
 FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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 *Cheb*") 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 is 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.