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**Ginette Vincendeau**, *La Haine*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. x + 118 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and appendices. \$40 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-252-03091-5. \$15 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-252-07332-0.

Review by Brett Bowles, State University of New York at Albany.

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Released in May 1995 after winning the prestigious Best Direction prize at the Cannes festival, Mathieu Kassovitz's film has become an acknowledged classic of French cinema and a standard component of university courses devoted to contemporary France. Today *La Haine* (Hate) has lost none of its sociological relevance or emotive power. The film's closing reference to a self-perpetuating downward spiral of suburban violence, racism, and exclusion—"une société qui tombe et qui se répète sans cesse pour se rassurer 'jusqu'ici tout va bien, jusqu'ici tout va bien'" ("a society that's falling and reassures itself by repeating constantly 'so far, so good, so far, so good'"—has proven eerily prophetic, for the events that initially inspired Kassovitz—a series of riots in April 1993 following the death of Zairian youth Makome M'Bowole while in police custody—have recurred at regular intervals on an ever larger scale, culminating in November 2005. Despite much public debate, France remains incapable of healing its infamous *fracture sociale* and upholding the promise of the Republican motto. More than any other single movie, *La Haine* forces viewers to recognize this failure and to reflect on its causes. Currently available in at least three DVD versions with English subtitles[1], the film is a provocative starting point for exploring issues such as race, class, gender, immigration, and the changing character of French national identity, but using it in the classroom can be challenging. If, on the one hand, it provides a welcome counterweight to the cloying, visually and sociologically sanitized fare often shown in undergraduate courses about France—think Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le Destin fabuleux d'Amélie Poulain*—on the other, students may be tempted to accept *La Haine's* selective, highly stylized representation of social reality as unfiltered documentary truth. Worse still, superficial viewing may leave the erroneous impression that French society is irredeemably flawed and inherently less just than its Anglo-American counterparts.

Although there have been numerous journal articles and book chapters written about *La Haine*, as well as two short pedagogical guides[2], Vincendeau's volume is by far the most comprehensive and perceptive to date. It is also the fourth of the "French Film Guides" published jointly by the University of Illinois Press (in the United States) and I. B. Tauris (in the United Kingdom).[3] Modeled after the British Film Institute's highly regarded "Classics" and "Modern Classics," the series aims to offer thoroughly researched, authoritative readings that remain concise and easily accessible to non-specialists. Historians with an aversion to the psychoanalytic or structuralist approaches that once dominated French film studies will be refreshed to discover a holistic brand of criticism that links analysis of cinematic form and style to relevant economic, social, and political issues. Vincendeau, currently among the most prolific and internationally respected scholars of French cinema, also serves as series editor, thereby ensuring a degree of methodological consistency among contributing authors.

Like the other entries in the series, *La Haine* begins with a brief plot synopsis and introduction, followed by chapters addressing production contexts, the film's content, and its reception. In the first section Vincendeau outlines Kassovitz's entry into filmmaking and his family connections to the business, emphasizing his love of Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, and American hip-hop culture. Thematically and stylistically, she situates *La Haine* with regard to the realist, socially engaged *jeune cinéma* of the 1990s and *banlieue* sub-genre (for example, Thomas Gilou's *Raï*, Malik Chibane's *Douce France*, Jean-François

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Richet's *État des lieux*, Karim Dridi's *Bye-Bye*); sociologically, with regard to French post-war urbanism, immigration, the dynamics of cultural integration/exclusion, the class and ethnic geography of Paris, and the use of *verlan* slang. Her cogent history of these phenomena, which draws on a broad range of recent French scholarship, provides the perfect background for evaluating the film as a politically charged cultural representation.[4]

Judging from his defensive attitude in interviews, the issue of whether a well-educated, white bourgeois filmmaker has the right to represent marginalized suburban minorities, and to what end, clearly bothered Kassovitz, who attempted to establish his credibility by living with cast and crew for two months in the housing project of La Noë (Chanteloup-les-Vignes) thirty kilometers northwest of Paris. The choice of that site—whose small clusters of buildings, gabled roofs, and central square adorned by murals of great French literary figures are anything but typical of suburban French apartment blocks—highlights the director's preoccupation with visual aesthetics. Contrary to reviewers who heralded Kassovitz's portrait of police violence, class and racial discrimination as courageous and revolutionary, Vincendeau emphasizes the ways in which Kassovitz "recycles a deeply ingrained, dominant set of images in a radically different cinematic style" (p. 25).

This "virtuoso noir" (p. 46) features the use of intense backlighting and black-and-white filmstock to accentuate tonal contrasts, a corresponding spatial and temporal dichotomy between Paris and La Noë, and numerous references to other films (including Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Raging Bull*, Howard Hawks' and Brian De Palma's respective versions of *Scarface*, Eric Rochant's *Un monde sans pitié*, Kassovitz's own *Métisse*), as well as classical art (a mural reproduction of Michelangelo's "Creation of Man" serves as an ironic backdrop to a block of hashish changing hands in the *cité*), and canonical literature (a mural of the cynical, self-destructive Baudelaire looks down impassively at the final tragic confrontation between Vinz, Hubert, and the sadistic undercover detective). Kassovitz's mastery is most apparent in his camera work, characterized by unusually long *plans-séquences* (uninterrupted, mobile takes that could more easily be captured in multiple shorter segments), some of which last well over a minute. Vincendeau also gives the young director high marks for his ability to convey emotion and to control mood by varying the pace of editing, as well as his use of music and sound to immerse the viewer in the psychological atmosphere of the protagonists. Like the film itself, Vincendeau's technical analysis is nothing short of dazzling, drawing out the importance of visual and aural details that even cinema specialists who have viewed *La Haine* multiple times are likely to have missed.

Yet she also argues that Kassovitz's stylization threatens to undermine the film's political message by establishing a comfortable, voyeuristic filter between spectators and the social reality represented on screen. Though *La Haine* clearly and graphically exposes institutional racism against French Blacks and North Africans, its narrative structure foregrounds Vinz (the white Jewish character played by Vincent Cassel, who serves as cinematic alter-ego for Kassovitz), at the expense of Hubert and Saïd. Not only does Vinz figure in more close-ups; his family environment is presented in greater detail than that of his friends (we visit Hubert's apartment only briefly, while Saïd's family is totally absent). Moreover, it is Vinz who finds the policeman's lost gun and wields it throughout the film as a symbol of power. Echoing Carrie Tarr, Vincendeau identifies the film's closing scene, in which the detective shoots Vinz and Hubert uses the iconic gun to kill the cop in turn, as symptomatic: "This finale, while justifying *banlieue* violence, can also be seen to reinforce—unwittingly—racist stereotypes, showing the white character as victim of police violence (although he is the most violent himself), the *Beur* as impotent witness, and the black not only linked to drug trafficking but also the perpetrator of violence. He may, in the final violent blast we don't see, also be its victim, but the fact remains that he uses the gun of his own accord, while Inspector Notre-Dame shoots Vinz by mistake" (p. 50).

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More troubling still, the pleasure that the film offers spectators is predicated largely on the spectacle of “infantile, macho violence” (p. 66). Made about and primarily for young men, *La Haine* consistently denies its female characters depth of characterization and subjectivity. When women do appear, they are presented as burdens (Vinz’s grandmother berates him for not attending synagogue and his sister tells on him for smoking dope; Hubert’s mother asks him for money to pay the gas bill and to procure textbooks for his imprisoned brother, while his sister harasses him for help with her homework), objects of male sexual desire, or as condescending representatives of the privileged Parisian bourgeoisie (the female partygoers at the art gallery disdainfully resist the three friends’ crass efforts to pick them up). Though Vincendeau builds a convincing case that the film lacks “social depth” beneath its veneer of realism and political engagement, in the end she lets Kassovitz off the hook by concluding that *La Haine* is a “post-ideology” film whose “contradictions—between youth who are excluded and angry yet enslaved by consumerism, between the lure of media spectacularisation and its traps—are themselves typical of an age where the grand narratives of politics and history have disappeared” (p. 76).

Though at first glance such comments may strike cultural historians, especially those of us loyal to Bourdieu and Foucault, as an apology for Kassovitz’s troubling representational paradoxes and blind spots, in this case Vincendeau’s prudence reflects her desire to properly acknowledge the film’s undeniable aesthetic and technical merits, as well as her attentiveness to the potential for hypocrisy always present in academic critique. In a short essay that appears at the end of the book, Vincendeau bravely dissects her own subjectivity vis-à-vis *La Haine* and *La Noë*. Having grown up in La Courneuve, she admits to thinking that she “knew pretty much everything there is to know about the Paris *banlieue* and felt faintly irritated by the distant, patronizing gaze that most writing on the film adopted” (p. 110). However, her attitude changed after a visit to Chanteloup-les-Vignes to take photos of shooting locations was cut short by children throwing rocks and cans: “We beat a hasty and somewhat shamefaced retreat to the station. I think of Hubert in the film saying to the television reporter: ‘This is not Thoiry’ (the well-known safari park). He and the young people that afternoon are right. For, while there is nothing inherently wrong in taking pictures, these youths did not mistake our intention. We had come to observe them and their habitat with our distant, learned and privileged gaze, our gesture reinforcing their deprivation” (p. 112).

Fortunately, that experience does not dissuade Vincendeau from exposing the reifying, narcissistic way in which Kassovitz criticizes the media fascination with *banlieue* violence (in the opening montage of authentic riot footage, which is subsequently viewed on television with great relish by Vinz; as well as when an ambitious female journalist, camera already rolling, avidly asks the three friends if they participated in the riots) but at the same time employs stylized violence and stock images about the *banlieues* to immerse viewers in the spectacle of his own carefully crafted narrative. Though French reviewers consistently overlooked the contradiction in their effusive praise, suburban spectators did not, booing Vincent Cassel off the stage at a promotional event in Marseille and disrupting screenings in central Paris. Here one might object that it would be impossible to make a *banlieue* film that avoids this trap entirely, but to my mind Bruno Dumont’s *La Vie de Jésus* (1997)—which depicts a group of racist, misogynist, teenage boys living in the economically depressed town of Bailleul near Lille—offers a revealing alternative approach by systematically refusing spectators any voyeuristic pleasure through violence, sex, music, fashionable cinematography, or emotional identification with characters, then at the end challenging us to bridge the moral chasm that separates us from Freddy, the film’s reprehensible male protagonist. In so doing, Dumont presses viewers to confront their own subjectivity rather than offering a seductive repackaging of stereotypes.[5]

Returning to Kassovitz, it is telling that he rejected compliments related to style and form by presenting *La Haine* as revolutionary socio-political critique; yet when pressed on issues of authenticity and social representation, he defended his right to artistic independence and denied all responsibility to realism. Such double-dealing underscores his personal ambition, which was confirmed by his subsequent

films and pursuit of side careers in acting (most visibly, as Audrey Tatou's love interest in *Amélie*) and modeling for Lancôme. Vincendeau aptly characterizes *Assassins* (1997), and *Les Rivières pourpres* (2001) as "gloomy and complacent" for their "spectacular displays of violence and gore" (p. 96). Kassovitz unabashedly admitted making those films in order to gain entry to Hollywood, which he accomplished with the mediocre 2003 horror flick *Gothika*. Predictably, Vincent Cassel has achieved similar celebrity, whereas *La Haine's* minority actors, Hubert Koundé and Saïd Taghmaoui, have consistently been relegated to stereotypical, racially determined supporting roles.

The book ends with a pedagogically valuable set of appendices offering detailed technical information, a scene breakdown corresponding to the 2001 DVD issued by Canal +, Kassovitz's filmography as actor and director, a short glossary of *verlan* slang used in the film, a bibliography of further reading. While Vincendeau's work will certainly help students appreciate *La Haine* in cinematic terms and better understand its complex position vis-à-vis contemporary French culture, it is perhaps most valuable as a reflection on the role that style and rhetoric play in shaping mass-media representations of social problems, political discourse, and ultimately the collective choice to initiate or evade reform. In the end, *La Haine* poses the crucial question of why and how a film that garnered so much attention and public debate failed to prompt meaningful social change, and may even have helped perpetuate what Timothy Smith has called the "culture of good intentions, bad policies, and vested interests" endemic to the modern French welfare state.[6]

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## NOTES

[1] To date the only authorized French edition is distributed by Canal + in its "Kulte" series. It has the advantage of offering American English and French subtitles, as well as extensive bonus material including a making-of documentary, advertising trailers and posters, several alternate takes, and Kassovitz's 1991 short titled *Cauchemar blanc*. Three additional versions have been released in the UK: the first by Tartan Video in 2001, whose white subtitles are virtually indistinguishable from the film's background; the second as *La Haine: special edition* by Optimum Home Entertainment in 2004, with yellow titles in British English and bonus features similar to the Canal + edition; the third in June 2006 under the title *La Haine: the ultimate collection*, which boasts all the bonus materials of its predecessor plus an informative tenth-anniversary documentary. Though the film has long been available on VHS in the United States and Canada thanks to the sponsorship of former Yale French major Jodie Foster, it has unfortunately never been issued on DVD for the American market.

[2] Michel Condé, ed., *La Haine, un film de Mathieu Kassovitz* (Liège: Le Centre culturel des Grignoux et le Centre de documentation du CTL, 1996); Roy Stafford, *La Haine (Hate)* (London: York Press, 2001).

[3] The first three are Chris Darke, *Alphaville* (2005), Susan Hayward, *Les Diaboliques* (2005), and Julianne Pidduck, *La Reine Margot* (2005). [4] François Dubet, *La galère: les jeunes en survie* (Paris: Fayard, 1987); François Maspéro, *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (Paris: Seuil, 1990); Jean-Pierre Garnier, *Des barbares dans la cité: de la tyrannie du marché à la violence urbaine* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996); Pierre Merle, *Argot, verlan et tchatches* (Toulouse: Éditions Milan, 1997); Thomas Robache and Pierre Saragoussi, *Banlieues, tant que ça tiendra* (Paris: Denoël, 1998).

[5] Brett Bowles, "Bruno Dumont's *La Vie de Jésus*," *Film Quarterly* 57.3 (Spring 2004): 47-55.

[6] Timothy Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality and Globalization since 1980* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 1.

Brett Bowles  
State University of New York at Albany  
bbowles@albany.edu

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