Re-Presenting the Urban Periphery: Maghrebi-French Filmmaking and the *banlieue* Film

by Will Higbee

Although technically the French word *banlieue* signifies "suburbs," it is an extremely loaded term in its contemporary socio-cultural context. The phrase evokes images of run-down *cités* (working-class housing projects) located on the peripheries of larger French cities dominated by violence, unemployment, criminality, social exclusion and populated by alienated male youth—particularly of (North-African) immigrant origin. This heavily media-driven imagining of the *banlieue—*endorsed by politicians from both sides of the political spectrum in rhetoric surrounding the problems of *fracture sociale* and *insécurité*—points to the very real social crises facing the inhabitants of the disadvantaged urban periphery, which have existed since the late 1970s. The extent of these crises have recently become apparent during the rioting and violent altercations between *banlieue* youth and police that took place across France in late 2005. Of course, such representations and associations offer only a partial view of the *banlieue*, denying the complex socio-cultural networks that constitute the disadvantaged urban periphery. They also ignore the failure over the past three decades of successive French governments to adequately respond to the causes of social exclusion within the *banlieue*: economic decline, chronic unemployment, crime, a lack of social mobility—as well as the institutional racism and broader prejudices routinely experienced by many residents of the *banlieue* (particularly those of immigrant origin) in relation to wider French society.

French cinema’s engagement with the *banlieue* is equally problematic, in the sense that these representations risk falling into the same overdetermined clichés of the rundown *cité* as the emblematic site of exclusion, criminality and "otherness." The critical purchase of the *banlieue* film as a generic category is also questionable—as, indeed, is the problematic notion of "beur cinema," with which the *banlieue* film is so often seen to coalesce. The term "*banlieue* film" or "cinéma de banlieue" first appeared in 1995, following the release that year of six independently produced features focusing on the urban periphery as a site of social exclusion and ethnic difference, and the media storm generated by the spectacular success of one of these films in particular, Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* (1995). Critics debated the significance of a "new" category of film that, for the first time since the Western, was primarily defined by its geographical location. And yet, beyond their shared socio-cultural location, these films displayed considerable stylistic and ideological diversity. Moreover, to describe the *banlieue* film as a "new" phenomenon is disingenuous, given that French filmmakers (including those of North African origin) had in fact been mapping the socio-cultural terrain of the *banlieue* since at least the 1960s through films such as *Terrain vague* (Carné, 1960), *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (Godard, 1967), *Laisse béton* (Le Péron, 1984), *Le Thé au harem d’Archimède* (Charef, 1985), and *De brut et de fureur* (Brisseau, 1988).

How, when, and where, then, does the *banlieue* intersect with Maghrebi-French (*beur*) filmmaking? Writing in 1990, French film critic Christian Bossoño suggested that the inclusion of a number of films by Maghrebi-French directors at the Lussas Festival of Regional Cinema in the late 1980s offered spectrums "a chance to discover *beur* cinema... the product of a new French "region," the working-class suburban environment." Bossoño’s observation is essentially correct in so much as North African immigrants and their descendants comprise a disproportionately high proportion of the population living in the working-class *banlieue* of larger French towns and cities. Earlier generations of economic (mostly male) migrants from the Maghreb were housed either in *bidonvilles* (shantytowns) on the urban fringes, or else in cheap accommodation in immigrant districts of larger French cities. With the halt of official immigration from the Maghreb in 1974, however, and the introduction of a policy of *regroupement familial* a year later, local government officials in France were forced to provide housing for the newly arrived families of immigrant workers. The increasingly dilapidated postwar *cités* of the urban periphery, which were being deserted by working-class and lower-middle-class French families for whom they had originally been designed, became the obvious solution. A significant proportion of the French-born descendants of North African immigrants (in this article referred to as "beur" or "Maghrebi-French") were therefore raised in the working-class *banlieue*. In this respect it is unsurprising that young Maghrebi-French filmmakers, often working on extremely low-budget projects and keen to articulate their own experiences or those of their peers, should choose to locate their films in the immediate vicinity of the *cités* in which they had grown up.

The significance of the historical and geographical positioning of Maghrebi-French filmmakers within the *banlieue* is even more apparent when compared to that of Algerian émigré directors such as Merzak Allouache, Abdelkrim Bahloul, and Mahmoud Zemmouri—whose work is often included within the broader corpus of *beur* cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. Tellingly, films such as *Le Thé à la menthe* (Bahloul, 1985) or *Salut cousin!* (Allouache, 1997) are located in the older, more centralized immigrant districts of Paris such as Belleville and Barbès, where established socio-cultural networks of street markets, "ethnic" commerce, mosques, and cafés provide a more immediate connection for these émigré directors to the Maghreb than the *cités* of the urban periphery.

Even in Zemmouri’s 100% *Arabica* (1997), which is considered part of the *banlieue* film canon and takes place on the outskirts of Paris, the neighborhood featured in the film (Montreuil) does not have the appearance of the typical postwar housing estates found in the *banlieue* film. Buildings are older and the entrance to the neighborhood leads into a courtyard, which is always full of local residents—evoking a sense of community and a connection to public space that is often lacking in other *banlieue* films.
Returning to the earliest examples of beur filmmaking in the 1980s, the most prominent example of the intersection between beur and banlieue filmmaking comes in the form of Mehdi Charef’s award-winning Le Thé au harem d’Archimède, a semiautobiographical film that focuses on the experiences of young Maghrebi-French youth from the estates of Nanterre (on the outskirts of Paris where the director himself grew up). Along with Serge Le Péron’s Laisse béton (1984), Le Thé au harem d’Archimède established the esthetic and narrative blueprint for the banlieue film that would (re-) emerge in the mid-1990s: a focus on an interethnic alliance between Maghrebi-French and (white) French banlieue youth combined with a realist esthetic that employed the alienating architecture of the housing estates to reflect the exclusion felt by the films’ youthful protagonists. This tendency also highlighted an inherent contradiction: the banlieue functioned as a site of exclusion that simultaneously remained the only real space of community and belonging for banlieue youth. This paradox is also played out through the narrative of Rachid Bouchareb’s Bâton Rouge (1985), where three friends (one white French and two Maghrebi-French youths) attempt to “escape” the limited horizons of the banlieue by travelling clandestinely to America, only to be deported back to France. The film partly eschews the social realism of Le Thé au harem d’Archimède by offering a more stylized representation of the cité, and by placing the majority of the action beyond the banlieue in the American South (Louisiana). Nevertheless, the link between the Maghrebi-French protagonists and the location of the banlieue is reinforced by the fact that the friends return to their old neighborhood at the end of the film where, as part of a local resident’s cooperative, they set up a fast-food restaurant (unambiguously positioning the Maghrebi-French youths’ future within France and, more specifically, the banlieue).

The connection of Maghrebi-French filmmakers to the banlieue in the 1980s was not only limited to the crossover success of Le Thé au harem d’Archimède and Bâton Rouge. Though the political mobilization of “beur” associations (community groups or collectives) at national level in the early 1980s had proved unsustainable, local organizations continued to provide a valuable support network, particularly within the working-class banlieues of the larger French cities. The creation of the local associations during this period added weight to suggestions of the existence of a common social identity or consciousness shared by Maghrebi-French youth across the “beur community” of the disadvantaged urban periphery. Mirroring this broader social mobilization of beur activists, a number of Maghrebi-French filmmaking collectives began to emerge from the banlieue in the early 1980s producing ultra-low-budget shorts—some benefiting directly from the assistance of the newly formed associations. Amongst them was a group of young French filmmakers of Algerian origin from the disadvantaged housing estates of Vitry-sur-Seine (Paris) who, working under the name of the Collectif Mohammed, produced a number of shorts on super-8 articulating the exclusion and discrimination experienced by Maghrebi-French youth.

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including Ils ont tué Khader, a documentary exposing the racist murder of a Maghrebi-French youth from Vitry. Though these films were mostly exhibited via local networks and immigrant associations within the banlieue, a section of Ils ont tué Khader was screened on French television in May 1981—allowing a wider French audience a fleeting connection with the more underground and oppositional work that was being produced in the early 1980s by Maghrebi-French filmmakers from the banlieue.

The crossover success of Le Thé au harem d’Archimède and presence of an alternative network of Maghrebi-French filmmaking collectives in the early-1980s did not, however, result in a profusion of narratives centred on Maghrebi-French protagonists located in the working-class housing projects of the French urban periphery arriving on French screens. The combination of a lack of funding for ethnic minority filmmakers and a preference amongst French producers for the seductive visual style of the youth-oriented cinéma du look or the lavish spectacle of the heritage film over social realist narratives led to a situation where Mehdi Charef was the only Maghrebi-French filmmaker consistently directing mid-budget commercial features in the late 1980s. And while Miss Mona (Charef, 1987), Camomille (Charef, 1988), and Au pays de Juliet (Charef, 1992) foreground the experiences of marginalized characters, they nonetheless display a conscious distancing from “beur” protagonists. Elsewhere, Bouchareb’s second feature, Cheb (1991), removes itself from the banlieue as it deals with the issue of the double peine, focusing on a Maghrebi-French youth from North-eastern France who is deported “back” to Algeria (a country he has never seen) and who struggles to return to France as an illegal alien.

It was not until the mid-1990s, then, that whose film Bye-Bye (1995) shifts between the postwar cités and more established working-class districts of Marseilles, is of Franco-Tunisian origin.

Critical discussion of the banlieue film in the mid-1990s was disproportionately centred on Mathieu Kassovitz’s La Haine, due to the film’s considerable commercial success, its multiethnic “black-blanc-beur” trio of lead actors and the media controversy generated by its (apparently) antipolice narrative. Yet arguably the key representation of the Maghrebi-French population in relation to the banlieue from this period came a year earlier, with Malik Chibane’s directorial debut Hexagone (1994). Produced on a shoestring budget, partly funded by the community association IDRISS, which Chibane had cofounded in 1985 to provide support for the local unemployed Maghrebi-French population, Hexagone took over six years to finance and was shot in a matter of weeks in the director’s own cité using a non-professional cast (with many of the technical crew working for free). Chibane’s film employs a similar realist esthetic to the banlieue films of the 1980s in order to highlight the problems facing the disenfranchised Maghrebi-French youth of the disadvantaged cité. Hexagone is exceptional, however, in that it provides a hitherto unprecedented degree of agency to a variety of Maghrebi-French subjectivities, including women. The film’s central protagonists include Slimane (an unemployed

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youth); Samy (Slimâne’s brother, a drug addict and petty thief); Ali (a university student); Naceura (Slimâne’s girlfriend, who respects her parents yet adopts a liberal westernized stance towards the restrictive mores of traditional Maghrebi culture); Staf (a quick-witted, sharp dressing self-styled Casanova) and Karim (a local small-time dealer). Significantly, the diversity of Maghrebi-French protagonists not only comprises disparate types (the dealer, the dandy, the student) but also places an emphasis on the cultural and national differences (for example between Algerian and Moroccan immigrant families) that exist within the supposedly homogenous Maghrebi immigrant “community” of the cité.

Unlike *beur* films from the 1980s such as *Le Thé au harem d’Archimède* and *Baton Rouge*, where the Maghrebi-French *banlieue* youth are distanced from the perceived “difference” of their North African heritage in favour of a multiethnic, Americanized youth culture (similar to that found later in *La Haine*), Chibane attempts to make such cultural difference visible. This does not mean, however, that the film advocates a form of essentialized cultural separatism on the part of the Maghrebi-French population. As the film’s title would suggest (*l’Hexagone* being a synonym for *la France*), Chibane endorses a priontintegration stance, and is keen to legitimize Maghrebi-French youth’s rightful place within French society. Yet by depicting the reality of social exclusion alongside the institutional and everyday racism faced by Maghrebi-French protagonists, the film refuses to view this process of “integration” as unproblematic.

In the same vein, Chibane’s second feature, *Douce France*, is an apparently lighthearted comedy but one that uses its *banlieue* location to explore potentially explosive issues relating to the Maghrebi-French community—racism, exclusion, the legacy of the Algerian War, and the place of Islam in contemporary France. The narrative also opens up further visibility for female Maghrebi-French protagonists in the form of two sisters: Souad, who is entirely westernized in her outlook and Farida, a tolerant but committed Muslim who is forced to repeatedly defend her right to wear the traditional Muslim headscarf—which she does by displaying a better understanding of French Republican history than her “French” interrogators. The inclusion of an assured but ultimately nonthreatening portrayal of Islam within the French *banlieue* is the source of gentle humor in *Douce France* Local Muslims unveil their plans for a new mosque with the minarets removed so as not to offend “French sensibilities.” And yet, when it is considered that the film was released only months after a series of bomb attacks carried out in the summer of 1995 by a small number of disaffected Maghrebi-French youth from the disadvantaged urban periphery, such comedy takes on a political significance, offering a timely challenge to the stereotype of the *banlieue* as a breeding ground for radical Islamists.

Chibane’s insistence that his films should reflect and articulate the experiences of Maghrebi-French inhabitants of the *banlieue* led to various difficulties in securing funding from French producers in the mid-1990s who were looking for a more “accessible” representation of the *banlieue* for a cross-over audience. In the case of *Hexagone*, the director resisted repeated demands from potential backers to either incorporate a role for a star of Maghrebi-immigrant origin (such as the comedian Smân) or to introduce white French characters into the narrative to allow for the trope of interracial male bonding so prevalent in other *banlieue* films. The film’s eventual distributors even considered French substituting for certain sections of *Hexagone* due to the apparently “impenetrable” slang—a mix of *verlan* (inverted street slang) and Arabic expressions—used by the cast of nonprofessional Maghrebi-French actors.

Through its independent production methods, intended to ensure control over the mode of representation employed in the film, and its ethical insistence on engagement with its Maghrebi-French audience, *Hexagone* acts as a bridging point between two generations of *beur* filmmakers and activists. On the one hand, the politically-aware collectives working outside of the industry in the early 1980s (such as Le Collectif Mohammed) and, on the other, the more recent low-budget productions emerging from the *banlieue*, such as Rabah Amercet-Zaimèche’s *Wesh wesh, que’est-ce qui se passe?* (2002), which challenge the “misrepresentation” of the Maghrebi-French population of the urban periphery by the mainstream media in France.

Another way in which Chibane’s films of the mid-1990s provide a greater cultural visibility to the Maghrebi-French population from the *banlieue* comes from their *mise-en-scène* of the deprived urban periphery. Typically, the *banlieue* film is dominated by images of dehumanizing tower blocks and bleak, alienating public spaces controlled by male delinquent youth (see, for example, *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T Va crâck-er* [Richet, 1997]). In common, however, with a number of other Maghrebi-French filmmakers (Bouchareb, Dridi, Ghorab-Volta, and Kechiche), Chibane depicts the *banlieue* as a lived social space defined by its inhabitants rather than the architecture itself. Shot composition in *Douce France* thus functions to fragment the alienating tower blocks of the cité, reducing their overbearing presence within the frame. Similar representational strategies are employed by Abdelatif Kechiche in *L’Esquive* (2004) with an immediate (almost confrontational) editing style that often cuts in extreme close-up between the film’s youthful protagonists, mirroring the teenagers’ dynamic *tchatche* (*banlieue*-speak) and relentless verbal sparring. *L’Esquive* also shares Chibane’s intention to look beyond the media-driven stereotypes of the *banlieue*, while not totally ignoring the realities of violence, delinquency, and exclusion found within the cité. The narrative juxtaposes violent altercations (both verbal and physical) between youths from the estate with rehearsals of *Le jeu de l’amour et du hasard* by the eighteenth-century French playwright Marivaux (a play that, tellingly, asks its audience to question the extent to which it is possible escape the social conditions of class into which we are born). Kechiche confronts the stereotype of the *citè* as cultural wasteland by literally inserting the sounds and actions of Marivaux’s play into the contemporary *banlieue* setting as the teenagers rehearse for their school production in the public and private spaces of the estate.

As the above examples illustrate, much of the strength of the intersection between Maghrebi-French and *banlieue* filmmaking in France at key moments since the early 1980s has come from the fact that these films function as a form of implicit or explicit social criticism of mainstream French society’s prejudices towards (and apparent indifference to) the plight of the *banlieue*. Many Maghrebi-French filmmakers, however, are now making a conscious decision to move “beyond the *banlieue*”—both as a site of social struggle and as an emblematic space of marginality. The late 1990s and early 2000s have thus witnessed an increasing diversity

Top to bottom, scenes from *Hexagone*, *Douce France* and 100% Arabica.
of representations of Maghrebi-French subjectivities by *beur* filmmakers on both sides of the camera in relation to space and place. This is especially true in relation to issues of gender and sexuality (for so long a structuring absence in most Maghrebi-French filmmaking) of which Sami Bouajila’s performance as an HIV-positive gay *beur* who embarks on a road trip through rural France in an attempt to find his father in *Drole de Félix* (Martineau and Ducastel, 2000) is arguably the most successful example. Elsewhere, Maghrebi-French filmmakers have attempted to connect with their North African cultural heritage by portraying the possibility of a “return” to the Maghreb for the Maghrebi-French protagonist (for example *Tenja* [Legzouli, 2005]). Finally, there have been attempts to move “beyond the banlieue” in terms of both location and the use of popular genre cinema—some more successful than others. In the case of those films, such as the action comedy *Le Raid* (Bensalah, 2002), where the film enjoyed considerable success at the French box office (attracting over one million spectators), the representation of Maghrebi-French protagonists from the urban periphery did little more than transfer stereotypical assumptions around the multiethnic male gang of the banlieue film into different social spaces outside of the cité—depriving them, as Carrie Tarr suggests, of their “perceived authenticity and ability to articulate social protest.”

One film that considers the socio-political implications of banlieue youth transcending the real and imagined boundaries of the deprived urban periphery in a far more productive way is Zaida Ghorab-Volta’s *Jeunesse dorée* (2002). Though a small number of Maghrebi-French women filmmakers, including Ghorab-Volta, have attempted through short and medium length films made since the early 1990s—e.g., *Le Petit chat est mort* (Delibia, 1991) and *Souviens-toi de moi* (Ghorab-Volta, 1996)—to redress the absence of a female perspective that, until recently, has been part and parcel of the banlieue film. *Jeunesse dorée* gains the distinction of being the (much delayed) first feature-length banlieue film to be directed by a Maghrebi-French woman. Shot with minimal funds using nonprofessional actors in the working-class Parisian projects of Colombes where Ghorab-Volta grew up, *Jeunesse dorée* is part banlieue film, part road movie. The film follows Gwen and Angéla, two young women who, with help from a local association within the cité set off on a road trip to photograph housing projects similar to the one in which they live, but located in the French countryside. In contrast to the opening 360-degree pan across the vast Colombes estate—an elaborate camera movement that ends up going nowhere, symbolizing the limited horizons and sense of entrapment felt by banlieue youth—the tracking shot positioned from inside the car as the young women leave the estate on their road trip not only provides an alternative view of the cité but also suggests the potential for transcending the real and imagined barriers between the banlieue and the rest of society. The fact, however, that both of the central protagonists involved in this move beyond the banlieue are white indicates the extent to which, in the context of the banlieue film, the female Maghrebi-French protagonist remains trapped within the cité. Nevertheless, with its more positive focus on the female residents of the banlieue, *Jeunesse dorée* challenges received notions of the deprived urban periphery as a site of male violence and criminality. Moreover, by placing the means of representation firmly in the hands of her female protagonists—in this case the camera that Gwen and Angéla use to document their cité and the other projects they journey to in *la France profonde*—Ghorab-Volta reflects upon her own position as a woman director working within the banlieue filmmaking tradition. The director...
constructs with care a representation of the banlieue that emphasizes a sense of community and collective history: one shared by the inhabitants of Colombes, and which extends to residents of the working-class projects in the provinces that the young women encounter on their road trip. The banlieue is thus qualified in *Jeunesse dorée* as “place” (a site invested with a collective historical and socio-cultural identity) rather than simply a space of exclusion.

Amongst this increasing plurality of spaces and subjectivities occupied by Maghrebi-French filmmakers in contemporary French cinema *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* stands out as a film that returns emphatically to the tradition of Maghrebi-French filmmakers documenting their own urban environment in an attempt to counter external (mis-)representations of the working-class banlieue and its inhabitants. Written, directed by, and starring Ameer-Zaïmèche, *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* was shot on DV with a minuscule budget and non-professional cast of friends and residents from the Cité de Bosquets in the Parisian banlieue of Saint-Denis where the film is located. Attracting approximately 70,000 spectators in France (an entirely respectable figure for such a low-budget production) the film was critically acclaimed in France, winning the 2002 Louis-Delluc Award for best film. *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* returns to established esthetic and thematic concerns of earlier banlieue films—the mise-en-scène of alienating tower blocks, young *beur* protagonists who face exclusion, discrimination and police harassment on a daily basis and who, with little or no prospect of social mobility, face considerable pressure to enter into the alternative economies of the *cité* (most notably drug dealing). Arguably the most innovative aspect of *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* in relation to the Maghrebi-French-authored banlieue film is Ameer-Zaïmèche’s use of the digital format itself. First, the relative affordability of digital allows a marginalized filmmaker such as Ameer-Zaïmèche the ability to make a feature-length production, an opportunity denied earlier Maghrebi-French filmmakers such as the Collectif Mohammed. Second, through its combination of carefully structured representations of the *cité* and a more immediate documentary realism, *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* offers a personal insight into the disadvantaged urban periphery that challenges the largely impersonal and sensationalized reportage style of the French TV news reports into the banlieue (which are now also shot for the most part on the same kind of digital camera used in *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?*). Finally, although Ameer-Zaïmèche employs visual codes common to the banlieue film—most obviously camera pans across the vast estate and establishing shots of the immense dehumanizing tower blocks of the *cité*—in the night scene that evokes the mood for the fleeting (but doomed) romantic engagement between the film’s central protagonist and a local French schoolteacher, the DV camera’s response to the poor source lighting of the *cité* bathes the buildings in a sepia-tinted glow, while also softening the outline of the tower blocks as the camera tracks and pans across them. For a brief moment, the representation of the *cité* is imbued with a poetic abstraction that reflects the clear affection Ameer-Zaïmèche has for his own banlieue “community” and allows us the possibility of viewing the *cité* through different eyes.

As *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* reminds us, then, the true importance of the cinematic representations of the banlieue offered by Maghrebi-French filmmakers since the early 1980s is as a form of intervention, at once artistic and political, in the broader debates surrounding the French banlieue as imagined socio-cultural construct and lived reality.

End Notes:
1. *Bye-Bye* (Karim Dridi, 1995); *Douce France* (Malik Chibane, 1995); *Etat des lieux* (Jean-François Richet, 1995); *Le Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995); *Krim* (Ahmed Bouchaala, 1995) and *Rat* (Thomas Gilou, 1993)
2. I will avoid using the more problematic term “*beur cinema,*” a generic category first proposed by French critics in the 1980s. The term was rejected by many of the Maghrebi-French filmmakers it presumed to describe, on the basis that it was an essentialized means of categorizing their work, more concerned with the ethnic origins of the filmmakers than the actual content of the films themselves. The term “*beur*” or ‘Maghrebi-French filmmaking’ will thus be used instead of “*beur cinema*” to refer to the work (on both sides of the camera) of French filmmakers of North African immigrant origin who were born, or who have lived from a young age, in France.
5. In this respect, see *Samaïa* (Fauccon, 2001) which, with the exception of the film’s final scene, foregrounds the experiences of a teenage girl of Algerian immigrant origin specifically within the socio-economic context and geographical space of the banlieue.

An insider’s view: challenging media misrepresentations of the *cité* in Ameer-Zaïmèche’s *Wesh wesh, qu’est-ce qui se passe?* (2002).