

***La Haine*: Transcript**

The ‘fracture sociale’ in *La Haine*

La Haine has been described by a BBC film critic as ‘A fatalistic account of society’s decline’. The black and white film follows a day in the lives of three young men living on a French housing estate. Although it was released in 1995, it is still relevant today, and provides an interesting commentary on the *fracture sociale*, or social divide in France. In this presentation, I will provide some background to the film, before giving an overview of how the *fracture sociale* is represented through different representations of Paris and the *banlieue*, plot, style and themes.

La Haine was directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, and was his second feature film (*Métisse*, his first, was released in 1993). At the time of release, Kassovitz was 28 years old, and not very well-known in the industry, although he does come from a film background – his mother is an editor, and his father a director and actor.

I think Kassovitz produced a film which is not only entertaining, but also thought-provoking. The issues that are raised in the film, coupled with the use of black and white, have resulted in a timelessness, which means that the film was just as popular when re-released in 2005 as it was in 1995, when it was originally made.

Before I go on, I’d like to give some definitions of terms which will come up in the presentation:

Fracture Sociale

Will Higbee says: “The term ‘*fracture sociale*’ refers not only to the perceived disintegration of community and civic responsibility that accompanies exclusion, violence and delinquency but also to the growing divide between rich and poor in French society. The term appears to have entered the popular vernacular in France in the mid-1990s and was repeatedly used by Chirac during the presidential campaign of 1995.”

Bavure Policiere

A *bavure policiere* is a police blunder, and is often used in France to refer to serious police mistakes, often involving violence, and resulting in the death of someone in police custody.

The *Banlieue*

The *banlieue* is a term used in French to refer to the low-income housing estates situated on the outskirts of big towns and cities. The *banlieues* are often home to immigrants, or the descendants of people who immigrated to France two or three generations ago. The resulting effect is what could be described as a cultural melting pot; the people living in the *banlieues* are exposed to the French language and culture on a daily basis, through their time at school, for example, but also the original native language and culture of their parents, grandparents, or other relatives. The people living in the *banlieue* have developed their own subculture, and this is closely linked to the way they speak. They use lots of slang and swearing, and this can be seen through the way the characters in *La Haine* speak. One of the types of slang the characters use is called *verlan*. *Verlan* is a type of French slang in which the syllables of a word are reversed.

Even the name of this type of slang came about through the reversal of the syllables of the French 'l'envers' which literally translates as 'backwards'. Some examples include: *keum* is the *verlan* of *mec* which means guy in English and *meuf* is the *verlan* of *femme*, meaning woman.

The situation in the *banlieues* can be linked to the *fracture sociale*, sometimes described as the gap between the haves and have nots in French society. The *banlieues* do not benefit from the best services, the quality of schooling is not always high, and even public transport seems to reinforce the sense of exclusion of people living in the *banlieue*. This can be seen not only in *La Haine*, but in other films depicting the *banlieue*, as the characters find themselves 'stuck' in the city, and unable to return home as they have missed the last train, for example. Reports in newspapers and on television often highlight the more unpleasant events occurring in the *banlieue*, such as crime, unemployment and drug use, thus reinforcing the perceived gap between those living in the *banlieue*, and the majority of French society.

A Summary of the Film

The film follows a day in the lives of three young men living on a housing estate called 'La Cité de Muguets' on the outskirts of Paris. The film opens with footage of rioting in France, and we learn that a young man (Abdel) from the same estate is in hospital following a police assault the night before.

The three main characters are Vinz, Saïd and Hubert. Vinz is a young Jewish man, Saïd is a young *beur* (a person of second-generation North African origins), and Hubert is of black African origins. All three are unemployed.

Vinz is central to the plot, as he is the one who finds the gun around which the story unfolds. Vinz is the more hot-headed of the three, he is prone to shouting and aggressive behaviour. There are also a few scenes in the film where he seems to imagine events (such as when he says he's seen a cow, or in Paris where he appears to imagine shooting a police officer), so you might question his psychological state.

Saïd appears to be the most immature of the three, he is quite naïve and playful and we see him ask Vinz and Hubert to get along with one another a few times. We see Saïd's sister briefly, but we don't see his home life and parents, as we do Vinz and Hubert's.

Hubert seems to be the most mature, and is certainly the most rational. He has big dreams, and near the beginning of the film talks about needing to leave, to get out of the *banlieue* or *cit  *. He used to be involved in serious crime, but we learn that he managed to get out of it, and appears to have tried to turn his life around by opening up a gym on the estate (this is the gym that was vandalised in the riots).

The first half of the film is set in the estate where the three main characters live. We see them hanging out with friends, telling stories, going to the supermarket, hanging out at home, and we even see Hubert dealing drugs. We also find out that Vinz has found the gun which was lost by a policeman during the riots the night before. Saïd is impressed with Vinz's finding the gun, but Hubert is not happy about it at all. The three decide to visit Abdel in hospital, but are refused entry by the police. They become somewhat aggressive and Saïd is arrested. A local policeman with whom the youths get on fairly well manages to get Saïd released, and the three take the train to Paris. In the city they visit a drug dealer who owes Saïd money. There is an altercation between Vinz and Ast  rix, and the three men end up leaving the apartment, but on their way out they are stopped by the police. Vinz manages to escape, and runs off. Saïd and Hubert are arrested.

The next part of the film shows Hubert and Saïd being beaten and very poorly treated by the Police, while Vinz makes the most of his time in Paris. He goes to the cinema, watches a boxing match, and heads to the train station for the last train back to the estate. He meets Saïd and Hubert at the station – they too have missed the last train. The three return to wandering around Paris, joining in a party at an art gallery (before they are kicked out), they then try, and fail, to steal a car to drive home. They learn of Abdel's death on a big television screen, and find themselves in a confrontation with some skinheads (one of which is played by the director, Kassovitz). During the confrontation, Hubert encourages Vinz to shoot Kassovitz's character, but Vinz can't go through with it. The characters return to their estate early in the morning, and Vinz gives the gun to Hubert. As they are parting ways, Vinz and Saïd run into the police, one of whom accidentally shoots Vinz. Hubert hears the gun shot and heads over. He points the gun at the policeman. The policeman is, in turn, pointing his gun at Hubert. Saïd is watching, and as the screen goes black, a gunshot is heard. We are left to decide for ourselves what exactly has happened.

Success of the film

The film was a success both in France and abroad. Kassovitz won Best Direction (*mise en scene*) for the film at Cannes, and it was in the Top 20 at the French box office in 1995. In her book on *La Haine*, Vincendeau states:

Ten years on, of all the French films of the 1990s, *La Haine* is still one of the most widely screened and admired – and written about – nationally and internationally, and it has attained cult status, especially with younger generations. At the time of writing in 2004, for example, the Allociné.fr website still carries a lively discussion (clearly among young viewers) about the

film, with some controversy but mostly ecstatic views... The fact that both Kassovitz and lead actor Vincent Cassel have subsequently become major figures in French cinema has not harmed the reputation of the film either.”

Context

A little about the context in which the film was released:

On the 6th April 1993, Makome M’Bowole a seventeen-year-old from Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), was shot while in police custody. Kassovitz has said that he started writing the script for *La Haine* on the same day.

In 1986, before the death of Makome, there was another high-profile case, where Malik Oussekiné died after being beaten by the French police. This case is referred to in the opening of *La Haine*. These would both be considered as *bavures policières*.

Representation of the *Banlieue* vs. Paris in *La Haine*

The ‘gap’ referred to by the term ‘*fracture sociale*’ is clearly reflected in contrasting representations of ‘la cité de mugets,’ the *banlieue* in which the film is set, and of Paris. The part of the film which is set in the *banlieue* involves some action, but is mainly storytelling and the heated situations are often diffused, while in Paris, nearly every scene ends with violence. It is also interesting that in the film, all of the scenes in the *banlieue* occur in the daytime, while the majority of scenes in Paris are at night.

The film also seems to follow the opposite pattern to the opening footage of the riots. The first two sections of the footage of riots which opens the film were filmed in Paris, in the day,

while the third section is in the *banlieue* at night. In this opening footage of the film, the violence appears to be more extreme in the footage from the *banlieue*, suggesting that perhaps the *banlieue* is more dangerous than the city centre. It has been suggested that this opening montage shows the viewer the shape of the film to come: moving towards more violence, and from day into night. It is absolutely clear, though, that there is a contrast between Paris and the *banlieue* throughout.

Of this opening sequence, Vincendeau also states:

In a more subtle way the opening blurs the boundary between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’, in image and sound... The move from montage to fiction also creates a contrast between the grainy, ‘dirty’ and blurred figures of riots at night, and the sharp, elegant black and white daytime pictures, as we switch from ‘television’ to ‘film’ (2005, p.47) .

On this question of reality and fiction, Kassovitz himself said ‘I wanted the topic to be treated seriously, the spectator to realise they were not simply being presented with guys who put their caps on the wrong way and Saïd “yo.” It is a sophisticated work of fiction, not a documentary on the life of the *cités*’ (2005, p.14).

This gap between the *banlieue* and Paris is even demonstrated in the opening credits; (photo) there is a cast list for the *cit *, which rolls first, then a cast list for Paris – the two lists do not appear in one long list, but are clearly separated. Even though this enables a listing of cast in order of appearance, it could be argued that the separation between the two is not absolutely necessary, as we know that Vinz’s grandmother appeared in the first half of the film, in the part set in the *banlieue*.

The Film's Plot and the *fracture sociale*

Kassovitz said 'there [is] no plot, it's like a diary or a news report' (2005, p.42). The aim of this is to give the impression that the characters don't do much, they have no jobs, they don't go to school or college, time passes and they wander around the cité, dealing drugs occasionally but not really doing a great deal. However, a plot can be identified in the film, and this plot could be said to be similar to that of a road movie – especially when we consider that the characters are constantly moving from one place to another. They move through different spaces, and meet various people along the way.

The plot of *La Haine* also appears to be a sort of cycle, the film begins following a police bavure, and then ends with one of the police officers shooting Vinz. This could suggest that the violence in the *banlieue* is never ending, and that similar events will reoccur in the future, and perhaps that the *fracture sociale* will not go away unless the cycle is broken. The characters in the film start and end in the same place, none of them manages to find a job, or leave the *banlieue*. During the twenty-four hours over which the film is set, Vinz seems to reconsider the violent act he had planned in wanting to shoot a police officer, and gives his gun to Hubert, the more mature member of the group. It was too late though, violence still caught up with him, resulting in his death.

Style and the *fracture sociale*

One stylistic feature of the film which cannot be overlooked is the fact that it was released in black and white. This allowed Kassovitz to work with the architecture of the *cité* on a low budget, and ultimately, he was able to make the *banlieue* look beautiful in the film. It also emphasises the skin colour of the characters, and their ethnic differences – they are often

referred to as the ‘black-blanc-beur trio.’ Black and white also gives the film a realist, documentary-like feel. Vincendeau said “Ultimately, the brilliance of *La Haine* is that it draws on the realist and anti-naturalist connotations of black and white, making the film appear both ‘gritty’ and ‘cool,’ drawing us into the topic and at the same time giving us an aesthetic distance from it” (2005, p.50). The timer also adds to the documentary or realist feel of the film, particularly since the times at which it pops up look random. The loud ticking of the clock also gives the film a sense of urgency, and even the impression that we might be counting down to something. Interestingly, the only time we see the time on the clock change is in the final scene (06.00 – 6.01).

The characters also seem to be more comfortable in the *banlieue*. When they arrive in Paris, they don’t really know what to do with themselves, but in the *banlieue* they move through the *cité* with purpose, visiting friends and running errands.

Another example of their familiarity with, and mastery of, space in the *banlieue* is the way in which the characters greet almost every civilian they pass in the *banlieue* – everyone seems to know each other, and there is a real community feel. Near the beginning of the film, the three main characters hear a motorbike in the *banlieue*, and they are so familiar with the sounds of their *cité*, that Saïd suggests what kind of bike it may be, and Hubert even seems to know who it belongs to.

Themes

Some key themes in *La Haine* are police brutality, exclusion and difference, youth culture and social problems. In fact, the majority of these themes can be seen from the very beginning of the film, where we witness a young man throwing stones, and from his manner

of speaking we can tell that he is from the *banlieue*. Here, we see a confrontation between youth and the police. We also witness violence in the *banlieue*, which is something that French people see in the media on a regular basis. We then hear Hubert, telling the story that has become synonymous with *La Haine*:

C'est l'histoire d'un homme qui tombe d'un immeuble de cinquante étages. Le mec, au fur et à mesure de sa chute se répète sans cesse pour se rassurer : jusqu'ici tout va bien, jusqu'ici tout va bien, jusqu'ici tout va bien. Mais l'important, c'est pas la chute, c'est l'atterrissage.

As we hear the story, on screen we see a globe, and a petrol bomb falling towards it. As the bomb lands, the globe explodes. This sequence reminds the viewer that the problem is not unique to France, but is a global issue, which could end in some sort of 'explosion.' At the end of the film, when we hear the story again, the word 'homme' is replaced with 'société,' and the significance of the story is further emphasised. In an interview in 2012, when asked how it felt to have produced a movie that became such a cult worldwide, Kassovitz said:

It's a great pleasure! It's what every director wishes for at least once in his career, especially for a movie about politics and society. The fact that the movie keeps ringing, sending a message, can be a problem for me as well because it means that the problem remains and gets bigger. It doesn't disappear. I would almost have preferred for the film to be forgotten, that it had remained a part of History, something that would have been dealt with so that we could move on, but unfortunately, it's not the case and the movie still represents today, even for young people who were not born at that time, the same need to rebel and to express themselves by saying no, we don't belong in this society.

Conclusions

In conclusion, *La Haine* addresses themes of exclusion and social divide in France. Kassovitz uses various stylistic features to blur the lines between fiction and reality, producing a film which encourages the viewer to think about certain issues in modern-day society, particularly those issues faced by young people. Although the film is set within the very specific frame of the French *banlieue*, and police brutality, Kassovitz also uses certain features, such as the globe sequence at the beginning of the film, to express his view that these problems are occurring around the globe, and that they are pressing issues which should be dealt with.

References

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