Review

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Carrie Tarr (2005) Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue
Filmmaking in France
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Beur and banlieue cinemas have been commented on for a number of years, and it is curious that very few books have been entirely dedicated to this fascinating contemporary cinematic trend. Thus, Carrie Tarr’s Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France is definitely a welcome contribution. It is indeed very good news to have Tarr’s excellent and insightful essays gathered in one book, and the reader will not be disappointed by the quality and the originality of the author’s analyses and discussions.

Tarr’s main aim is to assess the contribution of filmmaking in debates “about (and resistances to) France’s changing identity as a plural, multi-ethnic society” (2). This is precisely what the twelve chapters do: they discuss and map the representation of characters of Maghrebi descent “through the comparison of male and female, white and beur-authored films” (3).

Chapters 1 and 2 are twin chapters in that they both discuss cinematic works released prior to Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 La Haine (the latter is considered as a key moment in the French contemporary cinematic representation of the banlieue). Chapter 1 (“Questions of identity in beur cinema: from Le Thé au harem d’Archimède to Chebi”) focuses on both the development of beur cinema and the articulation of beur identity in
films made by filmmakers of Maghrebi origin. Four features films are under discussion here, and their narrative openness as well as their combination of art movie and realist aesthetics, is underlined throughout the pages. The centrality of male protagonists and their relatively un-challenged masculinity are also emphasized. However, one important limitation of these films is, according to Tarr, their incapacity to represent beurs in an empowering manner to a beur audience. As for chapter 2 (“Beurz in the hood: Le Thè au harem d’Archimède and Hexagone”), it discusses issues of national identity in the films mentioned in the title as well as male and female beur subjectivities.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to Kassovitz’s first two films, Métisse (1993) and La Haine, the latter marking a key moment in the cinematic representation of the banlieue and its inhabitants. Here, it is through the prism of ethnicity that the two films are discussed. The author’s hypothesis is that what links Kassovitz’s first two films is the foregrounding of the “white youth…, structured in the film in such a way that, rather than representing a multi-ethnic society per se, they serve primarily to work through the relationship of white youth to France’s ethnic minority others, first in a comic and then in a tragic mode” (62). Banlieue films are further discussed in the following chapter (“Beur and banlieue cinema in 1995”) and include analyses of La Haine, État des Lieux and Douce France, to name a few. Tarr rightly argues that white-authored films lay emphasis on their protagonists’ alienation. In contrast, films made by cinéastes of North-African origin concentrate on identity and integration issues.

Then, the author discusses several banlieue films through the prism of gender differences (chapters 5, 6, 7 and 10). Chapter 5 (“Beur women in the banlieue: Les Histoires d’amour finissent mal en général and Souviens-toi de moi”) analyses how young female protagonists of Maghrebi origin are given centrality in the films in question but also underlines these characters’ diverging relationships with men. In “Masculinity and exclusion in post-1995 beur and banlieue films” (chapter 6), Tarr argues that, in the set of the three films she analyses, “the representation of disempowered masculinity… is inflected in ways that relate to the cultural background and ethnic origins of their directors” (100) and that films directed by beur filmmakers are more open to nuances than those made by white French cinéastes. Then, in “Grrrls in the banlieue: Samia and La Squale” (chapter 7), the author moves on to discuss “how relations of power are inscribed in the spaces of the banlieue they project, and what connections can be traced between their spatial and sexual politics” (111). Here, emphasis in on female solidarity, geographical
displacement and the search for freedom and justice that is hindered by male banlieue youths. Chapter 10 (“Heroines of cross-cultural social protest: Marie-Line and Chaos”) also deals with female protagonists but focuses on “cross-cultural, inter-ethnic sisterhood” (154) and the exploitation of women at work: here, Tarr shows that, unlike many beur and banlieue cinematic works, the films under scrutiny move away from imposed structures / groups (the couple, the family) to adopt “a new form of solidarity” (157).

In chapters 8 and 11, the author pays particular attention to the ways filmmakers of Maghrebi origin have represented specific experiences of immigrants in period films. More precisely, it is the Algerian War of Independence that constitutes the historical framework in Sous les pieds des femmes and Vivre au paradis, the two films discussed in chapter 8 (“Memories of immigration”). In “Beur filmmaking in the new millennium: from Le Raïd to Jeunesse dorée” (chapter 11), Tarr’s focus is on action films and comedies made by a new generation of Beur-authored filmmakers in 2001 and 2002. Many of the works in question are still interested in Beurs’ specific experiences in France and sometimes provide original takes on the banlieue film.

“Beurs in the provinces: from L’Honneur de ma famille to Drôle de Félix” (chapter 9) concentrates on the representation of beur characters outside banlieue stereotypes. One of the most original features of the films under discussion in this chapter is that, unlike works previously analysed, the male protagonists are engaged in sexual relationships.

Finally, chapter 12 offers the author an opportunity to discuss the works of Algerian filmmakers working in France and explores “the extent to which the inscription of displacement and identity in films by émigré Algerian filmmakers overlaps with or differentiates itself from that found in beur cinema” (188). The films analysed in this last chapter show an interest in France and Algeria as well as Islam (only rarely addressed in beur cinema).

As already mentioned at the outset, this book is an extremely good collection from an expert in the field. My only reservation is the angle taken by the author. Indeed, that individual interactions are mostly conditioned by ethnic differences seems to be taken for granted in Tarr’s analyses of beur and banlieue cinematic works; however, discussions of social classes, which could have also shed light on racism in contemporary France, are not included in her analyses. In addition, the introduction to the book reads like a rejection of the French republican model at the favour of multiculturalism, the latter seemingly being able to perform what the former is unable to do (acknowledging and representing
differences). That racism (as well as homophobia and sexism) is rife in France is, alas, undeniable, but this is also certainly true of countries with multicultural traditions. Thus, problematizing the French republican model further may have been pertinent. It could have been argued for example, that the ideals of the Republic ("Liberté, égalité, fraternité") are mostly unrealised principles and that the social injustices and racial discrimination depicted in the films under discussion in Tarr’s book could be interpreted less as an expression of the failure of the French republican model than one symptom of a national myth.

Having said that, and despite my reservations, Tarr shows unquestionable coherence and consistency within her chosen theoretical framework. The author’s prose is limpid and very pleasant; all essays are indeed well written and the interest that Tarr shows in her subject is contagious. Although I sometimes disagree with some of the film analyses given in the book, these are nevertheless very well argued and thoughtful, and show the author’s fantastic knowledge of beur and banlieue filmmaking. The filmography is no less than astounding. In conclusion, Reframing Difference will undoubtedly (and deservedly) constitute a major reference for anybody researching beur / banlieue films.