shots of the film sets the tone: Saïd (Algerian) stands in an empty courtyard surrounded by high buildings forming prison-like walls around him, and by a barrier of police vans and policemen with their dogs. A subjective camera moves in circular pans and travellings, reinforcing the feeling of claustrophobia and



isolation. However, Saïd, transgressing the boundaries of the imprisoning space, walks to the door of the police van and writes; "Saïd: Baise la police" ("Fuck the police"). This first shot is representative of the spatial construction of the "banlieue" as a site of violent confrontation between males (police and male inhabitants), as a male-dominated space. But when Saïd tags the police car the film also points to the youth's resistance to the prison-like enclosure by opening within this local context a space which is culturally subversive. Throughout the film, reference is made to American subculture – American cinema, Bob Marley, hip-hop, etc. – indicating that a transatlantic dialogue is being conducted in the Parisian periphery with American subculture, thus establishing a form of solidarity, a connection between the urban rebellion depicted in the film and a global ghetto culture.

In *La Haine*, women are almost entirely excluded from representation; they are erased not only from the public repressive space but also from this emerging cultural discourse of opposition. They are seen very briefly in the private sphere of the housing commission apartment, also a narrow enclosed space, but they are not given any significant place in the narrative. Their existence is entirely defined in relation to the main protagonists: they are the mother, the grandmother, the sister and they are confined to the private realm, where they perform traditional tasks: sewing and cooking. The obliteration of women in the film raises the question: what do women do in the "banlieue" while men are drug dealing, tagging, fighting, etc.? *Chaos* provides a bleak response to the questions, as we will see later in this article.

If in *La Haine*, the terrain is essentially occupied by male bodies, males do not appropriate the space; the youth are seen walking across deserted, empty areas, parking lots, playgrounds, basements. They never stop moving. The only time they attempt to appropriate an area, the rooftop of a building where they have recreated a homelike place with barbecues, tables and sofas, the police force them to leave. This restlessness figures their displacement: they have lost their origin, do not know where to go and, as we will see, have been rejected from the geographic centre.

Halfway through the film, the three characters are seen travelling to



Paris so that Saïd can get his money from his friend Asterix, a name which immediately posits Paris as a true, original French place. In opposition to the “banlieue”, Paris is the site of power and traditional French culture. As Bourdieu notes, the capital city is “the site of capital, that is, the site in physical space where the positive poles of all fields are concentrated along with most of the agents occupying these dominant positions”. (124) However, it is interesting to note that, reversing the expected aesthetic hierarchy, the “banlieue” was filmed using stereo sound and a large crew allowing for large camera movements whereas Paris was filmed in mono with a limited crew and more static shots. This reversal makes the “banlieue” the geographical reference point of the film. The second part of the film will focus on the youths trying to return to their “cité”, their home, that is, the place which inscribes their displacement and therefore their marginalised identity.

When the trio leaves the “banlieue” by train, the film creates a feeling – through wider shots, high angle and crane shots – that the youth are leaving a claustrophobic space for an open landscape. We expect that the individual suffering will be reframed in a global context. However, only fragments of the global will be available to spectators. Several attempts are made in the film to reframe the individual suffering within a wider context. From the train travelling to Paris, through Hubert’s gaze, we see a large poster figuring in its centre the image of a globe (the earth) with the caption “le monde est à vous”, which Saïd will tag later on: he will change the caption replacing the “v” of “vous” (you) with a “n” to make “nous” (we). The message: the world is yours becomes the world is ours. We realise then that the poster is an advertisement for cheap travel to Agadir (Morocco).

This functions as an attempt to reframe the local situation of the trio within the wider context of colonialism and post-colonialism: it denounces tourism as territorial appropriation, post-colonial places as playgrounds for the West. It is significant that it is Saïd, an Algerian, who modifies the message; North Africa evokes his origins and through tagging he can symbolically reclaim it. The scene is emblematic of the process of disappropriation through colonialism, migration and tourism which is at





the root of the social marginalisation of youth in the “banlieue”.

As the trio is arguing in the toilet of a Parisian café, they are told an anecdote about anti-Semitism in the old Soviet Union, and the importance of solidarity. However, while most spectators would understand the story, the young men cannot make sense of it and its reference to European history, as they do not possess the cultural background. They cannot relate their personal suffering to a wider historical context, although the film offers fragments of an explanation and traces of the reasons behind this suffering. (O’Shaughnessy 75) It is through artificial inserts that the film inscribes traces of a global context, but it does not provide a wider framework which can offer understanding and hope. While opening a space for rethinking the situation in more global terms, the anecdote functions as an allegory of “the blindness of postcolonial Europe to read its present in the light of its near past”.⁶

What the trio learns in Paris is the extent of, rather than the reason for, their exclusion and their powerlessness. In Paris, they are faced with violent confrontations which do not empower them. On the contrary the trio occupies the Parisian space in a feminine fashion, as their experience of exclusion and humiliation emasculates them. If urban space is constructed essentially as masculine space, the disempowerment of the three protagonists makes them experience urban space in a way similar to that of women. *La Haine* might have been read as the plight of suburban youth, but it is more than anything the plight of disempowered, socially feminised men who fail to regain their masculinity through violence.

The trio’s trip to Paris and their return to the “banlieue” where Vinz will be killed, reveal the absence of hope, their despair and the lack of any systemic understanding of their suffering.

In contrast, *Chaos* adopts a coherent feminist discourse to frame its characters’ suffering. *Chaos* narrates the story of Hélène and Paul, a typical bourgeois couple – busy, professionals with a beautiful Paris apartment – whose lives are forever changed when they witness the savage beating of a prostitute of Algerian origin, Malika, in a Parisian street. They do nothing. Paul locks the door of his car, and when the pimps run off – the beaten woman is lying bleeding and unconscious in the street – the couple





take the sullied car directly to a car wash.

Feeling guilty, H el ene tracks down Malika in hospital and puts her life on hold to help her recover. She realises, thanks to Malika, that she is exploited by her husband and her son.

The film includes a long flashback recounting Malika's past, how she ran away from her family that lives in the Paris "banlieue", after her father sold her to an Algerian businessman. Homeless, living on the streets, she was turned into a sex slave by a criminal organization. But Malika has worked out an elaborate plot to get both her freedom and her revenge and with the help of H el ene sets herself, her sister and H el ene free.

Paris, in *Chaos*, is the site of female oppression and violence against women. It is a dark, confined and threatening place. Female characters do not wander in urban space, as they never feel safe enough: cars, motorbikes, men are all threats to their safety. However, later in the film, H el ene, in order to save Malika from her pimps, attacks one of them in the middle of a large open Parisian street, and in daylight; she hits him, kicks him when he is lying on the ground, recalling the first scene of the film when Malika was the victim of the pimps. H el ene is able, for the first time, to turn things around and take a masculine role, unlike the characters of *La Haine*, who when they riot to assert themselves, do so in the "banlieue", burning cars, destroying the sport centre, the schools, and exhibiting self-destructive behaviour representative of their self-hate.

Urban space in *Chaos* is not structured according to the division between "banlieue" and Paris. The polarities between a bourgeois central city and marginal outskirts are revealed to be only superficial: the migrant suburbs and the French, bourgeois capital, are both sites of male domination and female oppression and exploitation. The division of urban space is that between the private and the public. It is in the private sphere, Malika's family's housing commission flat and H el ene's bourgeois apartment, that the systemic reasons for women's suffering are powerfully revealed; the private space is the domain of patriarchal power. Both apartments are enclosed spaces where father and sons assume the worst aspect of abusive patriarchal authority. It is only outside the private space that the women will be able to escape this authority. The disenfranchised male youth are



not portrayed as victims in *Chaos* but as harassers: Malika, with disdain for materialistic possessions, floods her brothers with gifts by sending a van full of motorbikes, CD players, etc., showing they are only victims of their own greed.

Coline Serreau provides a clear message: whether in the migrant suburbs or in the French bourgeois capital, women are oppressed and victims of male domination and violence in their private and public lives. But the systemic reason can be found in the private sphere, site of the patriarchal family. In both families, fathers, husbands and sons assume the worst aspects of patriarchal authority. By depicting the life of two women of differing background, and including parallel scenes, Serreau applies a globalised feminist framework with no sensitivities to cultural difference. Interestingly, republican institutions such as schools, hospitals and the police (the police will help Malika get rid of her pimps) play an essential role in Malika's integration into French society. If in *La Haine*, male youths destroy the school and the sports centre and fight with the police, in *Chaos*, these public institutions are respected and trusted; they help women free themselves from male oppression. It is significant that in both films the hospital has a central place in the narrative. However, in *La Haine*, the trio is expelled from the hospital where their friend will finally die, whereas in *Chaos*, Malika will recover mobility and speech and will receive help and assistance in hospital. Malika is unable to liberate herself from her pimps without the help of H el ene, a white middle-class woman, and the assistance of French republican institutions. If *La Haine* constructs a narrative of total despair and hopelessness, *Chaos* proposes a narrative of rescue, liberation and Westernisation through the respect of French republican values which are perceived as gender neutral.

Transnational connectivity found in *La Haine* does not have a place in *Chaos*: Malika's story is the story of yearning for integration into French society prevented by the patriarchal family. In fact, Malika refuses her ethnic background, she speaks standard French, was perfectly adapted to the school system and has an extended knowledge of finance. Serreau narrates a utopian tale of social integration in which marginalisation and exclusion of migrant women come from patriarchy not republican



institutions.

The main spatial opposition in *Chaos* is between the urban and natural environment. While women are constantly harassed in urban spaces, peace is found in natural settings: it is in the country house of Mamie (Hélène's mother in law) that Malika finds refuge from her pimps. Mamie is a stereotypical grandmother, the traditional maternal figure: she grows her own vegetables, makes jam and is eager to feed and shelter everyone. The countryside is constructed as a maternal feminine refuge, away from men. However, it is in Malika's house by the seaside (she bought it with the money she made prostituting herself to a rich old man) that the four women, Malika, Hélène, Mamie and Malika's sister, will find true liberation. The last shots of the film show them sitting on a bench looking out to sea. Water has always been metaphorically associated with women and offers a direct contrast with the hard, dark and confining male-dominated urban spaces. The wide angle shot of the sea and the physical closeness of the female protagonists looking at the open, empty space produce a strong feeling of hope and optimism. But this future is a utopian future without the presence of men.

While *Chaos* and *La Haine* are fictional stories, they reveal aspects of social suffering which had until their appearance been kept under silence in cinema. They both draw attention to what is unacceptable around us and try to undo its silencing through close attention to embodied suffering. In both cases, spatial opposition allows the films to reframe individual stories within a global framework; however *La Haine* does so in a fragmentary fashion where only traces of the history of colonialism, racism and class struggle are made visible to the spectators but stay unreadable for the characters, who have no overarching system that can make sense of their personal suffering and give them hope for the future. In contrast, *Chaos* frames personal misery as female misery and within a globalised feminist framework which shows respect and hope in existing republican values which are perceived as gender neutral.

The films present two radically different discourses on the "banlieue". On the one hand, in *Chaos*, we are presented with a Western feminist discourse as a valid political discourse to articulate and frame marginalised



female suffering within a global context, whereas on the other, in *La Haine*, there is no overarching masculine political discourse able to articulate male suffering, but an attempt to begin creating transnational links with other marginalised male communities located beyond the national space.

Since 2000, French socio-political cinema has moved beyond the national boundaries. As noted by French film scholar Michel Marie, “the future history of cinema will inevitably be increasingly transnational”,⁷ and French film studies will have to assess the extent of the developing transnational perspective in French filmmaking begun in *La Haine*. However, this assessment should not lose sight of the way gender is always embedded in filmic and spatial representation.

Notes

- 1 Susan Hayward, “The City as Narrative: Corporeal Paris in Contemporary French Cinema”, in *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. Myrto Kontstantarakos (Exeter: Intellect, 2000), 23-31.
- 2 William Higbee, “The Return of the Political, or Designer Visions of Exclusion? The Case of Matthew Kassovitz’s fracture sociale Trilogy”, in *Studies in French Cinema*, 5,2 (2005), 123-35.
- 3 Jeanne Garane, ed., *Geographies: Writing Space and Place in French/Géographies: l’écriture de l’espace et du lieu en français* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), 10.
- 4 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- 5 Martin O’Shaughnessy, “Eloquent fragments: French fiction film and globalisation”, in *French Politics, Culture and Society* (Winter, 2005), p. 75.
- 6 Yosefa Loshitzky, “The post-holocaust Jew in the age of postcolonialism: *La Haine* revisited”, in *Studies in French Cinema*, 5,2 (2005), 137-47.
- 7 Michel Marie, “Preface” in *The Cinema of France*, ed. Phil Powrie (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), xiv.