

***REDEFINING BEUR CINEMA: CONSTITUTING SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH FILM***

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This dissertation focuses on Beurs' modes of identification in France as depicted in film. The term "Beur" is not used as an identity based on birth or citizenship but rather as a socio-cultural construct that serves as an analytical tool to dismantle the notion of Frenchness. This study, thus, investigates how cinema reflects on the experience of the Beurs through filmic narrative. The aim is to trace the changing lives of the Beurs as they have been reconstructed in movies since the early eighties. This process is both synchronic and diachronic. Synchronic as it engages in the analysis of films with respect to their historical context and diachronic as it will permit the distilling of the commonalities between these films to lead to the conception of Beur cinema as a film genre.

The theoretical premises of this study are founded on existential phenomenology; particularly Paul Ricœur's concept of narrative identity and Merleau-Ponty's notion of corporeality. As decolonized postcolonial subjects, the Beurs' presence in France has become more visible than other groups, and their impact on French society is undeniable. Their corporeality is not conceptually configured but physically manifested as their subjectivities are visually constructed. The corpus of films in this study illustrates how Beur narrative identities are "decolonizing" the French nation.

The first chapter traces back the emergence of the term “Beur” and discusses its linguistic derivation and metaphoric dimension. A discussion of Beur cinema as a genre constitutes the second chapter. The third chapter engages in an analysis of Beur comedy and the experiences of Beur characters as reflected through the narrative and the film techniques. The fourth and final chapter concentrates on gender in Beur films. It compares the image of the female Beur and that of the Beur gay respectively to that of the Arab nude and the “jeune arabe” of colonial postcards, and shows how these old colonial stereotypes still drive French perceptions today.

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## **PREFACE**

This work has taught me to reflect on a lot of things, but one of the major ones is that self-value is contingent upon others around us, without them our existence is of no significance. I would like to thank a number of people who contributed to the completion of this dissertation.

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ما كان القلب ليهوى، لولا... في ناظره العشق تجلى... حبيبا حسن الصفات كلاً... وبلسما للروح شهدا محلى

يحيى لعيوني

Thank you all

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

During the Twentieth Century, interest in the study of subjectivity has increased, and this concept has now become a major research subject of interdisciplinary studies, especially in the Humanities.<sup>1</sup> The Copenhagen Center for subjectivity Research created in 2002 and directed by Dan Zahavi<sup>2</sup> is a significant example of this renewed interest in an already established philosophical concept. One of the main goals of the center is to investigate selfhood as a self-reflexive and an intersubjective experience.<sup>3</sup> It is in this discussion that this dissertation aims to take part. In particular, I am interested in seeing what the notion of subjectivity could bring to the field of cinema studies. Since subjectivity is no longer exclusively conceived of as a matter of consciousness, and since corporeal existence is considered a subjective manifestation of selfhood, I aim to focus on how the visibility of the body-subject is reconstructed in film. My study poses questions related to the resonance that lived experiences with respect to their cultural and racial background, religious and political affiliations and their gender identities may have on themselves and on others. These variables I deem essential in understanding subjectivity as a corporeal experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Willem Reijnen and Willem G. Weststeijn, *Subjectivity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Zahavi is a professor at the University of Copenhagen and he has written extensively on the concept of subjectivity. Some of his major works include: *Self-awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999) and *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The other major research areas of the center are: Self and Consciousness; Infantile self-experience: A developmental perspective; Self, emotions and understanding; Disorders of self and Self and normativity, <<http://cfs.ku.dk/>>.

In January 2011, the whole world watched while the actions of the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi ignited revolutions in North Africa including Egypt, the Middle East, the Gulf countries and other parts of the world, aiming at having the voices of the people heard. Self-immolation was once known more as a “cultural” practice, but has become more overtly political at least since 1963, when the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, dramatically burned himself to death in the middle of the street, as a sign of political protest against the religious oppression of President Diem’s regime. Public self-immolation, though it is the result of total despair, is a symbol of resistance and the person who does it intends for it to be seen. The body burning in the street is a *subjective body* and the experience is personal, but the perception of it is by all means collective. Mohamed Bouazizi was making a living by selling fruits in the street, and the continuous harassment by the police culminated in their confiscating his cart. The idea of setting oneself on fire is almost incomprehensible but Mohamed Bouazizi has once more reminded us that when it happens, there is no room for regret, only for reflection. This reflection concerns first and foremost the condition of the human beings that that body wished to represent. Mohamed Bouazizi’s subjective experience has not only motivated youths in the North African and Middle Eastern regions to protest against dictatorships in what has become known as “*The Spring of Democracy*” or “*The Arab Spring*,”<sup>4</sup> but it calls also for an insightful reflection on the meaning of ‘being-in-the world’ as an embodied, historical self. Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in *public* is what made his experience become both affective and effective.

Since my understanding of subjectivity is founded on combining the concept of narrative identity that Paul Ricœur had introduced in his book *Oneself as an Other* (1995) with the notion of corporeality or how the experience of subjectivity becomes visible to the “self,” the “other,”

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<sup>4</sup> It has been mediatized as *The Arab Spring* but this appellation has been contested on the basis that the majority of North Africans speak Tamazight (the language of the indigenous people of North Africa), and that it is not legitimate to negate their participation in this process.

and the world as Maurice Merleau-Ponty had posited in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002) and others of his books, I find that the experience of Bouazizi intellectually compelling – despite its horrific nature. What I retain from this momentous event is that the experience of subjectivity is not an isolated reflection of the self, particularly when it unfolds itself in such a way. When Bouazizi decided to immolate himself, he was speaking for other selves that his subjectivity contained. This leads us to recall that subjectivity is a collective construct; it also shows us that a sense of self, for it to be visible and recognized, is in need of “others.” We are what other subjectivities have made us become, it is only when we decide to speak for ourselves that we take part in becoming visible as subjectivities. Subjectivity, thus, is performative because it breaks norms and gives a sense of fulfillment to the self. I have to stress also that our experience of subjectivity as enactment speaks for itself and our recognition of it shapes our understanding of selfhood as well as makes it collectively shared.

What Bouazizi did in January 2011 is not that different than what Toumi Djaïda had done in 1983 in France. Neither of them knew where their acts of courage would take the course of events. Toumi Djaïda, a resident of *Les Minguettes*, part of Lyon’s *banlieue*, was badly injured by a police bullet while he was trying to help a young man attacked by a police dog. This act was behind one of the major events in the history of the Beurs (French of Maghrebi background). Toumi Djaïda, the young president of the association “*SOS Les Minguettes*,” was himself behind the idea of organizing a march against racism in France and for a full recognition of Beurs as part of French society. With the contribution of many other associations, they started marching from Marseille on October 15<sup>th</sup> and arrived in Paris December 3<sup>rd</sup>, where they were received by President François Mitterrand. The marchers were heading to Paris with two major slogans. The first was “*La Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme*” (the march for equality and against

racism) later condensed in the media as “la marche des Beurs,” and the second was “la France est comme une mobylette pour qu’elle marche elle lui faut du mélange” (France is like a moped, for it to move it takes a mixture). Toumi Djäida belonged to a generation of children born to immigrant Maghrebi parents in France that had been suffering from exclusion and discrimination. By 1983, these social injustices had reached their peak and Toumi Djäida’s injuries at the hand of the police provided the spark that propelled them to organize the march. This event instituted the Beurs’ new visibility and triggered debates that later on attracted scholars and researchers trying to make of this visibility their object of research.

These two events, separated by almost three decades, inspired in both cases large numbers of people to rise up and act against injustice. Both experiences started as visible manifestations of selfhood and led to a collective shared experience. It is in the reconstruction of this “shared experience” that my interest in Beur subjectivity started, particularly in the way it is constructed in the visual arts and literary narratives. Both the corporeal experience of the Beurs and the implications of the linguistic derivation of the neologism “Beur” have been involved in the heated debate concerning the position of the Beurs in French society and the origin, accuracy and usefulness of the term. This dissertation, thus, is a contribution to the existing body of work that has been done on the subject, and it aims at highlighting certain aspects of the Beur subjectivities that have remained unaddressed or neglected. In my discussion, I reflect on the Beurs not as ontological beings but as reconstructed entities within film narrative discourse. I am not dealing with ‘real’ bodies in the ‘real’ world, but with how their experiences are reframed in movies. Even more importantly, my reflection also leads to a substantive reassessment of Beur cinema, as I negotiate the possibility that it has, by now, constituted itself as a genre.

But why Beur today? It has been almost thirty years since the neologism Beur started to gain prominence rendering the social group it represents more visible both in public discussions and in academia. After all these years, it is time for a retrospective assessment of the Beurs' agency in modern France. Who is the Beur and how do we define him or her? Is the Beur a postcolonial subject? And before that, how do we define the postcolonial? Is France postcolonial or is the Beur making France postcolonial? If we consider the Beur as a postcolonial French subject, how is his or her Frenchness different from other types of Frenchness? How does his or her Frenchness problematize the concept of French national identity? One might ask why the use of the postcolonial attribute and not the francophone?

Starting from this last questions, I will be defining the Beur subject as postcolonial and not as "francophone" for several reasons, some less obvious than others. First, *francophonie* obscures postcoloniality particularly in relation to subjects who were born in France to parents from the ex-colonies. There is a double standard in terms of how France deals with immigrants, clearly distinguishing between immigrants from its former colonial empire and other immigrants, particularly those from Europe. This distinction is even carried to the next generation, with the children of former colonial subjects, though French by birth, treated as somehow less French than the children of other immigrants. This issue is addressed, for instance, in the movie *L'italien* (2010) that I analyze in Chapter 3, when a Beur takes on an identity as an Italian to find professional success in France.

Furthermore, the very rhetoric of the *francophonie* discourse is reflective of a neocolonial dominance that France wants to exercise on its former colonial subjects. The notion of *francophonie* inscribes an extant dependency on France, and the bonds on which this dependence is founded is the French colonial legacy. When nation-states define themselves as 'francophone,'

they are of course declaring their continuous dependence on France not only by promoting the French language and culture; but also by being economically and politically influenced by the French. Lieve Spaas notes that “the old colonizer aimed at maintaining economic and cultural control over its former colonies.”<sup>5</sup> It is essential to stress also that the diversity of the cultures and languages that constitute the francophone world withers under the dominance of the French language and culture. More importantly, this diversity has not been welcome in France. One of the most impressive documents in this respect is an early declaration of Charles de Gaulle, who was one of the promoters of the *francophonie* and who said in one of his interviews with Alain Peyrefitte on March 5<sup>th</sup> 1959:

C’est très bien qu’il y ait des Français jaunes, des Français noirs, des Français bruns. Ils montrent que la France est ouverte à toutes les races et qu’elle a une vocation universelle. Mais à condition qu’ils restent une petite minorité. Sinon, la France ne serait plus la France. Nous sommes quand même avant tout un peuple européen de race blanche, de culture grecque et latine et de religion chrétienne.<sup>6</sup>

De Gaulle’s discourse reflects the hegemonic dominance he attributes to France. While the French language and culture are celebrated in the francophone world, the cultures and languages of the latter are not welcome in France. This is what modern France is experiencing today. However, the other races that de Gaulle talked about were born in the Hexagone,<sup>7</sup> they are as much part of France as they are part of their parents’ cultural heritage. *Francophonie*, as promoted by French official discourse, does not recognize the “otherness” of the “other.” The process has usually been top-down in looking for ways to encompass the cultures and languages

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<sup>5</sup> Lieve Spaas, *The Francophone Film: A Struggle for Identity* (Manchester: Manchester U.P, 2000) 2.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Peyrefitte, *C’était de Gaulle*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2002) 66.

<sup>7</sup> “Hexagone” is synonymous with “France” and I will be using them interchangeably, except when I referring to the movie *Hexagone* ( 1993) by Malik Chibane.



of the francophone countries. This policy that France is engaging in through the *Organisation internationale de la francophonie* (International Organization of *Francophonie*) is the same within and outside France.<sup>8</sup>

Since what interests me more is what happens inside France, I will focus in the following paragraph on how the notion of *francophonie* obscures the concept of the postcolonial subject, in particular the Beurs. If we consider the Beur as a francophone subject, then he is no longer part of France, for *francophonie* includes France as the origin of what *francophonie* promotes. But since the Beur is already French he cannot also be a *francophone* subject. Making them so would mean they are no longer French as it also means they are bound by the French culture and language as advanced by the French official discourse. The francophone subject is, conceptually, a neocolonial subject by definition, a carrier of the French colonial legacy and promoter of the French cultural and linguistic heritage. My choice of the postcolonial subject is a rejection of the obscuring effects of the term *francophonie* and of the belief in the supremacy of France's culture and language. However, we have to be careful, because postcoloniality, as much as it is useful in understanding the position of the postcolonial subject, has in fact its own limitations in the way it is used.

I would like to distill two major processes of postcoloniality: first, as an historical occurrence and second, as an 'immanent' process, a state of mind. By "occurrence" I mean the historical moment when the French army and state functionaries withdrew from the colonies. The 'post-' then would mean the physical non-presence of the French army, French bureaucrats and settlers in the colonies. This non-presence has of course its socio-political implications and

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<sup>8</sup> According to the official website of *francophonie*: "The International Organization of La Francophonie represents one of the biggest linguistic zones in the world. Its members share more than just a common language. They also share the humanist values promoted by the French language. The French language and its humanist values represent the two cornerstones on which the *International Organisation of La Francophonie* is based," 29 March 2011. <<http://www.francophonie.org/English.html>>.

impact on France as the colonizing nation as well as on the would-be emergent independent states. In this instance, postcoloniality marks a transition of political power that does not necessarily dispense with a remaining dependence on the “ex”-colonizer. This dependence, I argue, is still apparent and it takes many forms and shapes. In 2009, for instance, the newspaper *Le parisien* under the title ‘*Dîner familial*’ des Sarkozy chez Mohammed VI reflected on the ties between the King of Morocco and the French president Sarkozy.<sup>9</sup> These ties are of course translated in terms of the part the French economy plays in Morocco and were culminated by the agreement between the King of Morocco and President Sarkozy to build a TGV (high-speed train) connecting Tangiers and Casablanca.

By ‘immanent process’, however, I mean the emerging subjectivities that the postcolonial moment brought into being. Susan Hayward notes in her article “Claire Denis: Films and the Post-colonial Body” that:

[The] post-colonial body is so challenging because, whereas, under the repression of colonialism, the colonized body was perceived as a single unity and subjectivity whose multiplicities were deliberately dissimulated under [the] Western [Law of the father] rule, now its multiplicities and its fragmentation can come into the open.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt that these experiences share a collective memory, but as individual experiences they narrate their experiences differently. It should be underscored that the postcolonial subjective experience is an affective state and not only a political state of mind. It is in this direction that I believe postcoloniality can be more productive because it escapes mere homogenization and allows the individual to emerge as a thinking subject without losing his or her collective sense of

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<sup>9</sup> Le roi Mohammed VI du Maroc a offert dimanche soir un “dîner familial” en l'honneur du président français Nicolas Sarkozy et de son épouse Carla dans son palais de Marrakech, 18 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.leparisien.fr/politique/le-diner-familial-des-sarkozy-chez-mohammed-vi-28-12-2009-758471.php>>.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Hayward, “Claire Denis: Films and the Post-colonial Body,” *Studies in French Cinema* 1:3 (2001) 160.

being. Postcoloniality produces decolonized subjects who, on the one hand, resist an assimilating hegemonic discourse; and on the other hand, claim an identification that is constructed transculturally. Postcolonial subjectivity, as I perceive it, does not engage in continuously decrying the colonial experience nor does it exclusively enclose itself in a resisting position. The Beur experience, in this respect, shows us how the enactment of subjectivity engages in constructing its own discourse and in challenging that of the French state.

As an historical entity, the postcolonial experience lends itself to a phenomenological perspective where the corporeal existence of the decolonized subject makes of the space he or she occupies with the “ex”-colonizer a postcolonial one. Mecchia in her discussion of *Caché* (2005) notes that “in today’s France, the second and third generation of decolonized subjects are clamoring to make themselves ‘visible,’ and to make the adults in power aware that they are ‘being watched’ by a powerful oppositional other.”<sup>11</sup> The visibility of the decolonized subject is not only present physically inside France, but has become an integral part of it. Its legal identification as French does not end in being recognized as a state citizen, but in attesting to its cultural difference within that same state system. This attestation destabilizes the process of identity formation as conceptualized by the French republic. The launching of the debate on French identity in 2009<sup>12</sup> was an explicit warning call aimed at ‘rescuing’ the French identity from its Maghrebi Muslim “other.” At the same time, it was an implicit confession that ‘Frenchness,’ contrary to how it had been conceived, is *fragile*. Paul Ricoeur, whose insights are essential to my argument, already stressed in his earlier discussion of identity that “la confrontation avec autrui est ressentie comme une menace. C’est un fait que l’autre, parce que

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<sup>11</sup> Giuseppina Mecchia, “The Children are still Watching us,” *Studies in French Cinema* 7:1 (2007) 133.

<sup>12</sup> The debate on French identity was launched on October 25<sup>th</sup> 2009 by Eric Besson, minister of Immigration, integration and national identity with the question “what does it mean to be French?”

autre, vient à être perçu comme un danger pour l'identité propre, celle de nous comme celle du moi."<sup>13</sup>

The colonial scene is embedded with memories, an element that Paul Ricoeur considers essential in constructing a collective narrative where subjectivity as much as it is a personal experience is also a shared one : “La mémoire n’est pas seulement remémoration personnelle, privée, mais aussi commémoration, c’est à dire mémoire partagée.”<sup>14</sup> The concept of narrative identity that he posits reflects a subjective experience operating from within an historical process and seeking modes of identifications that are essential to a certain being-in-the-world. Narrative identities according to Ricoeur are lived and told, “le témoignage en effet commence avec la mémoire elle-même prise à son niveau déclaratif: la mémoire se dit et se raconte.”<sup>15</sup> “Living” imports on the personal experience of selfhood, while “telling” makes of this selfhood a shared experience. The construction of the Beur identity narrative, its attachment to French national memory and its rootedness in the Maghreb are crucial to the understanding of the Beur’s sense of selfhood; and ultimately to his or her subjectivity. Narrative identity connects the Beur individual to collective memory. He or she preserves memorable and irreversible traces of his or her otherness. The function of narrative as constitutive of the individual’s ‘selfhood’ experience is thus essential in the case of Beurs and of other postcolonial subjects who have gone through the same experience.

What might be equally problematic and perplexing is how the dynamics of “the same” and of “the stranger other” function within selfhood. What constitutes and draws the boundaries

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<sup>13</sup> This is a text that Paul Ricoeur presented under the title: “Fragile identité : respect de l’autre et identité culturelle,” at the *Congrès de la Fédération Internationale de l’Action des Chrétiens pour l’Abolition de la Torture*. (Prague, October 2000). 25 Feb. 2012 < <http://www.fondsriceur.fr/photo/FRAGILE%20IDENTITE%20V4.pdf>>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Entre la mémoire et l’histoire,” *Transit – Institute for Human Sciences*, 22-2002. 25 Feb. 2012 <[http://archiv.iwm.at/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=283&Itemid=461](http://archiv.iwm.at/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=283&Itemid=461)>.

of the “same” and the “stranger other” in the construction of selfhood? And how do the Beurs’ modes of identification destabilize “Frenchness”? Julia Kristeva in her book *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* had already pointed to this theoretical issue:

[L'étranger] n'est ni la victime romantique de notre paresse familiale, ni l'intrus responsable de tous les maux de la cité. Ni la révélation en marche, ni l'adversaire immédiat à éliminer pour pacifier le groupe. Étrangement, l'étranger nous habite : il est la face cachée de notre identité, l'espace qui ruine notre demeure, le temps où s'abîment l'entente et la sympathie. De le reconnaître en nous, nous nous épargnons de le détester en lui-même.<sup>16</sup>

The usefulness of Kristeva’s argument is that it questions the very notion of identity formation in relation to nation-states based on exclusion. The fear of the “other” is a reflection of how the image of this “other” is projected within the national self. It is this projection that increases the feeling of rejection. This resonates quite uncannily with what de Gaulle had mentioned in the same interview I quoted above:

Qu'on ne se raconte pas d'histoire ! Les musulmans, vous êtes allés les voir ? Vous les avez regardés avec leurs turbans et leurs djellabas ? *Vous voyez bien que ce ne sont pas des Français.* Ceux qui prônent l'intégration ont une cervelle de colibri, même s'ils sont très savants. Essayez d'intégrer de l'huile et du vinaigre. Agitez la bouteille. Au bout d'un moment, ils se sépareront de nouveau. *Les Arabes sont des Arabes, les Français sont des Français.*<sup>17</sup> (My emphasis)

It is obvious that de Gaulle is confirming the fear that Kristeva is still talking about three decades later. The singling out of the “Arabs/Muslims” is not a coincidence, because it reflects the degree

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<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1988) 9.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Peyrefitte, 66.

of rejection that this group had been experiencing in France. This rejection is of course based on race and religion. The Beur, however, is coherent with what constitutes his or her modes of identification as they recognize their parents' culture as part of their Frenchness, while the French, as de Gaulle defines them in the previous quote, "un peuple européen de race blanche, de culture grecque et latine et de religion chrétienne," are the ones whose sense of Frenchness is now condemned to be in perpetual conflict with itself. Recognizing the strangeness of the "other," as Kristeva suggests, is what is lacking in the conception of Frenchness.

An essential fact and the main premise of this study is that the memory of the colonial scene on the Beurs makes them more visible in France than any other group because of the visibility of their "race and religion," as de Gaulle said, and this is what makes their experiences quintessentially cinematic. The distinction that the Beurs bring in to the French context is that they dismantle the binary opposition that "foreign" immigrants experience with the "white French Other." Their narrative identity alters the self/other binary by incorporating and appropriating what these two opposed poles represent for them. The Beur selfhood as a lived experience shares the injuries of the colonial history, which in itself articulates a complex dynamic between "same" and "other." The story these injuries tell stages the memory the Beurs inherited and the subjective experience they enact within a context that is, and maybe will always be, continuously becoming postcolonial. The work of memory, as Ricoeur explains, begins with the recognition of the "evil" done and this recognition should lead, he adds, to an "appeased memory" that "does not seek to forget the evil suffered or committed. It seeks rather to speak of it without anger."<sup>18</sup> To this process, there is no definite end.

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<sup>18</sup> "Mémoire, Histoire, Pardon," *PASTS*, December 15, 2003 a dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi. 19 Feb 2012, <<http://pasts.ceu.hu/node/1158>>.

At this level, it seems that France hesitates in engaging in this enterprise, since it is still resisting recognizing the atrocities of its colonial past. In his latest film *Hors la loi*<sup>19</sup> (2010), Bouchareb, the film director, was fiercely attacked for reframing the 1945 Sétif massacre, where ironically, a recently liberated France forcibly put down any pretensions by its colonial subjects that they could share in ‘liberation.’<sup>20</sup> Even more shocking was that he portrayed how the Algerian guerillas who were fighting for Algeria’s liberation, carried out actions inside France. France has also remained silent for nearly forty years in not recognizing what happened in October 1961 in Paris as a massacre. In that year in Paris, Algerian protesters were harshly repressed and many protesters were killed. The French government took decades to admit that it was directly responsible for this tragedy, although still not quite truthfully: “After 37 years of denial, the French government finally acknowledged in 1998 that the massacre had occurred, and that 40 people were killed. However, historians have estimated that police killed over 200 Algerians, yet no one has been prosecuted for participation in the killings.”<sup>21</sup>

These events of course have a direct effect on the Beurs as inheritors both of the precolonial Maghrebi heritage - their parents’ ancestral culture of which Islam is an integral part - and of the colonial history out of which they have become postcolonial subjects. The Beurs are well aware of this colonial history, even if the French state persists in its deliberate blindness towards it, often resorting to strange diversion tactics. In this respect, it has been said, for instance, that “President Sarkozy’s effort to introduce studies about the Holocaust in primary

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that *Hors la loi* is directed and acted by Beurs.

<sup>20</sup> In his book *Democracy in France*, Nick Hewlett, enumerating the massacres committed by the French during the colonial period says: “these include the Sétif massacre in Algeria in May-June 1945, when attempts by the French to prevent displays of Algerian nationalism in street demonstration led to the deaths of 130 Europeans and between 6,000 and 8,000 Muslims, in several terrible weeks of attacks by plane, by ship, by 10,000 French soldiers on the ground and by Europeans in vigilante groups” (83).

<sup>21</sup> Kaoutar Abousmir, Laura Chambers and Gorčin Dizdar, “Remembering the 1961 Algerian Massacre as a key element for the recognition and inclusion of post-colonial minorities in France,” 19 Feb 2012 <<http://www.humanityinaction.org/>>.

schools in France, while refusing to acknowledge France's colonial crimes, has been perceived as the practice of double standards."<sup>22</sup> It is clear that the French republican discourse has not yet fully acknowledged its colonial heritage. It is this reluctance on the part of France that impedes any attempt at reconciliation, and the proper unfolding of what I have called "immanent postcoloniality." The Beurs, while themselves neither colonizers nor the colonized, are well aware of this unhappy colonial history and have expressed their rejection of the way the French mainstream discourse looks at them. Since at least 1983, however, the Beurs have decided not to remain silent.

In the last 30 years, The Beurs have gained a progressively increasing visibility. They have become both producers and the objects of discourse. The Beurs in France are participating in enriching the culture of modern France despite the fact that their artistic productions are often not recognized as being part of French culture. There are a number of Beur novelists, musicians, filmmakers, actors and actresses, all of them constructing their narrative identities from within France. In doing so, whether recognized as such or not, they are contributing in writing the history of France, and in so doing they are irreversibly unsettling the very notion of Frenchness. Coming from a North African origin they have already been transmitted the grain of transculturalism by being of an Amazigh-Arab-Muslim cultural background. This mixture, though, and more particularly the Muslim component of this equation, has never been welcome in France. In his interview with Alain Peyrefitte, de Gaulle had also declared, with trademark decisiveness and somewhat humorous bigotry:

Vous croyez que le corps français peut absorber dix millions de musulmans, qui demain seront vingt millions et après-demain quarante ? Si nous faisons

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<sup>22</sup> Yahya H. Zoubir, "French-Algerian Relations: The Weight of History," 7 July 2011. 19 Feb 2012, <[http://www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2011/7/14/1\\_1074008\\_1\\_51.pdf](http://www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2011/7/14/1_1074008_1_51.pdf)>.



l'intégration, si tous les Arabes et les Berbères d'Algérie étaient considérés comme Français...Mon village ne s'appellerait plus Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, mais Colombey-les-Deux-Mosquées.<sup>23</sup>

What de Gaulle is stressing here is that “the Muslim other” cannot be allowed to rewrite France’s landscape. As harsh as de Gaulle’s 1959 statement might sound to today’s ears it is no different than what has been thought of in the French establishment ever since. In the late seventies at the beginning of the Beurs’ first political awakening, president Giscard d’Estaing, recognizing that some of de Gaulle’s fears were coming true, offered a financial incentive to Maghrebi immigrants to go back to their countries. Over thirty years later Sarkozy, in addressing the same issue, seeks to limit immigration selectively with a proposal of *‘l’immigration choisie.’* One could argue that identity formation where two or more cultures come into contact is *de facto* transcultural. However, transculturalism as I understand it with regards to the Beurs is a paradoxical process by which two or more antonymical cultural backgrounds and conflictual historical pasts have to come together. The situation of the Turks in Germany is similar to the one I am describing here and is also leading to an emerging transcultural self, though minus the heavy and all-important burden of a colonial history.

In the twentieth-first century, the Beurs have reached a point where their Maghrebi heritage and French enculturation are thoroughly intertwined. This reference to the Beurs as a transnational people of North African or Maghrebi origins is best explained and demonstrated through the casting that occurs in Beur films, where a Beur of Tunisian origins, for instance, performs as a Moroccan or Algerian, like in the case of Sami Bouajila. It is also common among Beurs to refer to the geographic space that the Maghreb occupies as a generalized “le bled.” This appellation applies to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and even to some parts of France. Even

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<sup>23</sup> Alain Peyrefitte, 66.

more interestingly, it should be noted that this transcultural fusion is also reflected in films where “white” French act as Beurs and vice-versa, like Nicolas Cazalé who plays Reda in *Le grand voyage* (2004) and Hafsia Herzi who plays Marine in *Ma compagne de nuit* (2011). The fusion, in fact, is already apparent in the term ‘Beur.’ It translates the cultural mixing without emphasizing the more specific Beur possible configurations that appear, for instance, in expressions like: “franco-maghrebin,” and its sub-categories “franco-algerian/marocain/tunisian.” The dash ‘-’ has in this particular instance a symbolic meaning. It is an insistence on the separation between the two origins as it reflects the impossibility of the fusion. Hargreaves has already noted that this separation does not exist for French of European origin. For instance, “we do not talk about Charles Aznavour as a “franco-armenian” singer nor of Julia Kristeva as a “franco-bulgarian” critic.”<sup>24</sup>

In the context of my study, in fact, even the word ‘Maghreb’ that is being used to refer to North Africa, particularly Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia needs some explanation. It is an Arabic word denoting more a direction than a geographic region. ‘Al-maghrib’ and ‘al-mashriq’ are used respectively to mean ‘sunset’ and ‘sunrise.’ Accordingly, ‘al-maghrib’ is also used as a name for the fourth prayer in the Islamic tradition that is performed at sunset. ‘Al-maghrib,’ territorially speaking, is also the Arabic name used for Morocco as it is located in the westernmost part of North Africa. After the Muslim ‘conquest’ in the seventh century, the name for the geographic region spreading from what is now Libya to Morocco and the Atlantic Ocean was ‘bilad al-maghrib’ as opposed to ‘bilad al-mashriq’ where Islam had its inception. Even though it has been contested which geographical regions are encompassed in ‘bilad al-maghrib,’ most definitions exclude Egypt while some of them include even al-Andalus (Muslim Spain

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<sup>24</sup> Alec Hargreaves, “Une culture innomable?” *Culture Transnational de France*, ed., Hafid Gafaïti (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001) 34.

between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries) when it was under Muslim rule. What is important to note is that the name dates back to the Arab-Muslim conquest.

The word reappeared in the late 1950's with the addition of the word 'Arab.' It aimed at reuniting what has become known later as the 'Arab Maghreb Union,' and included Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauretania. However, it was not until 1989 though that the union had been officially declared but even since then it has been a "union" in name only. This appellation has been strongly contested as it does not take into consideration the 'Amazigh' component of North African populations. The union did not achieve any of its objectives and it remained active only on paper. Recently, the Tunisian President Mohammed Munsif al Marzouqi is trying to revive the union, but without using the word 'Arab.' The new term that he suggested is 'The Union of the Maghreb.' How and when, then, did the word Maghreb start to denote exclusively the three countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia?

Not surprisingly, one of the main reasons that the Maghreb is being used to refer only to the three countries has to do with their common colonial experience. While the 'Greater Maghreb' refers more to a geopolitical region still including Libya and Mauritania, among scholars, the Maghreb is almost exclusively used to refer to the colonial French territory that was known as *L'Afrique française du nord*: "[The] three countries (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) whose common colonial experience has been thought, particularly among Francophone scholars in the U.S. and elsewhere, to have fostered their decolonial affinities and solidarities and, later, postcolonial ties to their former colonizer France."<sup>25</sup> The Maghreb that includes these three countries designates a research category that shares a similar colonial history, similar emigration experience, and more importantly, most of the authors of postcolonial literary and artistic

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<sup>25</sup> Nouri Gana, "North Africa (Maghreb)," eds., Peter M. Logan, Olakunle George, Susan Hegeman, and Efrain Kristal, *The Encyclopedia of the Novel*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 572.

productions in France. Libya is excluded because it was colonized by Italy, and Mauritania, though colonized by the French, did not contribute to the literary and artistic productions as much as the other three countries. It is in this vein that ‘literature franco-maghrebine and cinema franco-maghrebin’ came to denote a field of study that includes works by authors from the Maghreb who identify or are identified as Maghrebis or as Franco-Maghrebi like Tahar Ben Jelloun, Driss Chraïbi, Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebar, and Albert Memmi among others.

For the Beurs the Maghreb as a geographic space is referred to as ‘le bled’ which is derived from the Arabic word meaning ‘balad,’ or ‘country.’ This word has witnessed an evolution in terms of its use. During the colonial era, it was used by the French colonizers to mean living in one of the Maghrebi countries: “Habiter le bled c’est habiter la terre d’Afrique du Nord, dans un village ou une ferme coloniale.”<sup>26</sup> The meaning of the word has changed because the speaking subject has changed. The Beurs and immigrants alike refer to the Maghreb as their ‘bled’ especially in connection with the idea of return: “Aujourd’hui, le mot a changé d’emploi. Retourner au bled, pour les émigrés du Maghreb [et leurs enfants, les Beurs], c’est revenir au pays, en vacances ou pour affaires. Le bled est la terre des origines.”<sup>27</sup> Though configured differently, this meaning has been used by a number of Beur novelists, singers and filmmakers regardless of whether their parents are originally from Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia. Its significance in Beur films, the object of this study, has shifted from being a ‘nowhere’ in *Prends 10000 balles et casse toi* (1981), to creating fear and anxiety like in *Bye Bye* (1995), to finally becoming a land of inspiration and reconciliation as in *Ten’ja* (2004). I will, thus, limit myself to discussing the effects of spatial configuration among other things on the Beur characters’ experiences in films.

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<sup>26</sup> Sophie Dulucq, Jean-François Klein, and Benjamin Stora, *Les Mots De La Colonisation* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail-Toulouse, 2008) 19.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The ability of cinematic production to replicate and reproduce individual and collective experiences of subjectivity through moving images has enabled the postcolonial subject to shape, develop, and reinsert his or her own perception of existence. As Jacques Rancière (2004) argues, the aesthetic and the political in art are “intrinsically” intertwined and cannot be dissociated. In this respect, films, as narrative processes and aesthetic performances, carry political messages, and project them to their audiences in an aesthetically accepted form. It is no coincidence that Beur films began appearing at approximately the same time as Beur political consciousness erupted in the “*Marche des Beurs*.” Following this thread of thought, Beur films narrating the stories of individuals born in France to Maghrebi parents are excellent examples to investigate and explore. My study, then, revolves principally around the interconnectedness that exists between the political and the aesthetic in the construction of Beur subjectivity. I will investigate, primarily, questions of identity and subject formation related to Beurs. To do so, I am aiming to merge phenomenology and postcolonial theory to understand the intricacies of the Beur subjectivity and the way it presents itself in films as reflective of individual experiences. This is why investigating the Beur experience in film as a critical category is important. It is also for this reason that I propose that Beur cinema should be looked at as a full-fledged genre independently of who authors it.

In Beur films, the “same” and its “other” are integral constituents of the self. The construction of Beur subjectivity in a postcolonial context, as a continuous process or as an ipse-identity following Ricoeur’s definition, carries within itself traces of the “colonizer” and of the “colonized.” In this dissertation, I argue that the Beur subjectivity is performative; it offers a concrete and challenging example in the ways it presents and positions itself through films. Beur subjectivity is not formulaic nor is Beur cinema; both have been constantly changing, opening

new prospects and offering as a result entertainment to the viewer. Though Beur films are mostly distributed in France or else in the Maghreb countries, they have their own audiences which continue to increase. The characters that were seen in Beur films of the 1980's and 1990's have changed at many levels since then; the most apparent change being that they are no longer presented as victims. The change has also affected the genre type. So far, Beur films have exploited different cinematic genres, among them drama, comedies, and road-movies. In my analysis, I will focus especially on comedy because; on the one hand, it offers a better reflection of the subjective experience and on the other hand, it liberates the Beur from always being portrayed as victim. Another aspect of Beur cinema is the exploration of gender identities, a subject that has been neglected or overlooked until very recently. The experiences of the "Beurette" and of the homosexual Beur are now central in any discussion of Beur cinema. The issue of gender is important because it has reconfigured the very notion and original construction of the Beur subject.

The first chapter in this study revisits the appellation Beur and repositions it to serve as an analytical tool in understanding the dynamics that contributed to its emergence and the possibilities it offers for such a project. This step is essential in order to establish the ground on which to found my premises. After introducing the term Beur, and discussing the ways in which it differs from other labels, I invest in showing the different connotations that the term Beur has. The importance of this part is that it reveals the metaphoric aspect of the word 'Beur' within the different contexts in which it has been introduced. The sociolinguistic analysis of the word 'Beur' allows me to place the Beur's experience within a liminal state simply because the Beurs, by both their names and their experiences are independently distinct from any other category that tries to assimilate or alienate them. This distinctiveness is of course constructed out of the

intermixing of culturally and historically different venues. The liminal state is discussed on the basis of Van Gennep's notion of rites of passage and Victor Turner's concept of the permanence potential that the liminal can offer.

After establishing its distinctive characteristics and its applicability to individual experiences, the second chapter sets the context where the Beur experience is going to be analyzed. After viewing a large number of films pertaining to Beurs, I have come to the conclusion that such a corpus of films is capable of constituting its own genre. This builds on the proposition advanced by Christian Bosséno in the early nineties about the possibility of considering Beur cinema as a genre. I also include the discussion of other film theorists in formulating my argument. I then engage in a discussion of a number of movies to dissect the differences and find the similarities. This part in my study is also important in the sense that it highlights the distinctiveness of the Beur in the context of film.

The third chapter is dedicated to a study of Beur films that are presented in a comedic style. In my analysis in this chapter, I pay particular attention to the importance of comedy as a film genre, and to the prospects it offers for experiences of subjectivities. I found my theoretical background on Geoff King's discussion of comedy. I discuss three films that belong to different historical periods to trace the shift of focus in Beur comedies and in order to understand the social mechanisms that have triggered this shift. The three movies I analyze are: *On peut toujours rêver* (1987), *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (2006) and *L'italien* (2010).

My fourth chapter aims at stressing the importance of gender issues that have been recently raised in Beur films. It is a comparative study between how the image of the "Beurette" and the Beur homosexual is presented historically and in films. My analysis goes back to colonial history when both North African women and young boys were portrayed as sexual

objects. The historical input helps us understand the reappearance of these images in a number of movies of which I select *P'tit con* (1985) and *Un fils* (2003). To contrast the stereotypical image presented in these two films, I select two other movies that present the gendered body of the Beur differently: *Road to Love* (2001) and *Des poupées et des anges* (2008).

The Beurs are redefining what it means to be French. Their visibility in France has heightened since they first thrust themselves into the French mainstream political and cultural discourse in the early eighties. Cinema has proved to be one of the essential mediums through which they have come to express themselves and enforce their presence as a part of the French culture.



## 2.0 BEUR: THE “OTHER” AS FRENCH CITIZEN

One of the main reasons for discussing the word Beur as a noun as well as an attribute emanates from the debates it has been raising at the sociopolitical level and the attention it has been given in academic research over the last twenty-five years. Despite all the criticism it has been receiving, the term Beur has remained a source of inspiration for a number of artists, filmmakers and media producers. To give just a few of examples: A radio station addressing Beurs and operating under the name Beur FM started in 1981 and is still broadcasting. “Black, Blanc, Beur” a slogan that has been used since the early 1990’s for an emerging style of French Rap music, has also been used to describe the 1998 French World Cup winning soccer team since the majority of the players were of Maghrebi and West African origins. *Né en France: une histoire d’une jeune beur* (1990) by Aicha Benaïssa is an autobiographical novel that builds its narrative on the complexity of being a Beur woman. TV Beur was launched in 2002 to be representative not only of Beurs but also of the Maghrebi minority. Zair Kedaddouche in 2002 wrote a daring book on the experiences of Beurs in France entitled *La France et les Beurs*. In 2006, Mahmoud Zemmouri used the term in his latest film *Beur, Blanc, Rouge*, where Mouloud, French by birth and Algerian by blood, claims both identities by being Beur.

## 2.1 IS THE BEUR AN IMMIGRANT?

In a strict sense, Beur designates French citizens whose parents are of Maghrebi origins, mainly from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Beurs are either French by birth or naturalized and the French authorities legally register them accordingly. However, adding to the contentions surrounding it, Beur is neither officially recognized as a legal term nor is it used in administrations; its usage is limited to the social context, academic research, and the review of arts and literature. The way Beur manifests itself makes it a ‘faction,’<sup>28</sup> a cultural and a linguistic phenomenon oscillating between fact and fiction. The former reflects on its common use either in this form or in other forms like ‘rebeu’ and the latter on its figurative dimension. Its facticity consists in its persistent presence as a term referring to French individuals of Maghrebi origins. Its visibility as a word can be also seen in the large number of books, movies, music and other media whose authors use the neologism Beur to construct their texts. On the other hand, Beur does not designate a specific ethnicity of any sort<sup>29</sup> nor does it appear on any legal documents or definitions of subjectivities. Its figurative dimension should be understood from within the historical dynamics that enables the Beur narrative identity to construct its mode of identifications and separate the subjective and the collective experiences. The word ‘Beur,’ thus, contains a collective history of subjective experiences that do not necessarily constitute a single defined cohesive community.

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<sup>28</sup> Faction is a neologism used in literature to describe narratives that are based on facts and fiction or as Oliver Connolly and Bashshar Haydar it: [I]s a hybrid genre, aiming at the factual accuracy of journalism on the one hand and the literary form of the novel on the other.” “The Case Against Faction”, *Philosophy and Literature* 32 : 2 (2008) 347.

<sup>29</sup> “[Ce] n’est (talking about the designation “Beur”) ni une pratique religieuse ni une origine ethnique” Malek & Kader Chibane, “Le cinéma postcolonial des *banlieues* renoue avec le cinéma politique” *Mouvement* 27 : 28 (2003) 35.

Beur, as a word, is more complicated and controversial than one might think and has a history of its own. It has been almost thirty years since the term was first introduced in literary as well as in a variety of other artistic productions, principally cinema and music. Though there seems to be a consensus that its first appearance goes back to the early 70's and was the result of a syllabic inversion of the word 'Arabe';<sup>30</sup> there are other explanations that contest this argument: "Alors 'Beur', kezaiko? Chacun y alla de son interprétation: pour certains atteints de berbéritude aiguë, cela voulait dire: Berbères d'Europe. D'autres encore - des érudits – avaient cru déceler une racine arabe signifiant étranger (barrani)."<sup>31</sup>

Beur has been around for over three decades, and it still means different things to different people. Accepted by some, rejected by others, especially in its feminine form "Beurette," Beur has caught the attention of researchers in different fields as a subject that needs more in-depth research. The genealogy of the word 'Beur' as these derivatives suggest disturb the general consensus of its emergence and reveals the tension it has been creating since its appearance. It is, accordingly, the visibility of the 'Beur' that places it within a narrative process that constitute its faction. The ambiguity of the word 'Beur' makes it prolific in terms of the meaning it generates and symbolic at the level of the discursive narration it creates.

It is noteworthy to mention that the major event that introduced the term and brought it to visibility was "La Marche des Beurs" in 1983.<sup>32</sup> The original slogan that SOS Racisme<sup>33</sup> used for

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<sup>30</sup> Verlan is a coded French slang developed in the seventies in the *Banlieue* areas for different reasons that aim to hide the meaning of words. It consists of reversing and re-ordering the syllables of words to create new ones with few adjustments like dropping consonants or vowels to maintain 'an acceptable' pronunciation. "Beur" is one of those words and it is the result of the word "Arabe" verlanized: arabe==a ra beu==beu ra a==beura==beur. It should be noted that the word 'beur' itself was verlanized into 'rebeu' and 'reub,' see Alec Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: Voices from the North African Community in France* (New York: Berg, 1991) 29.

<sup>31</sup> Sylvie Durmelat, "Petite histoire du mot beur: ou comment prendre la parole quand on vous la prête," *French Cultural Studies* 9 (1998) 196.

<sup>32</sup>The march ended in Paris where the representatives met François Mitterrand and he granted all participants a "carte séjour" for a period of 10 years.

the “Marche” was “Pour l’égalité et contre le racisme.” One of their posters shows a close-up of marching feet with the Eiffel tower in the background; one foot wears a western style shoe and the other a traditional Oriental slipper “babouche.” This was a clear indication that the marchers were claiming to be recognized as French citizens without denying their North African origins, symbolized by the slippers. Taking into consideration the background image and the western style shoe, the poster’s picture is also indicative of the fact that the Beurs are equally attached to their Frenchness and to their parents’ origins.

According to Sylvie Durmelat the Beurs, as a distinctive social group and as a term, came into visibility through the media:

L’usage du mot...a bénéficié de deux moteurs de lancement médiatique. Tout d’abord, la création de Radio Beur en 1981, suite à l’autorisation des radios privées locales sur la bande FM, et surtout la Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme de 1983 qui lui a donné une répercussion nationale.<sup>34</sup>

Two well-known newspapers of the time, *Le Monde* and *Liberation*, talked about the event using the following titles “Des Beurs à l’Elysée” and “Paris Sur ‘Beur’” respectively. The newspaper *Liberation* also dedicated a supplement to the “Marche,” with a very suggestive title: “Paris: le beur day.” This “médiatisation” of the term, not only has contributed to the spread of the word, but also immediately made of it a marketable label for the production of news.

La montée en une de l’arrivée de la Marche des Beurs en 83 est avant tout un travail de montage qui la met en perspective au carrefour de plusieurs trames d’actualité, et fait

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<sup>33</sup> SOS Racisme is an association that was one of the main participants in the March of Beurs. Their logo is “Touche pas a mon pote” <<http://www.sos-racisme.org/>>.

<sup>34</sup> Durmelat, 191.

apparaître, sous le regard d'un journalisme de "société", des enjeux d'envergure nationale dans la gestion politique, intellectuelle, morale du dossier "immigration/*banlieues*."<sup>35</sup>

Even though the word *Beur* was in use prior to the March of 1983, this event made it more visible to the public at large while it was paving its way through other modes of representations, particularly cinema and literature. *Prends 10.000 balles et casse toi* (Zemmouri, 1981) is, in this respect, the first movie to present glimpses of what it means to be *Beur*. It portrays two adolescent *Beurs* accompanying their parents as the latter accepted the Giscard d'Estaing government's offer to return to Algeria for 10.000 francs.<sup>36</sup> In literature, Mehdi Charef made the case for the *Beurs* in his novel *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1983) through his main character *Madjid* who mediates his way between his Algerian origins and his French upbringing. Additionally, while Charef's *Beur* stays within the borders of France, Zemmouri's *Beurs* fly to Algeria. This was an early indication that the *Beur* experience is equally problematic in both France and the country of the parents' origin. Since then whether in cinema or literature, inside or outside France, the *Beur* experience has become more visible in France.

The *Beur* in France are a culturally distinct social group demanding to be treated as equal to all other French citizens. Unlike immigrants they have been enculturated the same way as every other French person regardless of his or her origin. The *Beur* experience is inclusive of at least two cultures like other French citizens of an immigrant background<sup>37</sup> but where the culture and religion are radically different from the ones in France. The *Beur* is a "*de facto* musulman"<sup>38</sup> even if he or she is an atheist. Moreover, equating *Beur* integration with Islamic fundamentalism

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<sup>35</sup> Alain Battegay, "La médiatisation de l'immigration dans la France des années 80," *Annales de la recherche urbaine* 57-58, Dec. 1992 March 1993.

<sup>36</sup> Jane Freedman, *Immigration and Insecurity in France* (Burlington: Ashgate Limited, 2004) 35-36.

<sup>37</sup> Immigrants from European countries whatever difficulties they may have had upon their arrival in France, ultimately are able to integrate fully – witness president Sarkozy.

<sup>38</sup> Malik & Kader Chibane, 35.

has been an issue since 1989 in what has become known as the “veil affair,” and it has continued with the Pasqua laws as Peter Bloom explains:

In the summer of 1993, Jean-Marie Cavanna’s prime-time show *La Marche du Siècle* presented a program entitled ‘Les beurs’, which contextualized the restrictive immigration framework implied by the Pasqua laws in terms of Islamic fundamentalism, rather than beurs’ integration.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that Islam comes to the surface is not accidental. It brings to discussion a long history of confrontation that goes back to the Middle Ages. Thus, it is no coincidence that in 1991, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, in an analysis of a poll on immigration conducted by *Le Figaro Magazine* and entitled “immigration ou invasion?” described immigration as a form of invasion. Interestingly, the picture featured on the front page of the magazine showed Marianne, a national emblem of France, overshadowed by a Muslim woman wearing a veil. The metaphor is overtly stating that Marianne is French, has a name and represents reason and liberty while the veiled woman is Muslim, nameless, and represents illiteracy and repression. This contrast is not different than the one we find in the epic poem *La chanson de Roland* written more than six centuries ago.

The challenge that the Beurs’ citizenship presents to French society is that they demand recognition of their cultural and religious background as parts of their Frenchness. Unlike their immigrant parents or other young immigrants their age for whom citizenship means legal papers, and the right to work in France; the attachment that the Beurs have to France is more than the one naturalized immigrants have. Most naturalized Maghrebi immigrants still think of themselves as strangers because they have been encultured in their home countries before moving to the Hexagone; the Beurs, however, are brought up within France sharing their parent’s

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Bloom, “Beur Cinema and the Politics of Location,” *Social Identities* 5: 4 (1999) 481.

culture and absorbing the French mode of living. Accordingly, Beurs, though they share culture, religion and ethnicity with immigrants, are different from them in the sense that their Frenchness is not acquired but internalized. However, the contention that the term 'Beur' is still receiving makes other references to the Beurs such as "jeunes issus d'immigration" (youngsters of immigration origin) more problematic. This appellation refers to the Beurs by their parents' origins and not to their status as French citizens. Similar designations have been used in scholarly articles and books where we find that references to the Beurs are constructed using hyphenated names.

In the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture* (2002) a number of entries define the Beur as "second generation immigrants." Talking about "Beur music" Gérald Poulet says: "Music has been a refuge and a springboard for the beurs (second-generation immigrants of North African origin)."<sup>40</sup> Carrie Tarr in two instances defines Beurs in the same way: "the word beur was coined in the late 1970's by young 'second-generation' immigrants of North African origin living in the Parisian suburbs."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, while talking about Mehdi Charef's novel *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed*, she says: "Mehdi Charef was the first beur to write a successful semi-autobiographical novel about the problems facing the 'second generation' Maghrebi immigrant in shanty towns and housing estates of metropolitan France."<sup>42</sup>

Making things more confusing, Madelaine Hron in her book *Translating Pain* (2009) defines the "Beur" in two contradictory ways; first as immigrants and second as children of immigrants: "The term 'Beur,' derived from immigrant slang called verlan, is used to refer to

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<sup>40</sup> *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture*, ed., Alex Hughes; Keith Reader (New York: Routledge, 1998, 2002) 67.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

*second- or third-generation Maghrebi immigrants, or the children of working-class North African immigrant parents, who were born or schooled in France.*”<sup>43</sup> (My emphasis)

However, none of these references to Beur are accurate, because Beur is a word that designates a different generation who are by no means “immigrants.” More than a decade ago, Alec G. Hargreaves had already noted that “a longer-established label is that of ‘second-generation immigrants,’ but as most of those concerned were born in France, this is something of a misnomer for they have never migrated from one country to another.”<sup>44</sup>

To confirm Hargreaves’ affirmation, Samia Messaoudi, a Beur herself, has said that “The ‘beurs,’ in fact, are not immigrants. We are in the French society. We didn’t leave the country.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the appellation “second generation” has been harshly criticized. In his book *La Marche*, Bouzid, one of the participants in the March of 1983 declares:

Quant à l’appellation ‘jeune de la deuxième génération’, c’est celle que je refuse le plus. Pourquoi les Arabes sont-ils les seuls immigrés auxquels on donne un numéro? [...] Et puis dans cette appellation je vois une volonté de nous réduire au même statut que nos parents or, c’est précisément ce que je refuse. Deuxième génération de quoi? De balayeurs? De mangeurs de pain des Français?<sup>46</sup>

At the analytical level, it is therefore crucial to distinguish between at least three categories: Immigrants, naturalized immigrants<sup>47</sup> and Beurs. This distinction is by no means privileging one category over another nor is it an essentialist one. As matter of fact the three

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<sup>43</sup> Madelaine Hron, *Translating Pain: Immigrants Suffering in Literature and Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) 88.

<sup>44</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration and identity in Beur fiction: voices from the North African Community in France* (London: Routledge 1998) 1.

<sup>45</sup> Alec Hargreaves ed., *Immigration in Post-War France: A Documentary Anthology* (London: Methuen 1987) 45.

<sup>46</sup> Bouzid, *La Marche : Traversée de la France profonde* (Paris: Sindbad, 1984) 14.

<sup>47</sup> I am excluding children who migrated with their parents at an early age because I consider them part of the Beur generation.



categories overlap at many levels but it is clear that they are not interchangeable, especially when conflating a Beur and an immigrant.<sup>48</sup>

This separation is essential and primordial in understanding the intricacies of the Beur subjectivity, for their experience and their concept of selfhood are not quite the same as to that of their parents or of other immigrants who came to France as adults, even if they are of the same age as Beurs. The distinction between Beurs, immigrants and naturalized immigrants is essential also as it reflects itself through artistic as well as literary productions. In cinema, films dealing with immigration and the struggle to survive, adjust and integrate into French society were the main subjects of immigrant cinema. An example of such films is Abdelekrim Bahloul's *Le thé à la menthe* (1984). In it Hamou is an Algerian immigrant who went to France to work and stay, but was unsuccessful, especially after his mother came from Algeria to bring him back. Hamou in *Le thé à la menthe* struggles to survive and there are no instances where we see him questioning his identity, or claiming to be French.

One of the major distinctions between Beur cinema and immigrant cinema is that the focus in the former is primarily on the "Beur subject." Their concerns are different from those of immigrants even though they might overlap at times. The Beurs' problems pertain to both their connection with and disconnection from their parents' culture of origin and their connections with and disconnection from the French culture where they spent all their lives. Two examples of Beur films that clearly show this distinction are *Hexagone* (1993) and *Des poupées et des anges* (2008).

M. Chibane's *Hexagone* (1993) focuses on Slimane (Jalil Naciri), a young Beur, and his Goussainville friends, also Beurs, who he introduces in a voice-over. Malek Chibane's Beurs are

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<sup>48</sup> In the context of France, a Beur cannot become an immigrant, but an immigrant can become a Beur through a process of socialization, especially if he or she migrated to France at an early age. This is why, in my definition of Beur, I included those children who came to France at an early age and spent all their lives there.

not only Algerians but include Moroccans and Tunisians as well which was not common in previous films dealing with Beurs. In *Hexagone* we get to know about Beur lives at the beginning of the 90's. Goussainville, as a space so different from the city center, shows how disconnected from French mainstream society this group of young *French* are. Integration, traditions, racism and lack of communication are crucial themes in *Hexagone*. The events move slowly and the weather is always grey reflecting respectively the pace of life as well as the despair of these young Beurs. The only scene that breaks the grey monotony in the movie is when Slimane's brother is caught stealing and Slimane comes to his rescue in a car. This is the only time the Beurs, usually invisible to the authorities, come to visibility - as a social problem to be dealt with. The movie ends as it starts with no promises and no changes whatsoever. *Hexagone* is about despair and hopelessness, it is about an unknown future for a generation whose only "sin" is that they were born in France to Maghrebi parents.

Nora Hamidi's *Des poupées et des anges* (2008) revolves around two adolescent Beur sisters, Chirine and Lya. Male Beurs are given hardly any attention and the *banlieue* streets are almost empty of any male Beur presence, as opposed, for instance, to what we find in earlier Beur films such as *Rai* (1995), *La Haine* (1996), and *Blanc, Beur, Rouge* (2006) to name but a few. It is true that women as immigrants and as Beurs were almost absent from most Beur films, and little attention had been directed towards them. Thus, the absence of male Beurs in this film is not accidental but the aim is to exclusively focus on the "Beurettes." Nora Hamidi redirects the camera to capture frames where the "Beurettes" appear as leading characters. She tells her viewers that the Beur generation comprises both men and women. Nora Hamidi, in her narrative text, tells us the story of two sisters who have different aspirations and different perspectives. While Chirine, spoiled by her father, wants to become a model and spends most of her time

taking care of herself. Lya is the outcast of the family. Lya, strong and confident, finds in writing slam music an outlet that allows her to exteriorize her frustration and her anger. The movie, though, does focus equally on the position of Beur girls in French society and on negotiating their position within their family; a subject that is not or is rarely addressed in Beur films.

As shown in both examples, Beur films concentrate on different issues and discuss different subjects. Accordingly, my objective is not to prove whether the designation Beur has a positive or a negative connotation as much as to analyze the way it reveals itself differently in text and context. By text I mean any type of production pertaining to the arts and literature, and by context, I mean the sociolinguistic processes by which words and meanings are produced. Beur unfolds itself both as a performative utterance and as consciousness - there lies the necessity of moving beyond accepting or rejecting the term to establishing a theoretical framework. Beur as a consciousness designates a subjectivity in a liminal state that is socio-culturally and politically marked. Beur as a performative utterance is a metathetic<sup>49</sup> phenomenon, able to generate meanings characterized by its dynamic instability. Beur is also a socio-culturally constructed term that is inherently connotative as it is embodied in lived experiences. "Beur" as a designation and as a lived experience has shown us the properties it can share as a metaphor. Its metaphoric meanings are proliferated by means of neologism extraction, phonological resemblance and historical attribution. In what follows, I will explain how these three manifestations are applicable to the Beurs as I illustrate them by giving some examples from Beur films.

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<sup>49</sup>A metathesis is a linguistic process of transposition of sounds or syllables within a word or words within a sentence, 14 Jan. 2011 <[wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn)>.

## 2.2 THE BEUR AS A METAPHOR.

Before the word *Beur* was coined, children of North African immigrants were either referred to as “jeunes de la seconde generation,” “Arabes de France,” “Maghrebins de France” or “jeunes issus de l’immigration.” These composed forms are not quite representative of who the *Beurs* are, for the term “*Beur*” carries residues of each of the above designations but is not limited to nor bound by them. The word *Beur* shares similarities at the level of what these phrases stand for but retains its own significance by distancing itself from them. To be defined as “*Beur*” is not simply to be French with a Maghrebi resonating name. The *Beur* is identified by opposition and by identification; by opposition to what it does not share with others and by identification with what it has in common with others. The emergent self is not necessarily in a mid-position or an in-betweenness status that looks for strategies to negotiate its presence, but rather it is an assertive self-proclaiming to be heard right from where it stands. Considering “*Beur*” as a metathesis of the word *Arabe* and defining *Beurs* as French children born into Maghrebian homes is reductive at the level of meaning and function of the term “*Beur*.” What characterizes “*Beur*” at the level of its etymology is in fact its openness to other categories of signifiers; *Berrani*, *Berbère*, *Arabe*, *Beurre*, *Rebel*, *Rebeu* etc. “*Beur*” cannot escape being related to these categories. Its existence is marked as it carries traces of what these different signifiers refer to. “*Beur*” as a referent becomes a repository for meanings that are not polysemic in nature but rather are created by a language that is figuratively constructed. Ultimately, I will argue for an understanding of “*Beur*” at the level of what it is as an utterance, and why it should be analyzed as a metaphor. This consideration does not touch so much on the aesthetics of metaphor as much as it focuses on the functionality of it as an analytical tool.

In presenting the term “Beur” as a metaphor, my concern is not to provide a new definition of metaphor, but to construct an understanding of it based on the elements that constitute metaphor. In their book *Metaphors We Live by*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson deconstruct the traditional idea that “metaphor for most people is a device of poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish –a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language.”<sup>50</sup> Their argument is that “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life not just in language but in thought and action.”<sup>51</sup>

What interests me most in this position is that metaphors are not confined to the realm of the poetic and the rhetoric, and that it does not require more knowledge about language in order to be constructed. “Beur,” in this respect, could be considered a metaphor at the level of how people conceptualize it. Before giving examples that explain and clarify my point, I should first define the scope of my understanding of metaphor. The definition on which I am basing my understanding of metaphor is framed in Ricoeur’s article on “La métaphore et le problème central de l’herméneutique” (1972).

Un mot reçoit une signification métaphorique dans des contextes spécifiques à l’intérieur desquels ils sont opposés à d’autres mots pris littéralement; ce déplacement dans la signification résulte principalement d’une collision entre significations littérales, laquelle exclut l’emploi littéral du mot en question et donne des indices pour trouver une signification neuve capable de s’accorder avec le contexte de la phrase et de la rendre signifiante dans le contexte considéré.<sup>52</sup>

In my consideration of Beur as a metaphor, I have identified three different ways to unpack the word “Beur.” The first level of analysis focuses on the representational significance

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<sup>50</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Problème central de l’herméneutique,” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 70 : 5 (1972) 98.

of the term “Beur” in relation to ‘Arabe.’ The second level is an investigation of the social transformations “Beur” has gone through and the interpretations of the newly adopted forms. As for the third level, my aim is to look at the ways “Beur” as a homophone for the French word ‘beurre’ has been appropriated. I will use examples from Beur films to illustrate the different manners in which these metaphoric aspects of “Beur” have been used.

The word “Beur” functions as a metaphor in relation to the social context that produces it. The trajectory that the word has gone through shows its different facets and its ability to recreate meaning through a process of metaphORIZATION in relation to other signifiers. The very first connection that establishes this link relates the word “Beur” to other words that it has been associated with, mainly “Arabe, Berbère, and Maghrebin.” The metaphor, at this level of analysis, brings to the surface the connotative aspect of these signifiers. They constitute Beurs’ “point de repère,” which allows them, as collective subjectivities, to differentiate themselves and to revisit the notion of being French while remaining connected to their ethnic origins. Furthermore, by being Beur, they are resisting not only French homogenization but also their parents’ cultural heritage. In most narrative texts whether in prose or films, Beurs incorporate both the French culture and that of their parents but not in an assimilative way. They remain critical of both. Revisiting the idea of being French is a form of resistance to the model of assimilation that France offers them: one form of this resistance is remaining attached to one’s cultural and religious heritage.

In a number of Beur films, especially of the last decade, visiting their parents’ homeland, somewhere in the Maghreb, refreshes their memories as they remember the stories their parents told them growing up. Beur characters establish the connection between being French and having origins somewhere else. In *Exils* (2004) we see how Naima (Loubna Azebal) reconnects with her

origins in Algeria while she indulges in a trance party; in *Ten'ja* (2004) Noureddine (Roschdy Zem) concretizes his father's description of his village. In *Le grand voyage* (2004) Reda's (Nicolas Cazalé) reconciliation with his father as the movie ends is a symbol of his reconciliation with his parent's origins. Rabah Ameer Zaïmeche who plays Kamel in *Bled Number One* (2006) engages viewers to closely watch the details of the daily struggles of the people of his village as he attempts to reconstruct his past after being deported from France. Sofia (Hafsia Herzi) in *Française* (2008) is forced to go with her parents, but by the end of the movie we see her after work disappearing in the crowd somewhere in Morocco. These five examples show us the function of the "point de repère" and the potential role it might play in the Beur experience.

The second example of the metaphor that Beur represents is bound to its existence as an utterance that was subject to multiple transformations originating in the contextual changes that affected its socially constructed meaning and ultimately altered its reception. At this level, I will consider the Beur metaphor in relation to the Verlan slang not to sketch out where it came from but to describe the phenomenon that gave birth to it. According to Natalie Lefkowitz, Verlan is in fact a metaphor of opposition by means of concealment: "speaking backwards becomes a metaphor of opposition, or talking back."<sup>53</sup> According to Paul Ricoeur's definition "literal" meaning "est la totalité de l'aire sémantique, donc l'ensemble des usages contextuels possibles qui constituent la polysémie d'un mot."<sup>54</sup> The word 'Beur' as a Verlanized *utterance* has become a dead metaphor, according to Paul Ricoeur, as soon as it was given an entry in a dictionary and started acquiring its polysemic meanings. According to the Beurs, the word no longer belongs to them since it became ossified and stigmatized, particularly in the media. However, the utterance "Beur" regenerated itself by becoming "Rebeu" and "Rebelle," consequently becoming a living

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<sup>53</sup> Natalie Lefkowitz, *Talking Backwards, Looking Forwards: The French Language Game Verlan*, (Tübingen: Narr, 1991) 61.

<sup>54</sup> Ricoeur, "Problème central de l'herméneutique," 99.

metaphor again. As Paul Ricoeur notes “[Lorsque] l’effet de sens que nous appelons métaphore a rejoint le changement de sens qui augmente la polysémie, la métaphore n’est déjà plus métaphore vive mais métaphore morte. Seules les métaphores authentiques, c’est-à-dire les métaphores vives, sont en même temps ‘événement’ et ‘sens’”<sup>55</sup>

“Rebeu” and “Rebel” still carry traces of what “Beur” has invested in them. They are used as empowering means of resistance and protest. What interests me most is the passage from Beur to “rebel” and the metaphoric significance that such a connotation reveals:

Je passais devant une affiche sur laquelle il [Smaïn] était entrain de rire ; sur son teeshirt écrit : “REBEL” ...pourquoi il avait besoin de mettre “rebel” sur son tee shirt ? Eh bien je me suis aperçu que “rebel” en verlan ça fait “le beur”...a partir du mot“arabe” qui a donné “le beur,” ils ont fait encore un verlan qui est devenu “rebel.” Et donc l’Arabe est un beur et le beur est un rebelle.<sup>56</sup>

This linguistic coincidence reveals an aspect of “Beur” that has been there since the birth of the term but was concealed. It should be noted also that the word “rebel” contains “rebe(u)” as well. “Les rebeus” marks the second generation of Beurs reacting to the over-mediatization of “Beur” that made it so mainstream that this generation felt an increasing identification as “rebeu.” This is important because “rebeu” is the most verlanized form of “Beur” socially used in France today. In saying that “le Beur is a rebeu” and “rebel is a Beur” applying the transitive relation we get the following “a ‘rebeu’ is a rebelle.” Of course, the attribution of rebellion to the Rebeu-Beur is double edged; on the one side, it is against the French authorities and on the other side, it is a rejection of continuing in the footsteps of their parents.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Fabric Venturini, *Mehdi Charef: Conscience esthétique de la génération “beur”* (Biarritz: Séguier, 2005) 21.



This “rebellious” attitude is echoed explicitly in a number of narratives not only in films but also in literature. Since my concentration is on film, I will simply allude to literary narratives that were adapted into screen plays to emphasize my point. Karim Dridi in *Bye Bye* (1995) has already posed this problem through the character of Mouloud whose rebellious spirit was directed towards his parents’ culture of origin as well as towards the French racist characters. Moreover, in three adapted autobiographical films the characters are in constant struggles both with the cultural constraints imposed on them at home and with the social rejection they experience outside. Omar (Bouزيد Negnoug), as an 8 year old boy in *Le gone de Chaâba* (1998) is consciously aware of the socio-cultural contradictions that he experiences between the shanty town he lives in and the school he goes to. His way of showing resistance is exhibited through his willingness to excel in his studies in order to be able to change the way his father treats him and the way the French look at him. After the year 2000, the gender variable also is addressed, as we start seeing Beur women as lead characters expressing themselves forcefully both at home, where their voices traditionally are the last to be heard, and outside, where they are often verbally and sometimes physically harassed. Samia (Lynda Benahouda) in *Samia* (2000) and Lya (Laila Bekhti) in *Des poupées et des anges* (2008) are two young teen-age girls who decide to break the silence and confront the prejudices held against them both within and without their community. They do not deny their belonging to their parents’ culture of origin, but they want to change the patriarchal order governing the family and the cliché images held about them in public spaces and often reflected in films.

The third metaphoric aspect of Beur is inscribed within the homophonic pun between the French word “Beurre (‘butter’ in English)” and “Beur” that has been heavily exploited metaphorically. The semantic connection between “Beur” and “beurre” was taken to a new level

by the rap song that Mouloud composes in Dridi' film *Bye Bye* (1996). In his rap song, Mouloud states the following: "Parmi tous les gens de couleurs le plus fondu est le beur, fondu il est pourri mais congelé il reste joli." The distinction to be made here is between the "liquid" and the "solid" properties of butter. Based on Mouloud's sentence, "congelé" represents the solid state of butter and stands against its melting state. Ultimately, I argue that the "solidness" which is referred to here could function as a rejection of all sorts of assimilation, especially the one advocated by national French discourse. Using the same pun, a committed music group was created in 1985 in Toulouse by Beurs and non-Beurs. Zebda, the name of their group, is itself a play on the word Beur translated literally as "Beurre" into Arabic to create their group that represents a melting pot. Of course, "melting Beurre" in the context of Zebda is not to be confused with "le Beur fondu" in Mouloud's song. The first were trying to create an intermixed group but keep their personal identities while the second is related to the politics of integration in France. Since their first appearance Zebda has been known for its protest songs dealing with identity problems and other issues related to immigrants in general.

To illustrate, I will give examples of films where Beur characters are melted into the French culture and of other films where they have become inhabitants of France, without however losing the connection with their parents' origin whether reflected through traditions, language or religion. Mok (Messaoud Hattou) in *Salut cousin!* (1995) presents the example of a Beur who lives the illusion of a successful integration to the detriment of his family and all they represent for him. At the end of the film, Mok is being expelled to Algeria despite the fact that he was born in France. The second example is taken from *Vivre me tue* (2002) and narrates the story of a Beur, Paul Smail (Sami Bouajila). The combination of a French "de souche" name Paul with an Arab name Smail is suggestive and harmonious with the type of Beur Paul Smail is. An

educated person with a graduate degree and proud of his parents' origins, he has come to the conclusion that his inability to get a job is not because of his Maghrebi origins but because he wants to become an author. After seeing him through many job applications and many interviews, we get the impression that he is rejected because of his Moroccan origins, but we find out that after he was offered a job he rejected it to pursue his dream of becoming a novelist. Refusing to work in a position that fits his qualifications indicates that he was not necessarily refused the previous jobs because of his origins. By turning down a high paying job and deciding to follow his dream as writer, Paul Smail puts himself back on the threshold of the liminal, since we do not know what will come out of this new trajectory he chooses for himself. Paul Smail, thus, opens up new horizons of interpretation for the Beur experience because his decision to stay or remain at the margin was not due to external social conditions but was out of his own free will. This does not mean that discrimination against the Beurs is non-existent in France so much as that the movie hopes to help in its eradication.

My recourse to the "Beur" metaphor is not an end in itself. My aim is to show how language as a social phenomenon contributes to constructing "new" subjectivities. To proceed in processing the "Beur" metaphor, I will use Derrida's notion of *effacement* and *value* evoked in his essay "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" (1974). The application of these deconstructive processes is useful in showing how "Beur" has *effaced* and has been *defaced* in return. Derrida's explains effacement as follows: "'Ef-face-ment' should always be spoken of as the effacement of an original figure...."<sup>57</sup> This original figure is what he associates with a "primitive meaning" that is always "sensible and material" and is different from the literal meaning since this latter for Derrida is originally the result of metaphoricity. For Derrida the

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<sup>57</sup> Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *New Literary History* 6: 1 (1974) 8.

literal meaning is an effaced metaphor that gets accepted as such through the process of the polysemic nature of “usure.”

We may detect here the double bearing of the French word *usure* ...of which we offer the following account, although they remain inseparable: first obviously the word means that “wear” of which we have been speaking –erasure by rubbing, or exhaustion, or crumbling; but secondly it has the sense of a certain capital, the process of exchange which, far from losing the stake, would make of that original wealth bear fruit, would increase the return from it in the form of income, of higher interest, of a kind of linguistic surplus value.<sup>58</sup>

The effacement is never complete; it always leaves a trace inscribed in the effaced sign. The root *-face-* retains what has been lost in the process of *ef-face-ment*. The absent *-face-* is traceable, it is never lost, it is always there, and it just needs to be resurrected. *Beur*, in this respect, has gone through a process of double effacement. The face that the *Beur* still retains is that of the Arab/berber/berrani. By means of rubbing and exhaustion it loses its value and becomes effaced by “*rebeu*” and “*rebel*.” The “face” that stays with *Beur* should be taken literally and figuratively. As for the literal, the socially constructed identity of the *Beur* is through the face. He or she is recognized through his or her physical appearance as an Arab. At the figurative level, the face, metonymically, stands for who we are as subjects, it marks our identity, and it carries traces of our origins. In the case of the *Beurs*, the face is also “dissimulating,” though the *Beur* looks like, for instance, an immigrant he or she is not one. Their face conceals more than what it reveals, it is a defaced<sup>59</sup> face.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> I have noticed that there is a difference between the word ‘efface’ meaning ‘rub or wipe out’ and the word ‘deface’ meaning ‘disfigure, to mar or spoil.’ I consider “defacement” to be more expressive in the case of the *Beur*

In the following section, I will investigate the different facets by which Beur subjectivity recognizes itself in the world it inhabits and the impact of defacement on such an experience. At the level of corporeality the process of defacement is never complete, it returns on itself revealing traces of a presence that has been always there: the face. At the cognitive level, defacement is where consciousness is able to form a different selfhood. It is only at the level of consciousness that an emergent subjectivity that enacts its difference as it claims a presence of its own is possible. The embodiment of this subjectivity would not be able to detach itself from the other that constitutes it. The face would be explicit at the physical level and implicit at the cognitive level. I am far from claiming an identity for the Beurs for two simple reasons that; first, identity is irreducible as an entity or as Derrida in *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (1996) puts it: “Une identité n'est jamais donnée, reçue ou atteinte, non, seul s'endure le processus interminable, indéfiniment phantasmatique, de l'identification”<sup>60</sup> and second, to claim an identity means to perform it which is not my case. My aim is rather to argue that Beur's subjectivity is a performative agency of alterity. In other words, the Beur liminal subjectivity consciously incarnates alterity. Beur, thus, has become much more than a mere descriptive term circulating among youngsters in France. In what follows, I will explicate the designation Beur using, as my foundation, different theoretical concepts that I consider essential and illuminating in understanding not only the nature but also the function of the term Beur. The first of these concepts is “liminality” and the second is “alterity.”

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because, taken figuratively, its process is not a complete obliteration which seems to be the case with “effacement.”  
“Defacement” seems to hide traces but not erase them.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou, la prothèse d'origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996) 53.

### 2.3 THE BEUR AS A 'LIMINAL' BEING

The concept of the “liminal”, as it was introduced by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in *Rites of Passage* (1960) and later reformulated by Victor Turner, describes a “midway” status of being. In what follows, I will discuss this liminal status in relation to the Beur spatio-corporeal experience. I argue that while constructing their narrative identities, Beurs are located in a *liminal space* as *liminal body-subjects*. In this respect, my first argument is that the “liminal state” of Beur persists as long as immigration exists. My second argument is that the “liminal state” is not as problematic to Beurs as it is to the French official discourse. The third argument is that Beurs’ “liminal state,” under the current condition, is permanent. To better foreground my three affirmations, I will start by defining liminality and then provide concrete examples to justify its applicability to the Beurs.

In his book *Rites of Passage*, A. Van Gennep distinguishes between three phases in rites of passage: rites of separation, rites of transition and rites of incorporation. These phases are respectively referred to as preliminal, liminal and postliminal. The most important of all is the “liminal phase” during which the liminal being is in a process of becoming, where the transition to the next phase is not dependent on him or her alone but on the social group within which they live. While the distinction between the three rites was referred to as “phases” by Gennep, Victor Turner, keeping the same distinctions, redefined them as “states.” To make the distinction between “transition” and “state” clear, he says that “[state] is a more inclusive concept ...and refers to any stable or recurrent condition.” Turner goes further arguing that a liminal state experience could become permanent as in the case of monks. It is important to note that the liminal state is inclusive of the space the body-subject occupies in the world.

In this respect, I will be using Turner's concept of the liminal and applying it to the Beurs and to the space they occupy. Whether this space is symbolically configured or physically represented, it plays a crucial role in framing Beurs' liminality. I have to note though that the characteristics of the point of departure (the preliminal) and the expected point of arrival (postliminal) are irreversibly paradoxical in the case of Beurs. The historical-cultural conflict existing between them as Maghrebi descendants and France keeps them within the boundaries of the liminal. The liminal state is reflected in their daily lives and in their encounters with others. Even though the Beurs speak French with no accent and are part of the French society; their names and their physical appearances are for the most part distinctive and revealing of their 'origins.' Their liminality is, thus, visually inscribed in their bodies. Being conscious that neither their names nor their facial characteristics are those of "true" French, facts that they are reminded of constantly, the Beurs, as French citizens, find themselves occupying a heterotopic liminal space, Ali Yedes interestingly explains this experience applying the model of Michele Foucault's heterotopia of deviation:

Entre absence/présence et "déviation", les "beurs se voient bloquer dans un pays auquel ils appartiennent, non par choix, mais à la suite des circonstances historiques et politiques dont les enjeux les dépassent. Ils évoluent ainsi dans un espace géographique français séparé de la sphère sociale qui les renie et qui les plonge dans un état d'ambiguïté mentale les refoulant vers un Maghreb idéalisé mais paradoxalement absent.<sup>61</sup>

The liminal state of the Beur is the social condition that they incorporate as articulated by two cultures; their parents' and that of France. Beurs, as they are socialized in homes where the national identity of the parents' origin is praised and where Islam is the predominant religion, internalize Maghrebi identification. At the same time, Beurs are socialized in another way as

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<sup>61</sup> Ali Yedes, "L'idée de nation chez les "beurs," Cultures Transnationales de France (Paris: l'harmattan, 2001) 144.

well, especially at school where the language of instruction and the curriculum contents are in French and about French culture. These two forms of socialization create tensions that come to their peak when the parents want their children to remain Muslim, speak Arabic or Tamazight, be proud of their origins, and identify themselves as Maghrebis. But whether parents are indulgent or forceful about these cultural aspirations for their children, the Beurs have to confront the rules that France as a secular state expects from its citizens. They cannot simply wash themselves of what their parents have transmitted. Beurs, thus, are culturally and physically marked even if only residually.

The fact that the context where this process of transmission takes place is France complicates the situation of the Beurs at two major levels. First by being of North African origin the whole history of French colonialism and its impact on the construction of Beur identity as children of colonial subjects is brought to the surface. The second is that French secularism has been unable to accept Islam as a possible constituent of French national identity:

[The] French model of integration based on assimilation is problematic for Muslim guest workers and their families, who wanted to retain their own identities which were anchored in Islam. In short, the philosophical differences between French secularism and Islam have rendered the integration of Muslims a complex –thus far- not fully surmountable task.<sup>62</sup>

Additionally, the citizenship status of the Beurs is different from their parents who for the most part still consider themselves as immigrants. “La citoyenneté” as Derrida describes it “ne définit pas une participation [ou une appartenance] culturelle, linguistique ou historique en général.” What is problematic for the Beurs is that the process of French enculturation intermixes with their parents’ ways of upbringing, much of which destabilizes the concept of

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<sup>62</sup> Robert J. Pauly, *Islam in Europe: integration or marginalization?* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004) 46.



French national identity, as this latter is by no means inclusive of other ethnicities, particularly not of an ethno-religious group such as the Maghrebis. Thus, the “rite of passage” for the Beurs is the dynamic of enculturation they experience. However, unlike the rituals that Turner described, the problem is that enculturation, as much as it is an institutional and societal demand placed on the Beurs, is a rite of passage for them that is ongoing, hence they are “trapped” in the liminal state. Michel Laronde has summarized the complexity of being Beur, as he defines “être Beur” as “[Etre] Maghrébin de la deuxième ou même de la troisième génération, adopter la France comme lieu de résidence, et être de religion musulmane. C'est surtout avoir une certaine perception de sa situation ethno-culturelle.”<sup>63</sup>

The Beurs’ access to the postliminal or as Gennep describes it: the “ceremonies of incorporation into the new world,” is never fully attained. The “new world” could be described as “beyond the *banlieue*.” The *banlieue* is the liminal space that is defined according to the French mainstream discourse as a nest of all the ills of society and where the only law that reigns is violence. The “incorporation” suggested then is an assimilation “à la Française”<sup>64</sup> which most Beurs reject because it requires them to embrace the French culture and forget about their origins. What makes the Beurs’ liminal state permanent is the fact that while identifying with the French culture they continue to identify with their parents’ culture as well. The Beur cannot rid himself or herself of the residues left by the parents’ culture of origin, a situation that is mirrored by the children of immigrants in many countries.

Historically, this connection has been shown during the racial confrontation at Talbot-Poissy where many Beurs, still feeling empowered by the success of the March of 1983, joined

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<sup>63</sup> Michel Laronde, “La “Mouvance beure”: émergence médiatique” *French Review* 61.5 (1988) 685.

<sup>64</sup> Carrie Tarr, *Reframing Difference* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005) 50, and John Charles Hawley, *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2001) 59.

the side of their parents who were slated to be laid off by Talbot. Moghnis Abdellah comments on the incident saying:

Les marcheurs soutiennent les travailleurs immigrés licenciés, signifiant par là-même leur refus de jouer la division entre les enfants, accueillis à bras ouverts au sein de la République, et les parents O.S. virés par milliers des usines. Ils feront, après le succès symbolique de la Marche, un retour sur eux-mêmes et sur leur situation sociale.<sup>65</sup>

Both the Beurs and their parents are concentrated geographically in the *banlieue*, an area socially, culturally and economically outside the mainstream of France. Since the *banlieue* is marginalized and out of control as a *liminal space* so are the Beurs as *liminal beings*. What is interesting about the liminal state is that it is a performative process actively bothering the very conception of being French. Liminal bodies living in a liminal space is a recurrent narrative strategy in Beur films. In a transitional phase that marks the Beur's experience we never see what has become of them, we are left wondering about their predicaments as individuals. The liminal space is not always a physical space but rather can be a psychological one where liminality as a process never reaches the next state. It's the body that incarnates the liminal state. Since their appearance until now, the Beurs have remained in their liminal state both at the level of the space they inhabit and at the level of their corporeal experience. They are still at the margin of society and considered a potential threat. This permanent instability has been reflected in film in that we never see adult Beurs holding prominent positions nor are they ever portrayed as fully stable characters. Most of the time they are either coming-of-age individuals or young adults with chaotic life experiences. This perception is a reflection of how society looks at them and what it expects of them, not of how they perceive themselves. This final remark will lead me

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<sup>65</sup> Moghniss Abdallah, "Nouveau millénaire Défis Libertaires mais qu'est-ce que la marche pour l'égalité." 9 Dec. 2011 <<http://icietlabas.lautre.net/spip.php?article52>>.

to think about the construction of “otherness” and on the impact that our social “reality” has on individual experiences.

## **2.4 THE BEUR AND ALTERITY.**

At this level of difference, the Beur becomes “un autre en-soi,” an ‘other’ within the ‘self’ and not an ‘other self’ or a homophobic ‘other’ haunting the self. The ‘other’ within is an awareness of “autruié” (otherness) that exists within a defaced ‘self.’ The Beurs carry in themselves signs of ‘otherness’ of which they are reminded constantly in private as well as in public. The private as a space is not limited to the home but includes the social group of which they are a part. The Beur subjectivity disturbs the notion of alterity that conceives of ‘otherness’ as being exterior to the ‘self,’ as it does consequently problematize the notion of ‘ipseity’ as a solipsistic Cartesian ‘self.’ The ‘other’ within Beur subjectivity is a permanent resident in the ‘self’ as it is part of its constituents. The Beur, in being himself, is being his ‘other;’ he or she is both the ‘je’ and the ‘tu.’ Being conscious, as a subject, of his or her physical existence, the Beur subjectivity manifests and unfolds itself differently. Beurs are always reminded at the level of their own consciousness and by the social milieu where they live of the ‘other’ (l’autre) within.

This paradoxical situation is what establishes the “otherness” of the Beurs. Living their “otherness” within brings us to talk about an alterity structured much like Janus’ two faces. On the one hand, one face of Janus is the Beur looking at the past projected through his or her family, above all his or her parents’ country of origin with all the cultural heritage and colonial past that this look unfolds. On the other hand, the second face of Janus is the Beur looking at his or her presence in the French society with all the challenges it represents. To explore more fully

this notion, I will be using different approaches but my concentration will be on theories of subjectivity, in particular the ones advanced by Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur and Sartre.

I am mainly concerned with the distinction and implications of the interconnectedness between subjectivity and alterity. My argument is that Beur as an 'autre en-soi' challenges the general modalities that constitute the subject. Beur consciousness is constructed and experienced as an intera-subjectivity where both the inter- and intra- are contained within the same 'self' and exposed accordingly as a lived experience. The intera-subjectivity challenge is represented by what I categorize as a subject-self containing a subject-other. Consciousness as interiorized in a subject has to manifest itself in different ways but what interests me is how Merleau-Ponty explains it.

In so far, as I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I found it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely in with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject of that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. The ontological world and body which we find at the core of the subject are not the world or the body as idea, but on the one hand the world itself contracted into a comprehensive grasp, and on the other the body itself as a knowing-body.<sup>66</sup>

Our body is invisible to us but is visible to the world and to the other as "autrui." As a contained body-subject, the Beur apperception of alterity is intrinsic and extrinsic. The Beur is inherently a postcolonial subject who incarnates both the "self" and the "other." These two paradoxical constituents are composites of the same consciousness, and the Beur attests himself or herself by incorporating both. Beur being of Maghrebi descent and being French, at the same time, is being, by necessity, related to a colonial past. Beur incarnates the identity of both the

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<sup>66</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002) 474.

colonized and the colonizer. Beur subjectivity, thus, is recognized and validated by revealing itself in the form of a narrative to the world. This is a narrative that traps its subject/narrator into a labyrinth of possibilities where making a choice is not contingent upon him or her but dependent on situations. Being in a situation according to Merleau-Ponty is forcing one's "ipseity into reality only by actually being a body and entering the world through that body." Even though the conception of Merleau-Ponty about the body is universal, it is quintessential to note that the entrance of this body into the world is culturally and physically marked.

The construction of the Beur identity through narrative and its detachment from and attachment to French "national" memory is crucial to the understanding of the Beur's conception of selfhood and ultimately to his or her subjectivity. Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity is going to serve as my point of departure in formulating an understanding of Beur subjectivities as they oscillate between fact and fiction:

[The] constitution of narrative identity, whether of an individual or a historical community, was the place to search for this fusion between history and fiction...After all, do not human lives become more readable [lisibles] when they are interpreted in function of the stories people tell about themselves? And these "life stories," are they not rendered more intelligible when they are applied to narrative models -plots- borrowed from history and fiction...It is therefore plausible to affirm that: a) knowledge of the self is an interpretation; b) the interpretation of the self in turn finds narrative, among other signs and symbols, to be more privileged mediations; c) this mediation borrows from history as much as fiction making the life story a fictive one.<sup>67</sup>

The process of identification, for Ricoeur, is to be understood from within the interrelatedness of what he terms *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity. While the former is the status

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<sup>67</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," *Philosophy Today* 35.1 (1991) 73.

of identity as sameness, unchanging over life time, the latter is the continuous process through which the subject's story is narrated, received and re-interpreted. Ultimately, *ipse*-identity is what constitutes narrative identity as it encompasses *idem*-identity and is constantly dynamic. Accordingly, our subjectivity inscribes itself in the world through narrative, and it does so through the interaction of other narrative identities that it encounters. We tell our stories as we go, but we never own them. Once they are out there, they are no longer ours as they have never been.

The Beur's narrative voice is dialogic. Dialogism is expressed through the communication that is constantly present alternating between the two voices that speak from within the Beur. "Otherness" is not internalized but is intrinsic; it is part of the speaking subject. The speaking "I" is dialogic not only at the linguistic level but also at the cultural level. Dialogism is reflective of both the polyphonic aspect of the speaking subject and of his or her social and cultural points of view or perspectives. The 'self/other' component is not to be understood in terms of the traditional explanation mainly found in orientalist studies, but is dependent on contextualized situations where the Beur shifts positions between being "French" or "Maghrebi" to situate himself or herself. The position as 'self' and as 'other' is contingent upon the way Beur subjectivity expresses itself in context. The dynamics of 'self/other' mark incomplete transitions.

The function of narrative as constitutive of the individual 'selfhood' experience is fundamental in the analysis and understanding of Beurs. How does subjectivity articulate itself in selfhood? Subjectivity being conscious of what constitutes the 'self' and turns it into two socially constructed 'selves' that are articulated through the same subject. The concept of narrative engenders a contextualized experience. It also entails an embodiment, a physical being, a

character to enact it. The Beur cannot avoid being conscious of the cultural dimensions that are at play at the very instant he or she starts interacting with others. What has been lived cannot be erased or forgotten for it becomes part of memory, part of a narrative that exposes itself as a problematic experience not necessarily for the Beur but for the social context where it exhibits itself.

It is necessary at this point to evoke the notion of alterity as it is experienced by the Beur as well as the taxonomy based on 'habitation' as it is presented and analyzed by Randall Halle in his book *German Film after Germany* (2008). Halle classifies three types of habitation to establish an understanding of migrant minorities in host countries. These types are exhabitation, cohabitation and inhabitation, and they are analyzed as they reflect themselves in social reality and through Turkish-German films. He argues that there is a progressive shift in modes of representing the migrant minority in Germany, particularly the Turkish community. Exhabitation is a system of exclusion used by the nation-state either expressed through death or deportation. Cohabitation, on the other hand, is a system of resistance where characters belonging to migrant groups are forcefully marking their presence in the host society. Inhabitation, in contrast to the two confrontational forms of habitation, seeks to represent the migrant community characters as self-consciously aware of their belonging to the host country not as strangers or outcasts but as inhabitants as much a part of that society as to the ethnic group of which they are part. This third form of habitation is what interests me most in the analysis of Beur alterity. As I outlined earlier, the intrasubjective alterity with an interior 'other' that the Beur embodies not only renders an intersubjective alterity with an exterior 'other' possible, but also effective.

My understanding of alterity is that it should not to be reduced to the recognition of the 'other' as 'other' but to grant the 'other' space and speech where otherness constitutes a

consciousness that has a cognitive and a corporeal existence. “To speak with” not to or about the ‘other’ “already signifies a transformation in patterns of alterity toward an acknowledgment of the other as dialogic partner.”<sup>68</sup> What I understand by ‘dialogic’ is explained by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (1984) as he insists on the importance of dialogue:

[In] dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is -and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end.<sup>69</sup>

Contrary to the Cartesian cogito, Bakhtin engenders ‘existence’ in dialogic communication “to be means to communicate.” The ‘other’ in Bakhtin’s thought becomes essential in the construction of the ‘self’s’ consciousness. Though Bakhtin’s focus was on the novel, since a novel can serve as a reflective mirror of our existence, I will borrow Bakhtin’s terminology to speak of a dialogic monologue where the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ interplay from within the same subject. The Beur, thus, becomes a ‘host’ for such an interaction. However, in the French political discourse the Beurs are caught in a mode of paradoxical visibility. They represent a threat to national identity as a “cultural other.”<sup>70</sup> Their visibility or what the official discourse sees devalues them and invites negative stereotypes - they are seen as trouble makers and drug dealers. Their invisibility, or what the official discourse and media are sometimes blind to, and which has the potential to be constructive, is that the Beurs represent a possible reconciliation between the colonial past that modern France is still resisting to recognize and the postcolonial subjects Beurs and their parents have become.

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<sup>68</sup> Radall Halle, *German Film after Germany*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 141.

<sup>69</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 252.

<sup>70</sup> Graem Dunfy, Rainer Emig, eds., *Hybrid Humour: Comedy in Transcultural Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 118.



Rachid Bouchareb's *Hors la loi* (2010) was harshly criticized, as I noted earlier, and there was even a protest march that was organized claiming that the film misrepresents the French during "la guerre d'Algerie" and the Sétif massacre of May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945. The status of Beurs in France and their acceptance as French is still burdened with this colonial past. I have to add here that while the three actors who play in Bouchareb's *Hors la loi* are Beurs of Maghrebi origin they are not Algerians: two were born to Moroccan parents, the third to Tunisian parents. This detail is very significant as it makes the history of the Maghreb a history of Beurs at least at the level of cinema which still poses problems to the French mainstream discourse.

### 3.0 BEUR CINEMA: A GENRE?

Tracing the history of Beur cinema necessitates first defining what Beur cinema is. Since its emergence in the early 1980's, there has been a disagreement among scholars on how to define it. If Farida Belghoul gave Beur cinema a broad definition including films by Beur, Franco-Maghrebi, and "French" filmmakers, Christian Bosséno narrowed it down to films made by filmmakers of North African origins who were born or raised in France and portray Beur characters.<sup>71</sup> While Mireille Rosello does not even bother giving a definition of Beur cinema and is more lenient on what it might represent,<sup>72</sup> Carrie Tarr is reluctant to give a clear definition, especially after the emergence of *banlieue* cinema; meanwhile, she has a tendency to consider Beur films as part of *banlieue* cinema.<sup>73</sup>

The above snapshot definitions indicate the controversy Beur cinema is creating regarding its definition. My intention is not to place Beur cinema in a closed category, but nor is it to leave it undefined. My aim is to provide a definition that would serve as an analytical tool in my project taking into consideration what scholars have proposed so far. Thus, my definition merges what Farida Belghoul suggested with Bosséno's narrower definition. I will also disassociate Beur cinema from *banlieue* cinema though there are films that could be put in either

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<sup>71</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) 97.

<sup>72</sup> Mireille Rosello, "Third Cinema or Third Degree: The 'Rachid System' in Serge Meynard's *L'oeil au beurre noir*," *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone Worlds*, ed. Dina Sherzer (Austin: Univ. of TX Press, 1996) 147.

<sup>73</sup> Carrie Tarr, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France* (New York: University Press, 2005) 73.

category. My definition is, thus, founded on a focus on the Beur experience as its subject matter not on where the films takes place, in the banlieue for instance, nor on the origin of the film director, as a matter of fact a Beur film can have a French director. This definition will liberate films made by Beur filmmakers from being tagged as “Beur films”, as it will also open up new horizons for Beur cinema inviting contributions of other filmmakers, who are not necessarily Beurs, but who make film about them. In the light of this definition, a history of Beur cinema will include films where the central subject revolves around Beurs.

The history of Beur cinema, I will show, is a reflection on the position of the Beur and the process of subjectivity formation in Beur films. My goal is not to compare films but to trace the development of Beur characters, both within a single film and in connection to characters in other films. There is a very strong connection between Beur films not only at the level of narrative and style, but also at the level of their characters. During the 1980’s, films that portray Beur characters in leading roles were rare. With the exception of *Prends 10000 balles et casse toi* (1981), *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1985) and *L’oeil au beur et noir* (1987) there were hardly any other films where the visibility of the Beur is pronounced. These movies made the Beur subjects visible by reflecting on their social, cultural and political conditions. The other set of films that I also consider Beur films of this period include *P’tit con* (1985) and *Pierre et Djamila* (1987). While the former, which I include in my analysis in Chapter 4, depicts the Beurette as a sexual object reincarnating the colonial libido; the latter reinforces the impossibility of love between a Beurette and a “true” French character. We can also consider *Tchao Pantin* (1983) as a Beur film where the Beur character is an abandoned youth who ends up assassinated in the middle of the film. In the majority of cases, however, the Beur “other” in these films were

given minor, cliché roles and their subjectivities ‘defaced’ by the presence of a dominating “true” French character.

During the 1990’s, Beur films reaffirmed their presence and varied their choices. Autobiographical films like *Hexagone* (1993), *Le gone de Chaâba* (1997) and *Vivre au paradis* (1999) continued in the footsteps of Mehdi Charef’s *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed. Bye-Bye* (1995), *Douce France* (1995), *Salut cousin!* (1996) and *Les corps ouvert* (1997) among others opened new prospects for the Beurs in films and added more complexity to the characters. The Beurs were no longer confined to the *banlieue*, they started experiencing other possibilities and rethinking their position in France as well as their relation to their parents’ homelands. Among the possibilities, as in *Bye Bye*, was to cross the borders, if not physically at least mentally. *Douce France* touched on the cultural issue of arranged marriages and brought up the position of the ‘liberal’ and the ‘religious’ “Beurette.” In *Salut cousin!* the viewer experienced the politics of rejection in modern France through the character of Mock who was sent back to Algeria though he has never set foot there before. *Les corps ouvert* addressed the issue of Beur homosexuality that had long remained a forbidden topic. Even though it had been discussed already in Mehdi Charef’s *Miss Mona* (1987), it was not as daring as in *Les corps ouvert*.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Beur cinema managed to go beyond the *banlieue* and beyond the borders of the Hexagone. Beur cinema started treating new subjects, ones that were marginalized or were even considered taboo. There are two major changes that are essential to consider. The first is the gender component in Beur films. Questions of sexuality related to same sex sexual experiences, Beur gay identity and the position of the “Beurette” started to appear on the scene marking a powerful shift in Beur films. *Un fils* (2001), *Road to Love* (2001), *Chaos* (2001), *Exils* (2004), and *Des poupées et des anges* (2008) illustrate this

significant change that took place in Beur cinema. Each of these films takes up questions of sexual expression as rebellion against social norms. The second major change is related to the voluntary “return” to the parents’ homeland. A number of Beur road movies trace the “return” of Beurs to the Maghreb. In *Bent Keltoum* (2001) a young girl goes back to solve the mystery of her birth after spending all her life as an adopted child in Switzerland, *Exils* (2004) traces the journey of two passionate lovers on the road to their discovery of their origins. *Le grand voyage* (2004) takes us through a journey of self-discovery that ends in the tragic death of the father, and *Ten’ja* (2004) and *Française* (2008) bring out the ‘other’ inside the self.

To cover this whole development of Beur cinema, I will analyze three films; one from the early 80’s, *Prends 10000 balles et casse-toi*; one from the mid 90’s, *Bye Bye*; and one from the new millennium, *Française* (2008). The central subject of discussion in these films circles around “return”, and the different ways it is narrated. The aim is to analyze the experience of “return” in each individual film and, then, to reflect on its relation to the other two films. The attempt is to write a history of the Beurs from within their experiences in films’ narratives and, at the same time, to explore the manifestations of identity as a narrative with the changes it brings to the “self” and to the collective memory. Writing a history of Beur cinema would remain irrelevant if it did not relate to the experiences of the Beur characters populating the films.

### 3.1 BEURS THROUGH FILM

#### 3.1.1 *PRENDS 10000 BALLE ET CASSE-TOI (1981).*

There is a consensus that Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1985) was the first Beur film. It is true that it was the first film that attracted media attention, especially after the success of Charef's novel of the same title; however, I argue that the first Beur film to be produced was Mahmoud Zemmouri's comedy *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* (1981). The movie narrates the story of a family returning to Algeria where the children, who had lived in France all their lives, are looked at by the community as strangers and morally corrupt. In this film, Zemmouri was criticizing the effects of Giscard d'Estaing policy of forced return of immigrants, Algerians in particular, to their countries. Zemmouri's film was not given much attention even though he addressed an issue of serious import, one that he returned to in other comedies including *100% Arabica* (1997), and *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (2006).

*Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* opens up on a tracking close-up shot of a shopping cart dragged in the street. As we follow the cart, we hear a male voice repeating the word "Le Déchainé" mixed up with Maghrebi Arabic dialect. While the camera zooms out, we start discovering the person dragging the cart and repeating the same word over again "Le Déchainé." When he comes to a stop to cross the street, the camera tilts up slowly to have us connect what we hear with what we see. The person is selling a newspaper called "Le Déchainé." When he stops, we notice that the newspaper is attached with clothespins to his hood. The camera allows us, then, to read what is written on the paper's first page. As we hear him saying: "qui parle des hommes qui vivent entre deux mondes..." we read on the newspaper the following headline: "Plusieurs dispositions ont été prises pour faciliter l'insertion future des enfants d'immigrés dans

leur communauté nationale” and at the bottom of the page a caricature showing two men: one is dragging away the other while the latter shows resistance. The facial structure of the person resisting indicate that he is an immigrant with his dark moustache and his dark hair. Though this scene is not long, it introduces the central theme of the film, and enhances the comic style of its narrative, reflected through the clothespins holding the newspaper and the way “Le Déchainé” is pronounced.

In the next couple of shots, we discover the setting where this specific event is taking place. The person selling the newspapers enters a bar where the camera shows us two Frenchmen who, after getting a copy of the newspaper, start talking to each other. Then, they start teasing the immigrant barman asking him why he did not leave France yet. In the final shots of this sequence, the camera, following the newspaper seller, takes us to meet the main Beur adolescent characters of the film: Mus<sup>74</sup> and his sister Fifi. While with their friends in the street, they exchange a short conversation about the “bled” initiating what will happen next: “vous allez où là-bas [meaning Algeria].” Mus responds disappointedly, “dans un peti’ pat’ complètement paumé.” His sister continues, confirming what he said, “tu verrais, y a pas une seule nana dans ce bled, je sens qu’on va vraiment flipper a mort.” Mus concludes with a cliché image, “y a pas de bistro, y a rien, ... et en plus ils causent tous musulman.” The final words of Mus close the conversation and fade out to music, and the camera cut to a ship arriving at Algiers inviting the viewer to the beginning of the journey the two young Beurs will experience in the homeland of their parents: the “bled.”

Speaking no Arabic at all, dressed differently than most the inhabitants of Boufarik village where they are supposed to live and unwilling to compromise with their new way of life Mus and Fifi gave good reasons for Boufarik’s community to complain about their behavior, to

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<sup>74</sup> ‘Mus’ is a shortening for the Arabic name Mustapha

blame the parents for spoiling them and chase the family out. Though their father is lenient with them as he seems more relaxed and forgiving, their mother is more forceful reminding them they should be more culturally sensitive and respectful. One instance where you see this is when a neighbor is visiting and her son comes looking for her. As he is invited in, and Mus finds out that they might be in the same class, he asks him in front of his mother and his grandmother, "... et y a beaucoup de nanas dans ta classe?" His mother immediately reacts, "y a di chausures qu'on'di pas ici," indicating that he is not supposed to say what he just said. After the woman and her son leave, she scolds him saying that he hurt the neighbor's feelings and that he was disrespectful. Mus does not understand his mother's reaction and this starts his first cultural confrontation.

As film narrative, the movie adopts an objective camera point of view and most scenes are constructed using static takes that vary between long and medium shots. The objective camera perspective, particularly while using these shot lengths, helps in creating comic scenes as it makes the viewer the only observer of what is happening. This camera perspective could be compared to the third person narration. It allows the camera to move freely, to change angles, and communicate more of the characters' body language, their appearances and the settings. *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* makes good use of these techniques with a focus on the verbal that can appear for the most part exaggerated but remains culturally specific to the Maghreb. The use of some Algerian dialect cues, for instance, would lose their power to create laughter if translated.

Through these techniques we are shown clearly that Mus and Fifi are foreign to the community of Boufarik. Most of the comments they get are related to the way they dress and to the way they act. As the family settles in, Mus and Fifi are left on their own, and their parents start getting complaints from other parents in the community for the "bad" influence they have



on their children. While Mus and Fifi, the two young Beurs, are trying to live their lives as they used to in France, the people of the Boufarik consider that threatening to their values and their honor. A number of events illustrate this idea but the most significant one is the village parents' decision to prevent their daughters from going to school, thinking that Mus and Fifi will corrupt their sense of respect and morality.

The major ingredient to bring laughter and to complicate Mus' and Fifi's situation is the result of the tension that continues to build up between the siblings, the community and the new social constraints. This tension culminates with their "exile" from the village. Being aware that they are not welcome in the village and being unwilling to compromise creates instability and hatred vis-à-vis the whole family. Mus in his leather outfit that he never changes and Fifi with her tight jeans, high heel shoes and overdose "maquillage" are strikingly noticeable enough to antagonize the community against them. Raised in a different social context, Mus and Fifi act as if they were French; they never understand why the people of Boufarik react negatively and aggressively. The social tension reaches its peak when the principal of the school stops them one day and asks them to come to his office to let them know about complaints he had been receiving. Mus and Fifi had lived their lives within a different social context governed by different standards and values. When they moved to Algeria against their will, they tried to continue living the same way, neglecting the cultural restrictions. Their understanding of their identity, as socially constructed in France, was not negotiable. What Mus and Fifi were rejecting was their Algerian "other" whose presence was announced through the community of Boufarik.

In the next four scenes, I will discuss instances of the ineffective social interaction between Mus and Fifi on the one side, and the rest of the community on the other, especially the elderly. Upon their arrival two youngsters are introducing Mus to people in Boufarik. When they

present him to one of them, the man refuses to shake hands with Mus and says to him, “fous le camps,” and stalks off. Mus does not understand this reaction and the explanation his companions give him is that the guy is jealous of him. Even though this scene is established to create laughter, it clearly indicates a pronounced instance of social rejection. This rejection intensifies when Mus, fascinated by the minaret of the mosque, wants to go visit. Once inside the mosque, the muezzin of the mosque asks them for the reason that brought them there. After they explain that they want to have Mus visit the mosque, the muezzin reminds them that the mosque is not for visits, and that they have to at least take off their shoes while inside. During this conversation, Mus is mesmerized by the inside of the mosque and pays no attention to what is happening. The muezzin gets angry and says to one of Mus’s friend, “Allez! Sors ton gitan” (take away your gypsy [referring to Mus]). Mus, who finds himself kicked out with his friend, is once again confused at the reaction of the muezzin. This scene is an extension of the previous one. It accentuates the degree of misunderstanding on the part of the village community and the amount of confusion Mus is experiencing. It initiates a sentiment of “*désappartenance*” (non-belonging) and increases a feeling of rejection. The scene does not necessarily appeal to the viewer’s sympathy as much as it reflects the discomfort on the part of the muezzin. Mus, for him, is a reconfiguration of the French colonizer, and not allowing him to enter the mosque is a clear indication of that. Mus is considered ritually unclean, “*najis*,” because he is, according the village community, French, and thus not Muslim.

The next two scenes concern Fifi and her experiences dealing with daily life inside the village. In the first one, the camera is tracking her, with her tight jeans, short curly hair, and high heel shoes, as she is coming back with the groceries. Aissa, who will become her boyfriend, follows her offering help. Fifi does not resist long and gives him the bag, ignoring the cultural

norms and the outcomes of such an act. As they approach Fifi's house, the camera changes position to a high angle to give a wider view of what happens. Two women walking by all covered in a white garment called "Hayak"<sup>75</sup> comment on Fifi and Aissa, "quelle honte!" adding "que Dieu les maudisse." The comments of these women are representative of the feelings of the women in the village. Fifi stands in contrast against them, she is not one of them, her manners and her perspectives are completely different. The second scene takes place inside a makeshift cinema. Fifi is the only girl inside. After a while, someone throws something at her, when it is done the second time she leaves in disgust as she could not stand being there anymore. For Fifi, going to see a movie is not wrong, but for the Boufarik's community it is not appropriate. To Boufarik, Fifi represents the obscene, the forbidden, "the haram," and she is not a good example to follow and the same applies to her brother. Though the scene is presented comedically, it highlights a serious issue of cultural misunderstanding. The film constructs comic scenes based on contradictions to destabilize the normal. The film narrative plays on the incompatibility between text and context. The text being the way Mus and Fifi dress and behave, and the context is the social restriction that govern the village of Boufarik.

Following this line of thought, *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* is not about setting up rules or defending an argument but it is a direct critique of the Stoléru policy during the late 70's. The movie shows the failure of "forced return" to Algeria, a policy that did not take into consideration the children who were born in or who spent most of their lives in France. Most of the families who accepted the offer were obliged to abandon all what they had in France and start over again in Algeria. They were not allowed to return to France, and they had to cope with their new lives in a land some had never known. Even though the movie does not focus on the racism

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<sup>75</sup> 'Hayak' is a white garment worn especially in some regions in the Maghreb; it is white and covers the whole body.

the Beur generation was encountering in a France that did not see them as fully French, it did stress the fact that they were not welcome in Algeria where they were regarded as too French.

It should be noted that Mus and Fifi represent the first generation of Beurs, the ones who will organize “La Marche des Beurs” just two years after *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* was released. The film, as one of the early feature films dealing with Beurs, inspired many filmmakers to focus on the emerging generation of Beurs. Though *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* is not complicated in terms of its plot, it raises the question of subjectivity from within a postcolonial “context” that is not particular only to France but to almost any postcolonial experience. Beur cinema, since the beginning, inscribed itself within world cinema through the narrative means it uses to trace the trajectory of Beur characters. A definition of the self for Mus and Fifi was only possible in France, for being Beur has to do with an existing culture in France. Beurs are the construct of a postcolonial social reality, and their subjectivity is part and parcel of the Hexagone.

### **3.1.2 *BYE BYE* (1996)**

By the mid 90’s Beur cinema had already established and distinguished itself from mainstream French cinema, imposing its own style and filmic narrative techniques. Karim Dridi’s *Bye Bye* (1995) gives us a closer look at how Beur subjectivity asserted itself within the cultural dynamics of social life in France. Beur subjectivity, as its “disruptive” nature suggests, has been posing unsettling questions to the French discourse concerning identity formation. The debate on national identity launched in November 2009 through the “Ministère de l’Immigration, de l’intégration, de l’identité nationale et du développement solidaire” is indicative of the conundrum the Beurs as a generation represent to France. *Bye Bye*, in this respect, is a good

example of a road-movie to analyze as it tells the story of two Beur characters, Ismael and his younger brother Moloud, and their constant struggle negotiating around the authoritarian power of the father and avoiding the increasing racism in France.

In an attempt to “(dis)locate” themselves, Ismael and Mouloud come up with the idea of returning to the Maghreb to start their road trip. For Ismael *Bye Bye* is a journey within the self, a rebirth, and for Moloud, it symbolizes a new departure, an escape from the symbolic father figure. Haunted by the culpability of being responsible for the death of his other brother Nourdine, Ismael’s pain is continuously growing as the mystery of his brother’s death unfolds itself through the film narrative. Moloud, trying to convince Ismael not to take him back to Tunisia, is also self-aware of who he is. Beur-ness is what he questions through a rap song he himself composed. Mouloud is one of the Beurs who does not accept a certain way of looking at “Beur” as a designation. In Moloud’s lyrics, the word Beur is repeated many times, and his rejection of it, as I will explain later, has its root in how it is perceived by the “French”. This questioning is in itself constitutive and expressive of subjectivity in the making, as Mouloud is only 14 years old.

*Bye Bye* starts with a high angle extreme close-up of Nourdine’s desperate look, and the camera zooming out slowly on Ismael holding him and smiling at his face. As he puts him on the chair, we learn that Nourdine is handicapped. The next take informs us about the décor in the room, as Ismael gets ready to leave his brother. The scene closes in on Nourdine’s face and the lifeless atmosphere surrounding him. Non-diegetic music of an Arabic song breaks the silence of the scene. The camera cuts to darkness, then with diegetic disturbing noises starts to fade in on Ismael’s face as he is driving - what we saw in the previous scene was a flashback. As the camera zooms out to a tracking shot, we see that Ismael is driving an old 2CV car and next to

him is his little brother Mouloud. The first scene is part of Ismael's memory and it constitutes a sub-narrative in the film. As we follow the events of the film, we witness how it builds up, tormenting Ismael. It is part of his past, but it still haunts his present, reminding him constantly of what happened when he left Nourdine.

Ismael is twenty five years old and Mouloud fourteen when they drive to their uncle in Marseille, a final station in France for Mouloud before he heads "home" to Tunisia to live with his parents. Mouloud has never been there and he refuses to go. His resistance is very essential in the film, as it marks a turning point in his life as well his brother's. It pushes Ismael to confront his fears and the tragic shadow of memory that keeps following him. Nourdine is a remnant of the past; he is what connects Ismael with Tunisia. He is his "other" that he has to confront. Ismael represents the generation of Beurs who decide to stay in France and not "return" to the Maghreb, but the feeling of culpability is still resonating in their heads. For Mouloud, Tunisia, as a geographical space, is foreign to him, but he feels that it is imposed on him. However, Mouloud does not negate his Maghrebi origin. He reminds us of this through the rap song he wrote as a response to racism he experiences in France.

The film narrative, thus, unfolds on two different stories of two Beurs with different aspirations. The construction of subjectivity in *Bye Bye* is built on reaction as self-recognition. *Bye Bye* disturbs the unity of the subject through memory in the case of Ismael and through the rejection of "otherness" for Mouloud. For both of them, changing location, from Paris to Marseille, does not change their struggle but rather intensifies it. Approaching Marseille means getting closer to the Maghreb, it also implies that Mouloud's sojourn in France is over. Changing locations, trying to "escape" the tragic death of his brother, Ismael does not succeed, at least not at the beginning of the film. Numerous times Ismael avoids talking about what happened, and as

the film narrative progresses, we see it reconstructed piece by piece. The only way for Ismael to see for himself and recognize that he is not “guilty” in the death of his brother is to confront his fears. It is Mouloud, at the end, who brings this out of Ismael when he tells him, “je ne suis pas Nourdine,” and leaves. After this incident, Mouloud, desperate yet still determined not to go back, disappears for days, preferring drugs to going “back” to Tunisia.

As they get to where their uncle lives, the camera shots alternate between close-ups and medium close-ups showing how small and claustrophobic the place is. To give it a realistic touch these shots are taken from a subjective hand-held camera perspective starting at the stairs and continuing inside the apartment. After a warm welcome at the door, the uncle goes towards the grandmother sitting on a chair, speaking to her in Arabic and telling her that Mouloud and Ismael have come from Paris. Mouloud comes first and kisses her forehead, and then Ismael. The grandmother does not speak but she hears and understands. The forehead kissing and her presence are very symbolic and the way it was shot increases its significance, particularly for Ismael. She is the only one who witnessed how much he suffered when he burnt his hand in front of her as a sign of punishment for what happened to Nourdine. She is also the only one to whom Ismael will reveal his feelings.

The uncle’s family is comprised of two young girls and a teenage boy. The father and the mother are immigrants while their children were born in France. The father/children relationship is fractured. And when the father tries to “regain” his authority that he knows is lost the gap between him and his children deepens. It is only through the mother’s intervention that communication between the two is made possible. In a failed attempt to reaffirm his authority, the father orders Rhida, his son, to leave his room for his cousins, but he refuses until the mother intervenes. Ismael, feeling that he is a burden, interrupts the discussion to remind his uncle that

he is only staying for fifteen days. Outraged by what he heard, his uncle starts his rant on the meaning of family ties telling them they can stay as long as they wish. This scene implicitly touches on the main theme of the film: “return.” The idea of returning to Tunisia that the uncle keeps repeating to his wife and children is not driven by nostalgia but by a longing to re-establish a power position and “retrieve” the authority of the father through the impact of the community. France, according to the generation the uncle represents, spoiled his children and gave them too much freedom.

The construction of subjectivity in Maghrebi cultures is framed inside the community and is supervised by the father. There is no room for individual subjectivity and *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* is a good example to refer to. When the community members remarked that the two Beurs were left with no supervision on the part of their father, they felt it was their responsibility to bring this to the attention of their father. In *Bye Bye*, the uncle fails to establish his authority as the social context is no longer the same. Even though Maghrebi women are not given leading roles in *Bye Bye*, they challenge the stereotypical image known about them as being submissive and inferior to men. The mother holds the family together: keeping Rhida from hurting himself and reviewing school lessons with her two daughters are strong indicators of her position in the family. She also agrees with Rhida and her two daughters that going back to Tunisia will never be an option. The father, with no community to support his decision, is left alone, powerless and desperate. Another woman is Yasmine, a “Beurette” herself, though she is not given much importance. She is the girlfriend of Ismael’s co-worker, Jacky, who is also the son of Ismael’s boss. Yasmine does not talk much and refuses to answer Ismael’s aunt when she asks her about her origin. The shots we get of Yasmine present her as a object of male gaze and sexual desire. For Jacky she is the sexual exotic other, and for Ismael, who will later make love to her, she is an



emotional and a sexual outlet. Yasmine does not live for herself but only to satisfy others, and her subjectivity is negated in the process.

In the following scenes that I selected, focus will be directed towards the position of Mouloud and Ismael and the strategies they choose, as individual subjects and as brothers, to find a way out. The first scene takes place early in the film when Mouloud joins Ismael. Both of them are sitting at the window, while Mouloud starts reading his rap song's lyrics. As he reads the camera zooms in bringing both of them to a medium close shot stressing the importance of their facial features and of the language that represents them. The song's title is "Le Beur pourri", it plays on the word "Beur" and its resemblance in pronunciation with the word "beurre= butter." The first line of Mouloud's "chanson", as he calls it, starts with an affirmation "le Beur, le Beur telle est notre couleur." The second line distinguishes between two types of Beurs "Parmi tous les gens de couleurs le plus fondu est le beur, fondu il est pourri mais congelé il reste joli." Comparing the Beur to melted and solid butter indicates that Mouloud is not against being designated as Beur, but against a social manifestation of the word. The melting aspect of the Beur refers to those who are assimilated to and absorbed by the French culture, and the "solid" aspect indicates resistance to the process of assimilation. "Le Beur pourri" is the Beur who accepts and gives up, not the one who resists and stands solid against all forms that detach him or her from what they really are. This position manifests itself later when Rhida and Mouloud cover Jacky's brother's car with graffiti as a sign of self-determination.

The second aspect of Mouloud's lyrics refers to colonialism and his personal views of it, "C'est vous qui sont venus nous chercher dans notre pays." The significance of the "nous" and the "vous" highlights and reveals a very important fact about Mouloud. He is definitely conscious that he is different and he allows himself to speak on behalf of his community. "Notre

pays” means the “Maghreb,” it was the French who during and after the world wars went searching for soldiers and workers in the colonies. This statement shows that Mouloud identifies with his parents’ origin that he considers his as well. It shows the empowering role collective memory can play in framing individual subjectivities. Using “notre pays” evokes the notion of belonging. Though Mouloud rejects the idea of going back to Tunisia, he does not negate that it is part of his identity.

The second scene takes place at a lunch table when Ismael and Mouloud’s father calls from Tunis insisting that Mouloud should “return” to the “bled.” After the phone call, Rhida tells Mouloud, “tu vas retourner au bled” and Mouloud immediately responds, “jamais, je partirai jamais.” His aunt and his uncle try to convince him but he gets frustrated with everyone and says, “je n’as rien a foutre avec votre bled de merde.” Ismael’s reaction is immediate; he slaps him. The camera does not show us Mouloud but only a close up of Ismael’s angry and confused face. Mouloud, then, runs downstairs and Ismael follows him. He catches him and makes his apologies, but Mouloud wants to get a confirmation from his brother that he will not be sent “home.” Ismael, unable to make such promise, tells him he is going to send him the next day. Mouloud, not able to keep silent anymore, explodes in his face, “je ne suis pas Nourdine.” Ismael, almost in a panic, lets Mouloud go, and the next shot is of a fire and then a cut to an extreme close-up of Ismael’s eyes. Finally, he is able to picture the fire that killed Nourdine. To make it more realistic and emotionally revealing, the stairs scene was viewed from a handheld camera perspective.

The most important moments in this scene that will affect Ismael afterwards are related to what Mouloud said. “Je n’ai rien a foutre de votre bled,” has a powerful effect, especially on the uncle and Ismael as it shows Mouloud’s disrespect and his insolence. The bled for Ismael has its

importance and its value. It is part of what he is, and the fact that he is not considering going back does not mean he is rejecting the idea or not thinking about it. In one of the scenes, we see Ismael sitting close to the seaport watching a ship that frequently goes from Marseille to Tunis. The second important part of Mouloud's words is when he says, "je ne suis pas Nourdine." The significance of this moment is its revelatory aspect. By saying it, Mouloud is telling Ismael that he is different from Nourdine, he has his own personality, and he will not accept to be manipulated. These words have an immediate effect on Ismael as he starts to see the fire with his own eyes, not as a flashback, but as a reality. The close-up shot of his eyes reflect loss and fear but also liberate him. Ismael, by agreeing to send Mouloud back, is refusing responsibility and his feeling of guilt is the reason behind that decision. Mouloud's courage allows Ismael to face his fears and anxiety.

Mouloud goes missing, and Ismael starts looking for him. It is not until the end of the film that we see Mouloud again, with Renard this time, the drug dealer. In one of the most shocking scenes in *Bye Bye*, Mouloud with Renard's help is smoking drugs. Not long after that, while Renard is with a teenage girl, the doorbell rings and Mouloud opens the door, it is Ismael. Frightened by the arrival of Ismael, Renard, paranoid, shows up with his gun thinking that Ismael was a drug agent. In this chaotic scene, Renard is menacing Ismael; Mouloud goes to another room, grabs a bigger gun and forces Renard to let them go. Ismael and Mouloud run leaving Renard locked inside. The two brothers drive to their uncle's place. While Ismael is picking up the few bags they brought and saying goodbye to his grandmother, Mouloud has already marked "Bye" on the rear of their car. For the two of them, Marseille is no longer a safe place. Renard will be looking for them. Ismael has already lost his job and his only friend, and they have already caused enough trouble for their uncle.

As they drive away from Marseille, the two brothers are back again on the road, the difference is that Ismael has now come to a final decision concerning his brother Mouloud. In the last scene of the movie, Mouloud wakes up finding Ismael talking on the phone along the Mediterranean. Eager to know Ismael's final decision, Mouloud is still afraid that he is going to be sent back home to his parents in Tunisia. Ismael finally announces that he is going to stay with him. As Ismael is having trouble starting the car, Mouloud asks him what their next destination is. The car breaks down, and the two brothers have to continue on foot. The camera cuts to a wide shot, Ismael and Mouloud are picking up their luggage and Mouloud suggests they go to Spain. The camera perspective indicates they are watched from the other side of the Mediterranean, from the Maghreb. Their new destination remains unknown unless if Ismael accepts Mouloud's suggestion. They remain on the road, away from Paris, away from Marseille and away from the "bled". They are caught somewhere between France and the Maghreb, dislocated and heading nowhere. They belong in both places, but they are still searching to bring the two places together. They do not know yet how to reconcile with their parents' heritage nor how to cope with the growing racism in France. While *Bye Bye* leaves us wondering where the two brothers will end up, *Française* (2008) takes off narrating the story of a family's return. It is divided into two parts, the first one takes place in France and the second takes place in Morocco.

### **3.1.3 FRANCAISE (2008)**

Sofia is a little girl born in France and she lives with her parents and her two siblings. She is in the same position as Mouloud in *Bye Bye*, except that she is a girl and she has no choice against the will of her parents to return to Morocco due to the family's financial problems. Sofia is presented as a smart assertive girl. When her father asks her to bring her little brother from

school earlier than she does, her answer is, “il n’a qu’a rentrer tout seul.” In class, Sofia is a hardworking student, and she helps her “French” friend Elodie with exams and preparation. Early in the film the question of identity is raised, when Sofia’s teacher asks the class about the origin of Sofia, Elodie, her friend, is perplexed when she hears that she is from Africa. She turns to Sofia with a rhetorical question, “quoi, qu’est-ce qu’elle raconte, tu n’es pas Africaine.” Sofia’s replies that she is not Africaine but her ancestors are and, then, she shows her the Moroccan map. Sofia’s answer complicates things for Elodie, and her next question leaves Sofia silent “Alors t’es quoi, française, africaine, marocaine ou arabe?” Souad El-Bouhati, the filmmaker, makes it clear from the beginning of the film that Sofia is going to confront all these questions in the process of shaping her own subjective identity.

Sofia sees herself as French, but that does not negate for her that her ancestors are Moroccans. In one of the scenes while still in France, Sofia’s family is on a picnic and she is collecting “baquoula” (a green plant similar to spinach). As she exchanges in a short conversation with her mother about the “baquoula” in her grandmother’s “pays”, her mother in an affirmative tone tells her that it is her “pays” too and adds, “n’oublie pas que tu es du pays de tes grandparents.” Sofia remains silent, but the close-up shot we get of her shows how puzzled she is. The camera follows Sofia into the woods as she boards a small boat alone. The camera cuts to a subjective perspective of Sofia looking around at her family from afar. Sofia seems disconnected from her family, in particular the alien pull of their cultural background but she knows also that she cannot leave them, not only because of her age but also because she loves them. Sofia feels bonds of affection to her family not to their heritage. At this point, the idea of “return” is not yet an issue, but Sofia sees it coming.

One day, Sofia returns home and finds that their furniture is being sold. Trying to fathom what is going on, her sister tells her that they have no money and her father had no choice. No one tells Sofia what is really happening. The same night, her mother knocks at her door telling her she should get ready. Sofia, unable to comprehend what is happening to her, refuses and resists but not for long. Her father forces her to go and the car disappears in the dark. A new phase of Sofia's life begins.

Ten years later, we meet Sofia dressed as a farmer in Morocco. The family lives in Morocco now and their farming business is going well, but has Sofia forgotten about France and going back to where, she thinks, she belongs? Sofia's character did not change; she is still rebellious and does not follow the traditional woman's role her mother tries to teach her. She is always wearing jeans, exchanging clothes with her brother, fighting and helping her father in the field leaving the household work to her mother and her older sister. Sofia is not a "garçon manqué" (tomboy) but nor does she want to be constrained by traditions. She does not want to follow her mother and her sister's model because she believes that if she does she will never go back to France. Appropriating the traditional masculine characteristics was a strategy to show her parents that she does not meet the "requirement" of what a female should be in Morocco. It is also an indication of her insistence on going back to realize her dream. We also learn later the reason behind Sofia's enthusiasm for hard work both at school and in her father's field. Her plan is that after getting her high school diploma she will return to France.

Sofia splits her time between her studies and her work on the family farm. During the week she leaves for the city where she lives in a girls' dorm and during the weekends she comes back to the farm. Her life as a "jeune fille" is not a priority though she feels close to one of her classmates. She distances herself from the others except her roommate and her boyfriend with

whom she does not share much. Sofia feels she is French and going back is just a matter of time. All she remembers from her life in France are memories of a little girl. Sofia lives a conflicted life between her convictions and the ones imposed on her. She thinks she is French but reality says otherwise. Her experience in Morocco is “passagère,” and Morocco does not feel like ‘home’ to her. Sofia continuously asks her father about her French passport and reminds him they are all French.

The turning point in Sofia’s life is when her boyfriend, Ammar, goes to see her father asking to marry her. She is outraged and she loses control as she returns to the girls’ dorm where she takes out her anger on her roommate, Touria. She flees the dorm in the middle of the night. Her body language and her words are clear indicators of her breakdown. When Touria tells her all she worries about are France and her studies, Sofia says, “c’est ça qui t’ deranges, que je sois française. Eh ben oui je suis *française* et je t’en merde.” She hits the window while shouting and continues, “je ne peux plus.... J’ n’arrive plus à respirer” (I cannot anymore...I am unable to breathe). Sofia’s obsession with France and the effects it has on her are more than she can imagine. She is so attached to the idea of *returning* to what she calls “home” that she has an unrealistic vision of France as a paradise. She even tries to smuggle herself to France by hiding underneath a truck that is supposedly heading to Europe. After this incident, Sofia refuses to talk, changes her look by cutting her hair short and stays home. Her only request is to get her passport back and leave. In the second phase of Sofia’s individual growth, a number of scenes exhibit the “other” in her and illuminate another side of her personality, a side she refuses to confront.

The first scene starts with a medium shot, when her brother joins her on the roof where she is sitting alone coloring a map of France. Her brother starts a conversation about France. He tries to convince her that their life in France would not be any better. She tells him that France is

where she belongs, she was born there and she wants to die there. At this point, Sofia starts to open up after a very long silence. Her dream to go back is still strong but not as it was at the beginning of the film. Sofia claims her Frenchness through birth even though what is left from her experience are but childhood memories. Her attachment to France has nothing to do with her inability to adapt to the Moroccan way of life because she does not even try to do so. Sofia believes she betrayed her French side that contributed to the construction of her subjectivity as an individual. The need to go back was a reflection of her feeling of guilt. In a following scene, Sofia reaches a point where she begins to negotiate a midway between her French side and her Arabic/Moroccan side. Translating a poem from French to Arabic allows her to find stability.

It is the middle of the night; Sofia is lying down on her bed reading parts of Baudelaire's poem *L'invitation au voyage*.<sup>76</sup>

Songe à la douceur (think about the sweetness)

D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble! (of going there, live together)

Aimer à loisir, (to love to no end)

Aimer et mourir (to love and die)

Au pays qui te ressemble! (in the country that resemble you)<sup>77</sup>

As soon as she finishes reading it, out her window we see her mother is walking by hearing her translating the above part of Baudelaire's poem into Arabic. The camera cuts to a profile angle then to a subjective perspective panning slowly over the original text and, then, Sofia's translation. Sofia realizes that her dream to go back is only accessible through poetry and imagination. She turns her despair into a powerful tool using language. She finally finds the part

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Calman Lévy, 1896) 166.

<sup>77</sup> My translation



of France that she has been looking for and this in turn allows her to bring out and see the beauty of her Moroccan side. Sofia's solitude permits her to rethink her identity.

The construction of subjectivity in the three films shows to what extent they share similar characteristics. With the idea of "return" as their central point, all three films deal with it in a different way. The process of change and the degree of complexity that we observe in the characters' development are very significant. The non-resistance of Mus and Fifi in *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* to returning with their parents to Algeria is rejected by Mouloud in *Bye Bye*, but in *Française* the challenging experience of Sofia opens up the notion of "return" onto other possibilities. Sofia's intellectual independence and her growing awareness of her parents' origin are visible throughout the film. The involvement of the parents and the short sequence we get of Sofia's life in France are what Mus and Fifi's experience lacks. Sofia's rejection of going back was not based on a prejudice about the "bled" as in *Bye Bye* and *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi*, but rather on her attachment to France. Sofia's confrontation with her "other" brought her to know herself better. The experience of Sofia *destereotypes* the preconceived ideas about the "bled."

Her subjectivity depends on her final decision as to whom she wants to become. In the case of Mus and Fifi, resistance brought them to a dead end. Distancing themselves from the rest of the community blinded them and paralyzed their thinking. Mus' and Fifi's refusal to consent to the other part that constitutes their subjectivity deepens their sense of fear and anxiety. In *Bye Bye*, Mouloud is afraid of the shadow left by experiences similar to Mus' and Fifi's. His refusal to go back to Tunisia is the result of his fear. The narratives of the three films are constructed to reveal the difficulties the characters face when they are reminded of their "autrinité." The three films have a lot in common; apart from the fact that they are all about Beurs, "return" remains a

constant theme fueling the events and intensifying the complexity of the characters' experiences. The movies I selected to analyze are representative of Beur films where "return", even if it takes different forms, is constantly present giving Beur cinema a distinctive aspect, particularly on how it is represented. And this begs a larger question; do Beur films, whether "return" is a central theme or not, share the characteristics that would make them a distinct film genre?

### 3.2 BEUR FILM GENRE

Christian Bosséno in 1992 was the first to argue that Beur cinema constitutes a genre "[Beur cinema] displays enough characteristics to be classified as cinematic genre of its own."<sup>78</sup> It has been almost twenty years since Bosséno made this argument but unfortunately it was not developed further to establish what distinguishes Beur films at the level of form and content to make them stand as a genre. Bosséno's classification was based on a definition of Beur cinema that it portrays Beur characters and includes only filmmakers of North African origin.<sup>79</sup> Over the twenty years since Bosséno made his argument for a Beur genre, there has been a large body of films that fit his definition in both their focus on Beur characters and in the North African origins of their directors. However, there has also been an increasing number of films centered on Beur characters that would fall outside his definition on the basis of their directors' origins. My definition, while different from Bosséno's, broadens it and makes the argument for a Beur genre stronger as it would not exclude films for having directors who are not of North African origin.

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<sup>78</sup> Christian Bosséno, "Immigrant Cinema: National Cinema: The Case of Beur Film," R. Dyer and G. Vincindeau eds. *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992) 56.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

The question is: are Beur films going to be grouped together based on already established classifications or is there room for inventing new genres instead of thinking of them exclusively as an evolution of preexisting ones? According to Derrida “Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.”<sup>80</sup> Derrida’s statement confirms that texts cannot escape being classified according to genres, and at the same time attests that genres do not fully contain texts. This is what draws the limits of genre and makes mixing genres inevitable. Derrida’s argument does not mean that genres are flexible but that the interpretation of texts is uncontainable. Derrida gives more importance to the interpretative power that the text has than the category it belongs to. Grouping a number of films in a genre does not mean they all belong to that genre or that they all share the same characteristics because “the process by which genres are established always involves the human need for distinction and interrelation. Since the purposes of critics who establish genres vary, it is self-evident that the same texts can belong to different groupings or genres and serve different generic purposes.”<sup>81</sup>

As categories, genres are static but as labels they are mutable. It is the elements constituting genres that make these new labels possible and genres transformative. To establish a “new” genre, these elements evolve from within pre-existing genres or borrow other elements from other fields’ genres, like literature for instance. This process has made genres intra-generic. A genre can be created but its existence originates in a previous genre or at least reflects an aspect of it.

Genres are open systems; they are groupings of texts by critics to fulfill certain ends. And each genre is related to and defined by others to which it is related. Such relations change

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<sup>80</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” *Critical Inquiry* 7: 1 (1980) 64.

<sup>81</sup> Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre,” *New Literary History*, 17: 2 (1986) 204.

based on internal contraction, expansion, interweaving. Members of a genre need not have a single trait in common since to do so would presuppose that the trait has the same function for each of the member texts.<sup>82</sup>

Genre theorists and film producers alike reinforce the continuous existence of genre classification, accepting the infusion of elements that allow them to transform while retaining aspects of a specific group. The issue that arises is related to the labeling of genres and the process they undergo to be recognized as such. As genres are becoming more and more intra-generic in nature and their elements are constantly evolving; categorizing genres is becoming more dependent on the objectives behind such a categorization. Existing genre categories inform us more about the form and less about the content of films. As labels, they tell us nothing about the constitutive cultural aspects of films. Comedy and its subgenres encompass a great number of films from many different cultural contexts, but in fact these films are often intrinsically different at the level of their contents and their audiences. *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (2006) and *Les Visiteurs* (1985) are both labeled as comedies but each one of them has not only its own cultural specificity but also is constructed differently. The fact that they both bring viewers to laugh is not enough of a reason to put them solely in the category of comedy films because while they might share certain characteristics their functions are utterly different. To further complicate this distinction and since both movies are produced in France, are they accordingly equally to be thought of as part of French national cinema? Elsaesser states that “a nation, especially when used in a context that suggests cultural identity, must repress differences of class, gender, race, religion, and history in order to assert its coherence, and is thus another name for colonization.”<sup>83</sup> As much as it is safer to group them under comedy film, it is risky to consider them part of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005) 36.

national cinema, particularly in France where national identity is founded partly on exclusion, especially of postcolonial immigrants and their children, of whom Maghrebis comprise a large number.

In this respect, transnational cinema as a film genre is worth discussing, first because it is representative of this contestation of the existing genres, and second, because it clearly exposes the power films have as texts in transcending the modalities of the existing labels. Should Beur films then be part of transnational cinema? “Independent transnational cinema” as Hamid Naficy defines it is “a genre that cuts across previously defined geographic, national, cultural, cinematic, and meta-cinematic boundaries.”<sup>84</sup> According to Hamid Naficy, classifying independent transnational films into the existing categories is to divorce them from “the very cultural and political foundation that constitutes them.”<sup>85</sup> The new classification, he suggests, will host a body of films that were by and large classified as “third cinema” or “world cinema.” This process of revision and re-classification will allow these films to be “read and reread” as “sites for inter-textual, cross-cultural, and translational struggles over meaning and identities.”<sup>86</sup>

Although this classification may seem perfect for Beur films, a close reading of Hamid Naficy’s analysis shows that his distinction of independent transnational cinema is founded on authorship rather than on the content of films:

Transnational films here are considered (1) belonging to a genre of cine-writing and self-narrativization with specific generic and thematic conventions and (2) products of the

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<sup>84</sup> Hamid Naficy, “Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre,” eds. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003) 203.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

particular transnational location of filmmakers in time and place and in social life and cultural difference.<sup>87</sup>

Even though he recognizes the specificity of each film belonging to this category “each of these films is a product of the particular location of its maker in time, place and culture.”<sup>88</sup> The exilic status as a fundamental descriptive of the transnational filmmakers gives them the status of “guests” in the host country. In the case of Beurs, however, they have become a constituent of the nation’s cultural identity and they take part in writing its history as citizens rather than as “guests.” Their liminal and nomadic position is characterized by an immutable process and what results from it. The *liminal* position marks their transcultural subjectivities and the *nomadic* operates from within it capturing those moments of shift between being Maghrebi, French, both or neither. The dis/continuity of this process is apparent at the mental level as well as at the physical in space and time. Transnational cinema seems to absorb the specificity of the films’ character at the expense of the transnational subject. In addition, defining transnational films based on the filmmaker is to superimpose a certain predetermined reading of it. Though transnational might seem to encompass Beur films, it groups them as such using variables that ‘dilute’ them of their cultural specificity. My next investigation is why *banlieue cinema*, though it overlaps with Beur cinema, does not fully contain it.

After the release of *La Haine* (1995), in *Cahiers du cinema* Thierry Jousse wrote an article entitled “Le banlieue film existe-il?” Since then most of the films that have been produced in the *banlieue* whether focusing on Beurs or on other groups were considered to belong in this category. In her article “Maghrebi-French (Beur) Filmmaking in context” Carrie Tarr, considering the controversial discussion that the label “Beur” has revealed, opted for

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 205.

*banlieue*: “It [referring to the *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1985)] thus foreshadows Mathieu Kassovitz’s later international hit *La Haine* (Hate, 1995), which gave rise to the notion of ‘*banlieue cinema*’ as a new *genre*”<sup>89</sup> (my emphasis). Considering that a given film belongs to a category based on the position and the perspective that govern our readings, I would like to note that, though I do not disagree with Tarr, I find that grouping Beur films solely in a *banlieue genre* divorces them from the cultural aspect that is central in their narrative. The genre label *banlieue* reduces the conflicts in these films to socioeconomic ones while what the Beur faces is a far more profound question of his or her Frenchness. It is not just income level or accumulated wealth nor even educational level but a question of the very notion of being French. The Beur is still subjected to a notion of French identity that was explicitly enunciated by de Gaulle in 1959. Including Beur films in *banlieue genre* participates in the discourse that believes that the problems of the Beurs are mainly connected to their social milieu not to their cultural, historic, and religious heritage, not even to mention their status as ex-colonial subjects.

My argument that Beur films constitute a genre takes into consideration the concluding remarks of the previous paragraphs; meaning separating them from generic homogenization, differentiating them from films of transnational cinema and disengaging them from being subsumed by *banlieue cinema*. None of these classifications place them in a position that reflects their inter-cultural and intra-cultural characteristics as well as the filmic components that comprise their narratives. Beur cinema is not a new classification but rather a new label that I have founded primarily on my definition of Beur films. This definition will make the Beur character visible in films and his or her experience distinctive. As Andre Tudor noted “[genre is] best employed in the analysis of the relation between groups of films, the cultures in which they

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<sup>89</sup> Carrie Tarr, “Maghrebi-French (Beur) Filmmaking in context,” *Cineaste* 33:1 (2007) 32.

are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited.”<sup>90</sup> Beur movies will allow a body of films to be classified from within the cultures that participate in building their narratives and be analyzed with reference to how the Beur experience has evolved in films in relation to the social dynamics of which it is part. In the following discussion I will focus on the most important components that construct Beur films, principally the content and the cinematic style. At the level of content, I will give a brief description of the setting, character’s growth, narrative and language. At the level of style, I will focus on the influence of *cinéma vérité* on Beur films.

The setting, the character’s development, the narrative and language in Beur films, as in all films are grounded in the cultural context that produced them. But the uniqueness of each cultural context should be highlighted as it makes the experience different. At the level of their settings Beur films occupy a dual space: France and the Maghreb. This duality is present through a geographic space that is physical and/or imaginative but its presence is constantly there. *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* (1981) reflects the two spaces in a complete contrast as do *Hexagone* (1994), *Bye Bye* (1995), *Salut cousin!* (1996), *Le gone de Chaâba* (1998) and *Chaos* (2001); while other films like *Bent Keltoum* (2001), *Bedwin Hacker* (2003), *Ten’ja* (2004), *Exils* (2004), *Française* (2008) and *L’italien* (2010) reflect a relationship of reconciliation between the two. Beur films, as I have already defined them, revolve around stories of Beur characters whose subjectivities are in constant negotiation with the two sides that constitute it: the heritage of the parents and the culture of modern France. These two sides are symbolically present in terms of the two physical spaces: the “bled” and France. Whether contrasted or reconciled, these two spaces are part and parcel of the transformative process of Beur narrative identity.

The Beur character who inhabits this dual space in Beur films evolves as Beurs themselves evolve in their *intra-action* with French society. While in *Hexagone*, for instance, the

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<sup>90</sup> Andrew Tudor, “Genre,” *Film Genre Reader*, ed., B.K. Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 10.



Beurs are portrayed in a way lacking depth, in *Bye Bye* we notice that the Beurs have become more aware of their position and their presence in the narrative is more complex. In addition, and despite the fact that during the 80's and 90's Beur characters were mainly males and ostensibly heterosexual, the last ten or twelve years have witnessed an increasing number of Beur films where Beur women and Beur homosexuals are given leading roles. But while now there are "Beurettes" as well as Beur gays, these gendered bodies still hold Arab or Berber names, and the Beur still lives with and/or has connections to his or her family. This family relationship is conflictual at times, bearing a cultural and a religious impact on them. The Beur belongs to a lower social class and is never portrayed in a higher social position. And though he or she most of the time speaks French it is combined with a few broken words or phrases borrowed from a Maghrebi Arabic dialect. These ingredients that constitute the Beur character should be understood in relation to the French context. Being of a different cultural and religious background and as a postcolonial subject are facts necessary in understanding the Beurs' position in Beur films.

The construction of Beur films' narratives builds on the two previous components and is related to the experiences the Beur generation has been going through since they have become visible in the French society. They and the society they live in have changed since the first time Beurs decided to speak for themselves and express their willingness and devotion to changing their conditions. The narrative structure of Beur films is established around the objectives behind the use of certain elements. Beur movies are not formulaic in nature; their narratives are constructed in different ways though with largely similar ingredients. Beur films center on Beur characters and follow their experiences in life individually and/or collectively as they project themselves through the film. The specificity of Beur films is that narration takes different paths

to tell the story, but remains consistent at the level of who inhabits and who propels the events. Beur films' narratives stress the irreversible interconnectedness between the cultural heritage from their parents and their French citizenship. The dynamics of this relationship have changed since the early movies where the narrative was more descriptive as for example in *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1985). In *L'italien* (2010) this relationship has become more complex in the film narrative where both the visual components and the dialogue witness this challenging intermixing. Dino/Mourad, living a successful life in France, while completing his vow to his father, will find himself revealing sides of his cultural belonging of which he himself is not aware.

Language too is an important element of Beur films and is used to reflect the ties that Beur have with both cultures. In Beur films, both French and Maghrebi dialects are usually present symbolizing the contradictions existing between the two languages and, in the process, showing that this fusion of French and Maghrebi dialects is paving its way into the French language. The "bled" is a recurrent word used in Beur films and has even entered French dictionaries. In *Larousse* the word "bled" is defined as follows "Interieur des terres, compagne, en Afrique du Nord." Whenever the notion of *return* is evoked the word "bled" is used without naming the country. "Le bled" becomes synonymous to the Maghreb and it unites the three countries (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia). In early films, "le bled" was somewhere in the Maghreb, a place they had almost never visited. In recent films the presence of "le bled" has become more positive. For the parents, especially the father, "le bled" is home and their wish is to go back with their children and live there. The use of language brings the father to forefront of the Beur films. He is an iconic figure, and his presence is essential and significant. He represents the cultural values of their origins and constantly criticizes the new life his children are

experiencing. The father is most often in his fifties or sixties, has a low paying job or is retired or close to being so, is religious, is strongly connected to the “bled,” has lost his authority over his children and speaks French with a strong Arabic accent. Yet despite the strong accent the father often speaks French reasonably well but opts to speak in his native language – a sign of identifying with his heritage and a rejection of being swallowed by the French culture. The presence of the father in Beur films is very symbolic. It is a reminder of their parents’ origin, of their “other” they cannot escape. The father incarnates the culture of the “bled.” In France, he always feels out of place and he tries in vain to reconstruct the authority he has lost over his children.

In terms of style, Beur films have borrowed elements from “*cinéma vérité*,” their plots and the elements employed to present them are generally accessible and close to real life experiences. This closeness to reality is expected to incite viewers to make connections with their own experiences for, after all, films “effect” reality in a way that makes the viewer experience subjectivity differently. Even though they are not representative of ontological experiences of individuals, they make us rethink the position we keep as “social beings.” As Jean Rouch puts it “*Cinéma vérité* means that we have wanted to eliminate fiction and get closer to real life. We know that we must only pose the problem of truth, to arouse questions in the spectator.”<sup>91</sup>

Similar to *cinéma vérité*, in Beur films, the daily lives and movements of the characters are presented in details. “Cinema vérité [stresses] fluidity, alertness to the unexpected, and the subtle details of human behavior.”<sup>92</sup> What we see in Beur films are ordinary families living their lives as they come; we hear the noises of the street with no overwhelming special effects. The

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<sup>91</sup> Jean Paul Roche, *Cine-ethnography*, trans., Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 262.

<sup>92</sup> Mohammed Ali Issari, *What is Cinema Vérité?* (NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1979) 14.

choice of “*cinema verité*” style in Beur films allows it to redirect the camera to another type of protagonists in France. Its aesthetic is seen through the depiction of the ordinary as it appears. It offers a vantage point where the viewer sees himself or herself on the screen. “[Our] films are the audience. The film are a means of sharing my audience experience”<sup>93</sup> Richard Leacock says. Another important feature that Beur films borrow from “*cinema verité*” is the narrative structure where there is almost an absence of the traditional plot. What we see instead are snap-shots, slices of ordinary people’s lives as they unfold themselves to us in moments of revelation.

Given their low budgets, most of Beur films’ actors and actresses are nonprofessionals. In best cases, they rely on names that have become famous like Sami Bouajila, Roschdy Zem, Rachida Brakni and Nozha Khoudra to name but a few. Whether it is by choice or by constraint, the use of nonprofessionals in Beur films has become part of their narrative discourse. This method also is a reflection of “*cinema verité*.” Mohammed Ali Issari notes “in addition, economic conditions following the war caused severe cutbacks in all phases of studio productions, thereby encouraging independent film-makers to emerge and strike out their own to make films on low budgets with minimum technical facilities and know-how.”<sup>94</sup>

Even though the situation is not the same as the post-war period, Beur films have suffered from marginalization and their makers from a shortage of resources which forced them to look for other alternative ways of moviemaking. Inspired by “*cinema verité*,” filmmakers who were interested in exposing the realities of the Beur life in the suburbs of France started to pave their ways using different methods to minimize the budgets of their films. It should be stressed that “cette vague [referring to *Bye bye, Rai* and *Hexagone*] de 1994-1995 n’a représenté qu’à peine

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<sup>93</sup> Richard Leacock, “One Man’s Truth: An Interview with Richard Leacock by James Blue,” originally in *Film Comment* (New York), Spring, 1965.

<sup>94</sup> Mohammed Ali Issari, 5.

5% de la production nationale. Et ce chiffre n'a pas évolué depuis. En 2002, sur les deux cents films produits, les films se nourrissant de cette thématique ne sont toujours que 5%.”<sup>95</sup>

This reality affects not only the Beurs films produced but also the audiences they might attract. It shows also that the official discourse tends to ignore these films. *Hexagone* (1994) is a good example to cite here. After Malek Chibane was denied funding, he relied only on local community help to finance his film:

Chibane set up his own production company and took six years to make *Hexagone*, facing problems in raising funding at every stage. The original script failed to get the *avance sur recette*, and in the end shooting of the film was financed through support from local community, thanks also to technicians and a local amateur cast who were willing to work for free.<sup>96</sup>

It should be noted also that making films about Beurs or anything related to their parents' pasts has raised controversy at the national level. Rachid Bouchareb's *Indigenes* (2006) instigated a heated political debate on the status of North African colonial troops who participated in WWII alongside the French army. Alec Hargreaves in his article “*Indigenes: A Sign of the Time*” states:

In highlighting the role played by North African colonial troops in the liberation of France during World War II, the movie helped to persuade President Chirac to end a long-standing injustice whereby veterans in former colonies have been receiving lower pensions than their former comrades in arms in France.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Malik Chibane et Kader Chibane “Le cinéma Post-colonial des banlieues renoue avec le cinéma politique,” *Mouvements* 27-28 (2003) 36.

<sup>96</sup> Carrie Tarr, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) 53.

<sup>97</sup> Alec Hargreaves, “*Indigenes: A Sign of the Time*,” *Research in African Literature* 38:4 (2007) 204.

Over the thirty years of its existence and even with all the problems it has been encountering Beur cinema has been able to portray Beur experiences using different genre narratives: drama, comedy, road-movie and now gay films. Both Beur comedies and Beur dramas have been around since the beginning, *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* (1981) was a very early comedy and *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1985) an early drama. What characterizes Beur comedies is that the laughter that is instigated through misunderstandings and confusion as in many comedies here arises out of the contradictions created by the mere fact of being Beur. Sometimes the unawareness of this truth is what results in building the comic scene like in *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (2006) when the parents did not understand why they were not allowed to enter Algeria. In similar ways, Beur drama is constructed around the conflict of how the 'self' conceives of its existence and how this very existence is looked at from the perspective of "others." The Beur lives a life of self-betrayal; they are constantly reminded of their "Arab" origin as their ethnicity is etched on the face while at the same time they self-consciously think of themselves as French citizens. This very instance of recognizing and/or denouncing one of these or both sides is what Beur dramas try to catch.

Beur road-movies started to appear during the mid-nineties with Karim Dridi's *Bye Bye* (1995). Beur road-movies can be considered as a developed phase of the Beur genre in general. The "Arab/Amizigh" side that constructs their subjectivity and that has been overlooked for a long time surges to the surface in some road-movies. In these films, Beur characters' self-awareness of their parents' origin is finally recognized and appropriated. Whether forced to go back to the "bled" or not, their experience of being on the road to the Maghreb unfolds itself in their encounters with Maghrebi people. It is not mere self-discovery, but self-recognition that the Beur road-movies trace. While the narrative in all these road-movies is built on the idea of going

to the “bled,” certain narratives depict it as a forced “return,” most often by their parents like in *Française* (2008), or a voluntary “return” where the Beur character themselves simply decide to go back like in *Exils* (2001) or else social events force the “return” such as in *Ten’ja* (2004). Their reasons vary but their quest is similar in the sense that it culminates not only in their finding their “otherness” but in their acknowledging it.

My goal in this next section is to reveal details that differentiate Beur films and correspond to the content and style I described above. I have selected two films belonging to two different periods: *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1985) and *Le grand voyage* (2004). The aim here is twofold: first to demonstrate the choice of the label “*Beur genre*” and the necessity for such a category in film analysis; the second to highlight the aesthetics of Beur films.

### **3.2.1 LE THE AU HAREM D’ARCHI AHMED (1985)**

Caught between two cultures, two languages and two races Madjid is a good example of the first generation of Beurs who experienced two distinctive, sometimes extreme and even hostile realities, especially after the rise of the rightwing party “Le Front National” founded in 1972 by Le Pen. As a novel and as a movie *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* succeeded both as a narrative and then as a feature film to evoke some serious issues related to hospitality, racism, and integration. It problematizes the slogan of the French Revolution “liberté, fraternité, égalité.” Madjid is discriminated against and is always suspected by the police because of his Arab face. On the other hand, in the “little Algeria” he resides in, he is being told to be careful and to remember he is a Muslim, an Arab and an Algerian. This fear of the “other” who himself is part of creates a sentiment of instability and uneasiness. Madjid, like many others, was left to himself in the street. *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* then serves not only as one of the pioneer movies

on Beurs, but also it reveals some major aspects pertaining to the Beur generation. Being-looked-at or thought of as an “other” in France at the beginning of the eighties was not an easy reality to deal with. The experience of Madjid is revelatory of the role race, language and culture play in shaping the perception of others.

Setting: As it is was the one of the first Beur films *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed* (1985) established the first building blocks for Beur films to come. It should be noted, however, that *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* (1981) that preceded *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed* works through the same dynamics and uses the same elements but in a reversed way. The “bled” contrasted to France is one of the major components that characterize Beur films. This conflictual relationship between France and the “bled” is visible through the mise-en-scene and the use of language. In Mehdi Charef’s *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*, though the events take place in France, a pronounced reference to the “bled” (Algeria) is strongly present throughout the film. What make this reference part of Beur films is not only its reoccurrence, but also its relevance and importance in the construction of the film narrative. It is almost impossible to imagine a Beur film with no reference to France and the Maghreb.

The scene that establishes the context for the “bled” is the one where Madjid’s mother, Malika, could no longer stand Madjid’s attitude. This scene is repeated many times in many different ways to inform us that it is part of Malika’s daily concern. She enters Madjid’s room, stands by the door and starts sliding down slowly reflecting her powerlessness. She then starts talking to her son in Algerian dialect: “I will go to the consulate. They will come to take you home. You go to the “bled” to do military service. You discover Algeria. You will know it better; you will know your language.” Whether Madjid understands fully what his mother says or not he definitely recognizes her tone of voice and the words “consulate,” “Algeria,” and the



“bled” are suggestive of what she means. Malika is definitely against the idea that her son become a “roumi”<sup>98</sup> as she puts it in a scene when Madjid tells her, “to find a job I have to be French [which he is].” The “bled” and France as two distinctive geographic spaces are basic elements in Beur films. Beur parents have always insisted on reminding their children of the “bled,” in Malika’s case there is not even a possibility of negotiating where her children belong. To her understanding, the distinction between being Algerian and being French is already decided. In later films, the “bled”/France continues to work as an element that takes different turns but its functionality has always been strong and visible.

Characters: Another major medium that Beur films utilize to construct their genre are the type of characters used in the film narrative. Since the first Beur films the characters share the same characteristics. The narratives are constructed around the experiences of these young Beurs. It is essential to note that Beur films do not present the Beur youth as protagonists but rather as “real” individuals experiencing “real” situations. The other types of characters that Beur films use are the Beur parents. The parents are important as they set up the distance and the gap between their generation and their children’s generation. They are also essential in the analysis of Beur films as they demarcate the difference between being immigrant and being Beur. The relationship between the parents and their children is essential and it has been manifested differently over time from how it first started with earlier films. In *Le thé au harem d’Arch* *Ahmed* we see how this relationship works and how it unfolds itself.

Madjid is eighteen years old, born in France to Maghrebi parents, he dropped out early from school, does not have a job and all he does is hang around with either his friend Pat or with a group of youngsters his age. His hair and his face easily distinguish him as an “Arab” even though he does not speak a word of Arabic. To be legally recognized as French does not mean

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<sup>98</sup> A “roumi” is a label used in North African dialects to refer to Europeans.

that you are accepted socially as one. When contrasted to the character of Pat, his “*non-Beur*” French friend, we see the extent of divergence more than that of convergence. No one bothers Pat who is content in his present life, so much so that when he is offered a job he casually quits. Madjid, on the other hand, tries to find a job, but he is rejected not because he lacks qualifications but because of his ethnicity. This contrasted image between Beur French and a non-Beur French has been used as an element in many Beur films to reflect that the basis of rejection is more racial than social. Beurs are rejected not because they belong to a lower social class but because they are thought of as Arabs, a fact made obvious by their facial structures and their names.

Language: Language structure in Beur films’ narrative plays on two major dimensions; the first is related to the opposition between French and Maghrebi dialects, and the second is in what that represents in Beur films. In them, narrative language varies depending on what objectives it is being used for. It could be used to create laughter as in *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (Zemmouri, 2006) or to intensify the gap between the parents’ generation and that of their children as in *Le grand voyage* (Ferroukhi, 2004). Beur films are bilingual or trilingual by nature; the use of French, a Maghrebi Arabic dialect and/or Tamazight are essential in constructing the Beur narrative and they also contribute to the aesthetic of Beur films. In *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* the use of Algerian dialect is very significant. Inside the house, Malika tries to use it with her children but she is not successful because all of them speak only French. Malika’s knowledge of French is limited but her rejection of using it and preferring the Algerian dialect instead is as much a sign of resistance as it is a cultural identification. When she asks Madjid to go back to Algeria to learn the language and familiarize himself with the culture, she is making her last attempt to connect him with his origins, as she thinks of them. Madjid does not

care about what his mother says simply because he does not understand her, or else he does not want to understand her. He seems to be more connected with his father who is speechless throughout the film. The silence of the father is a sign of his failure. Being speechless during the film is symbolic of his powerlessness. The father's speech in later Beur films such as *Hexagone* (1993) *Bye Bye* (1995), *Samia* (2000), and *Des poupées et des anges* (2008) to name but a few, even though spoken aloud and heard, is dismissed or ignored.

The second film I chose is *Le grand voyage* (Ferroukhi, 2004). While analyzing it, I will also be referring to other films that share the same characteristics. Beur film narratives are constructed around oppositional duality where Beur characters are positioned in-between their French identity and their parents' origin. The first Beur films narratives were more confrontational. In these films, the Beurs were neither integrated into the French society nor were they able to fit in their own families. Beurs were not the origin of this oppositional duality, it was rather imposed on them, as I will explain later. Throughout the history of Beur films, since its beginning until now, we notice that there is a constant development at the level of the plot and the characters' progress where the oppositional duality becomes less problematic.

### **3.2.2 LE GRAND VOYAGE (2004)**

In his road-movie, Ferroukhi invites us to travel from France with Reda, a young Beur in his early twenties, and his father. Reda is obliged to drive his father to Mecca to perform the Haj. Reluctant and unhappy with his father's decision, Reda did not have a choice but to accept. As the trip starts, the father/son relationship is not promising, neither of them tolerates the other and they barely communicate. Driving from France to Mecca in a car is a decision that Reda does not understand as he grew up in France with no knowledge of his parents' culture of origin. The

father, a devoted Muslim, refuses to speak French to his son but Reda answers back in French. The father's choice is intentional, choosing Reda as his driver is part of his plan to teach him the culture of his parents and to have him experience the hardships of life and discover the world. As they get closer to Mecca, their relationship starts to loosen up and they no longer look at each other as "strangers." The movie ends with the death of the father upon his arrival in Mecca, and Reda, after the long journey with his father, finally recognizes the importance of the trip.

*Le grand voyage* unveils the generation gap that exists between immigrant parents and their children who were born, studied and grew up in France. It uncovers also the problem that arises between the two generations; that of the parents who are much more connected to their culture of origin than their children who feel completely disconnected from it. The use of language is also very important in the sense that it shows the degree of mis/communication between the two. Reda speaks French and the father speaks Arabic. For Reda, French is his mother tongue and for the father Arabic is not only his mother tongue but is a sacred language his children are supposed to learn. Language is exposed as an element of struggle between the two. The journey, however, is not intended to show the importance of one culture over another so much as to show the richness of both. The father's aim is to bring up and awaken the Moroccan "other" in his son and to have him find and recognize it as his own.

*Le grand voyage* shares features of generic road movies. It utilizes a vehicle, urban and rural landscapes, close-ups and long panoramic takes. Beur road-film shows how the Beur character has evolved at the level of Beur film narrative. Mus in *Prends 10.000 balles et casse-toi* is not Reda in *Le grand voyage*, particularly when we consider their use of language. While Reda's use of language reflects his awareness of his "*Beuritude*" and also helps him negotiate his identity; Mus' language is an end in itself, it becomes an obstacle that impedes

communication and complicates any attempt to reach his “otherness.” In my analysis, I will focus on the implications of Beur films’ characters, language and oppositional duality.

Character choice: in *Le grand voyage*, we meet Reda and his family; they are an ordinary family where the parents are clearly immigrants of the first generation and their children belong to the Beur generation. The resemblances between this family and any other family of Maghrebi origin living in France are numerous. Reda is a typical Beur character and his family portrayal reflects the entourage of Beurs in France. It would be even impossible to think about a Beur film without thinking about the Beur parents and the hard social conditions of the family. Thus, we can relate Reda’s experience in *Le grand voyage* with that of Nouridine in *Ten’ja* (2004) who goes to bury his father in Morocco. We can see the resemblance also in Ismail and Moloud in *Bye Bye* (1995) particularly their relationship with their father in Tunisia. Sofia’s life in *Française* (2008) changes completely because of her parents’ decision to go back to the “bled,” while Naomi/Malika fights against the figure of the authoritarian father. The common thread that links these relationships is their insistence on emphasizing the duality between the two generations that leads them to conflict and sometimes resolution.

Reda, like most of the Beur characters mentioned above, is always at the threshold of meeting and recognizing his “maghrebi” double. A feeling of fear and uncertainty are constantly haunting Reda as he drives his father to a place he knows nothing about. This journey to the unknown brings Reda to recognize the differences that exist between the two different worlds, civilizations, cultures and languages. These two worlds, though distinctive, each constitute a part of who he is. The distinction between what he believed himself to be and what this journey reveals in front of his eyes adds to the complexity of his character and opens up a different way of defining the ‘self.’ Even though Reda’s discovery of his “otherness” is revealed to him

through a spiritual journey, and his “return” was not to the “bled” as in most other Beur films, his experience is similar to that of other Beur characters in the way that the journey offers, beside self-discovery, a new vantage point of experiencing subjectivity. The new perspective does not alienate, by any means, the pre-existing one but it allows looking at it from without while rediscovering the self. Like in most Beur films, the open ending brings the character to look at himself or herself from an angle of which they either ignored the existence or avoided all through their lives. Discovering their “otherness” is not an end in itself nor does it offer an alternative, but it is rather part of a process in constructing their subjectivity.

The use of language is another aspect that gives Beur films their specificity. It is not only the contrast that bilingual/multilingual dialogues play, but also what they represent. It is interesting to also see what has become of their usage. French slang whether it is “l’argot” or “le Verlan” includes many Arabic words that are being used by Beur and non-Beur in France. Bilingualism and the intermingling of both Arabic and French have become part of Beur films and representative of their social reality. Most Beur, if not all, at least understand dialectal Arabic and use some of its vocabulary in their daily life. The use of language in such a way has become problematic at many different levels. The first is between the immigrant parents and their Beur children; the second is among Beur themselves and the third is between the French Beurs and the French non-Beurs. Reda’s case in *Le grand voyage* represents the first case emphatically. Reda understands the language his father uses to communicate with him but he responds in French. We can clearly see also that the father is able to understand and likely could respond using French but he chooses not to. Using two different languages does seem to hinder or block communication between the two but it surely poses questions on language choice. Language in Beur films is an area of struggle. Thus, it becomes an incarnation of culture,

religion and origin. While Reda's father's use of dialectal Maghrebi Arabic indicates where he wants to belong; understanding his father's dialect but being unwilling to speak it, Reda shows in his own way how he wants to belong to his parent's culture of origin, but only so far.

The last, but not least aspect I would like to discuss is relevant to the narrative's oppositional dualism. Beur films' narrative structure operates through contrasts that are constituted of different elements. This dualism is intrinsic to Beur films and is visible throughout their narratives. The construction of subjectivity is, at its base; dualistic and the mise-en-scene is reflective of this aspect that becomes more pronounced through dialogue's structure expressed through characters' interactions. As for the first element, we notice that the subject/self meets its subject/other not to necessarily recognize it but to simply perceive it. Perception is very important in this respect because it allows the Beur to consciously become involved in the process of his or her subjectivity formation. Defining the self then, in Beur films, though constrained by the social conditions is promoted by individual initiatives. The dualism that the Beurs experience emphasizes is through private and public space, inside their homes and outside in the street. However, mainstream French society sees them from one angle. Their individuality has been contained and rendered invisible, they have always been re-presented. At home, they are part of a group and their definition of their selfhood is bound to their position in the family in relation to the other members; and outside they are pointed at as "immigrants," "Arabs," "immigrants' children" and so forth. This single-sided view does not give them the opportunity to present themselves as they see themselves. Beur films, thus, address this issue of dualism, giving voice to the Beurs to construct their own identity narrative through film.

In *Le grand voyage*, Reda plays the leading role in the film. Being on a journey as his father's driver is very significant to the way he is presented as a subject. His subjectivity

becomes more pronounced through the father's comments that allow us to see how Reda wants to be seen. The act of driving gives Reda the means to become visible and to take control. Even though it was not his decision to go on the trip, the experience itself was not possible without him. Along the way, Reda's father reminds him numerous times that he should not speed, and to be careful; but Reda does not listen to him, especially ignoring the warnings while his father is sleeping. Reda's visibility and assertiveness unfolds into his willingness to speak for himself and to invite the viewer to see the world through his eyes. That Reda also has a camera with him serves to stress the idea of perspective and perception. The father does not take into consideration Reda's plans nor does he give him time to prepare himself. Reda, able neither to disobey his father nor even to negotiate with him, accepts. Reda's inability is not due to lack of courage but it is more related to the cultural aspect that constitutes his relationship with his father. However, on the road he is able to break the rules and to forge a different relationship with his father.

The second element that is worth studying is the *mise-en-scène* and its contribution to the narrative structure of the Beur film. What interests me most in the Beur film narrative *mise-en-scène* are costume and *décor*. These two components are essential to Beur films in many different ways as they further emphasize the dualism in the film narrative: first, because they are part of the nonverbal, they are used as semiotic elements; and second, because they are paradoxical. The stories of Beur characters are always connected to their families. In most Beur films, the parents are immigrants and their way of dressing is still affected by their cultural heritage. At the very beginning of *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* when Mouloud is driving his car with his mother and his grandmother inside, we notice that they are dressed in long sleeve clothes with headscarves of a traditional fashion of Bedouin women. We also notice the tattoo on the



grandmother's forehead as she is speaking to the policeman. As for décor, we can easily notice it on the inside of their houses.

In *Le grand voyage* for instance, a series of shots inside the house clearly indicate the cultural background of the family. At the entrance, as the camera shot shows Reda's face as he is taking off his jacket, behind him we see a frame on the wall containing a richly decorated verse from the Quran. As the camera continues inside, we notice how the entire room's décor is presented as typical of North African fashion. In this scene, as Reda is talking to his father, we also notice the father with his worry beads that show his devotion to his faith, murmuring as he holds them in his hand stressing their presence and their importance. Though the sequence inside the house is short, it gives us a cultural context, particularly through iconography. This is where Reda was born, and this is where he spends all his life. The structure of *Le grand voyage*'s narrative makes use of these elements to emphasize distance and proximity and their effects on characters and viewers alike. Reda might never have noticed what was written inside the frame on the wall, but as the journey reaches its end with his father's death, he comes to realize the importance not only of the journey but also of its effects, especially as the film closes on a non-digetic voice of Amina Aloui singing a Sufi song on tolerance of Ibn Arabi while the camera in a close up shot tracks Reda's face inside a cab as he is leaving:

O Marvel! a garden amidst the flames. My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, and a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Kaa'ba, and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Quran. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Alain Alaoui, "Ode d'Ibn Arabi," *Alcantara: Arabo-Andalusian*, 1998. CD.

#### 4.0 WHAT MAKES A FILM COMEDY 'BEUR'?

Colonialism has become part of an unforgettable history that is now part and parcel in the construction of the cultural identity of the postcolonial subject. As Stuart Hall notes: "Cultural identity...is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture."<sup>100</sup> He adds: "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture."<sup>101</sup> The experiences of immigrants' children who are raised in the land of the ex-colonizer are reflective of what Hall describes as "points of identification or suture." Their mode of identification brings into play an agency that problematizes national identity discourse through the adjustments that their postcolonial subjectivity allows. This agency has given birth to a transcultural subject who exceeds essentialist views of identity.

Such excess reveals itself to be a painful experience for the Beurs in the context of modern France. This latter represents a colonial master for the Beurs, but yet it is also their homeland. The two are disconnected, but they are part of the same historical process that brings them together through what Stuart Hall calls "suture." For this "suture" to hold the two sides together, it needs to find compatible modes of identification. It is, thus, within the transcultural

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<sup>100</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," In *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 225.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 226.

dynamics that the Beur subjectivity is capable of articulating itself. This articulation becomes problematic as it does not identify itself with any preexisting social model in France. The 'being and becoming' of Beurs gave birth to what I have already introduced as transcultural subjectivity which finds its origins in Mikhail Epstein definition:

[It] builds new identities in the zone of fuzziness and interference and challenges the metaphysics of discreteness so characteristic of nations, races, professions, and other established cultural configurations that are solidified rather than dispersed by the multiculturalist "politics of identity."<sup>102</sup>

Being transcultural, for the Beurs, is not a matter of choice but is the result of a historical process. The Beurs did not choose to be born to Maghrebi immigrants, but their history has positioned them at a "zone of fuzziness and interference" to represent themselves and dismantle the notion of Frenchness in the process. My concern in this chapter is to investigate Beur film comedies as transcultural modes of expressing Beurs subjectivities. Ultimately, I will explore the elements that have been used in these films to construct the Beurs as transcultural subjects while, at the same time, negotiating their positions within society to reveal its contradictions; and to "disturb" the dynamics that govern French national identity discourses. My recourse to comedies is threefold: First, the margin of 'freedom' that the comedy genre allows visually and textually. Second, the context it offers for the characters and viewers alike to reflect on selfhood. Third, comedies do not seek to spread universal values, but rather aim at showing individual subjectivities experiencing them.

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<sup>102</sup> Epstein Mikhail and Berry Ellen Berry, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 25.

Even though during the 80's and 90's Beur comedies were less common, in the last decade, a significant number of them were released.<sup>103</sup> This turn to comedies is concomitant with the other experiences of other visible minority groups in Europe as well as in the US regarding the outcomes of immigration. *Jalla Jalla!* (2000), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Bend It like Beckham* (2002), *Kebab Connection* (2004), *Het Schnitzelparadijs* (2005) and *Les Barons* (2009) are representative of a new wave of films that have changed the way of looking at identity problems, and opened new possibilities in dealing with them. Instead of adopting a dramatic point of view, where self-discovery becomes 'destructive', they gear towards comedic narratives without losing the seriousness of their films. To better understand this choice, it is essential to give a brief historical account of the genre that will serve also as theoretical framework for my discussion.

#### 4.1 COMEDY: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is not a coincidence that the first fictional film by the Lumière Brothers' was a comedy, *L'arroseur arrosé* (The Waterer Watered 1895). However, even though comedy established itself as one of the most profitable popular genres since then, it has not attracted much critical attention and is still under-represented in the most famous cinema competitions. Geoff King notes that "Comedy was one of the most popular formats in early years of cinema and has remained so ever since. Rarely one of the most prestigious or award winning forms, and often subject to critical

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<sup>103</sup> This a list of some Beur comedies: Olivier Ducastel, Jacques Martineau, *Drôle de Félix* (2000); Ahmed Bouchaala, Zakia Bouchaala, *Origines Controlées* (2001); Djamel Bensalah, *il était une fois dans l'Oued* (2005), Mahmoud Zemmouri, *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (2006); Roschdy Zem, *Mauvaise foi* (2006); Thomas Gilou *Michou d'Auber* (2007); Gabriel Julien-Laferrière, *Neuilly sa mère* (2008); Olivier Baroux, *L'italien* (2010).

neglect, comedy has provided a reliable source of income for cinemas around the world.”<sup>104</sup> As much as it contributed to the enrichment of film genres and film history, it remained in the shadow of other film genres for various reasons. Some of these reasons are historical; others are more related to it as a film genre.

Horton argues that there are three main reasons for such neglect. The first is deeply rooted in the history of comedy as an art form. Since Aristotle, comedy has been overlooked and considered an inferior genre.<sup>105</sup> Horton explains that the Aristotelian definition of comedy positioned it below tragedy and the epic in Western literary criticism. It seems that comedy has kept that position ever since. In 1988, Horton explains that comedy’s inferiority was reflected in the proportion of comedies at the box office compared to the number up for Academy Awards. He says that it is rare that comedies win Academy Awards even though six out of the top ten selling films that year were comedies. Eleven years later, in 2002, Geoff King confirmed Horton’s argument by comparing how a low budget comedy film *There is Something about Mary* (1998) “outperformed” “\$100 million plus special effects-oriented blockbusters.” It becomes clear that despite the fact that Hollywood comedies attract large audiences - often even more - than other genres, they remain for the most part under-represented in the Academy Awards and marginalized in the field of film criticism.

The second reason is due to the “vastness of the territory, which includes the nature of laughter, humor, the comic, satire, parody, burlesque, the grotesques, the lyrical, romance, metacomedy, and wit, [and so] precludes facile generalization.”<sup>106</sup> Beyond these varieties of comedy forms, comedy has been used to construct hybrid genres as well. It is in this respect that Geoff King argues that comedy is better described as a “mode” rather than as “genre.” According

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<sup>104</sup> Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002) 1.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Horton, *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 2.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

to him, comedy is a “manner of presentation,” as he explains that “any genre might be treated as a subject of comedy. A variety of possibilities exist. A western might include some comedy without altering its primary definition as a western.”<sup>107</sup> Comedy has become a general description under which a variety of subgenres and hybrid genres are included. Its subgenres such as slapstick or spoof have even become substituent as it sounds redundant to say slapstick comedy for instance. As for the hybrid genres, comedy is either used as a descriptive adjective or as a modified noun. As Geoff King explains:

In its adjectival use, comedy is a modal, an inflection of a noun-object, as in the case of ‘comedy western’: a western presented in a comic mode. In its use as noun, comedy seems to suggest the relatively more solid object of a genre. ‘Romantic comedy’, for example, suggests a particular adjectival take (romantic) on the noun-object, comedy.<sup>108</sup>

Finally, the third reason for the relative neglect of comedy as a genre is due to the fact that “the comic is enjoyable. Why risk destroying pleasure.”<sup>109</sup> This statement relies on the generic definition that the primary role of comedy is to make us laugh and that analyzing it would make a pleasurable experience a dreadful one or as the famous quote of E.B. White goes: “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.” Geoff King argues that “Producers of comedy often argue against analysis of their work. To analyze comedy, the cliché goes, is to destroy it.”<sup>110</sup> The argument behind this claim relies on the fact that since comedies are profitable as they are presented, there is no need for them to be analyzed. Geoff King adds to this by saying that comedy practitioners are afraid that serious analysis of comedy “might threaten a form of creativity that draws on a range of unstated and

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> King, 3.

<sup>109</sup> Horton, 2.

<sup>110</sup> King, 4.

unselfconscious assumptions.”<sup>111</sup> Film critics have, on their part, contributed to this neglect. As Kathleen Rowe notes: “[The] very dearth of theory and criticism about comedy in general and the ‘unbearable lightness’ of what does exist, in contrast, to the voluminous work on tragedy, already suggest that no simple symmetry between the two forms exist.”<sup>112</sup> This lack of critical interest in comedies is explained in terms of its objectives. “Because of its popular accessibility” Rowe argues “comedy is more confined to the realm of amusement than art.”<sup>113</sup>

In France, comedy has also been neglected by film critics and historians alike, “despite its status as the most popular genre throughout ten decades of French film history.”<sup>114</sup> Guy Austin argues that this neglect was mainly due to three major reasons: “the critical denigration of genre cinema, the dominance of a realist aesthetic and the lasting influence of *la politique des auteurs*.”<sup>115</sup> With the exception of a few successful filmmakers like Jacques Tati and Colline Serreau, and some famous comedian performers like Bourvil and Louis de Funès, who attracted large audiences and significant critical attention, French comedy did not get the same attention that was given to other genres. The long lasting influence of *auteurism* in French cinema contributed to its lower status. French comedy also was criticized for the absence of “social issues, emotional depth and artistic elements.”<sup>116</sup> Even though *le cinéma d’auteur* was not recognized as a genre, but more as personal cinematic styles, films were more attributed to their authors rather than the genre they represent.

This list of reasons is not exhaustive, but it summarizes some of the major reasons why comedy has not received the critical attention it deserves. However, comedy films have gained

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Kathleen Howe, “Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genre of Laughter” *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed., Kristine Brunovska Karnick, Henry Jenkins (N.Y: Routledge, 1995) 43.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Rémi Lanzoni, F. *French Cinema: From Its Beginnings to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 167.

<sup>115</sup> Guy Austin, *Contemporary French cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) 199.

<sup>116</sup> Lanzoni, 167.

prominence not only as means of “pure” entertainment, but also as reflective of experiences of subjectivities. Hegel in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts* affirms that:

In comedy, individuals have the right to spread themselves however they wish and can. In their willing and fancying and in their idea of themselves, they may claim an independence which is immediately annihilated by themselves and by their inner and outer dependence.<sup>117</sup>

Whereas tragedy, he explains, is more concerned with retaining the positive elements of individuals, in comedy “it is subjectivity, or personality, which in its infinite assurance retains the upper hand.”<sup>118</sup> Comedy, accordingly, does not seek resolution as much as it poses social issues as experienced by individual subjects. It does not intend to solve social problems, but rather expose them. According to Mark William Roche, who has worked extensively on Hegel’s notion of comedy: “tragedy sacrifices the individual for truth; comedy suspends truth for the benefit of the individual.”<sup>119</sup> Comedy, thus, should not focus solely on exaggerating the actions to raise laughter, but the aim should be also to reflect on subjective experiences of the characters. Comedy is textually and visually suitable to construct script narratives that are capable of satisfying audiences’ eagerness to laugh by keeping ‘humor’ its primary aim while raising their consciousness about some serious social, cultural, and political issues.

My aim in this chapter, though, is not to investigate comedy and its subgenres but rather to examine comedy as a medium of representation. I argue that comedy film, with its ability to push things “off-limits,” opens up the lived experiences of its characters onto a multitude of possibilities that are not necessarily constrained by societal aspiration. Comedy film reveals

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<sup>117</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics; Lectures on Fine Arts*, Trans., T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) 192.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 1199.

<sup>119</sup> Mark W. Roche, *Tragedy and Comedy: A Systematic Study and a Critique of Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 282.



forms of subjectivity that are either ignored or silenced and brings them to the attention of its audience. Comedy creates a space for the viewers to see how “otherness” is constructed and represented. It invites us to share an experience of alterity while enjoying the show. Geoff King notes that:

Who and what we laugh at, and why, has implications in terms both how we see others and how we define ourselves, the two often closely interconnected. Gender, race/ethnicity and nationality are three major sets of grounds on which such distinctions and identifications are constructed and articulated; as such, it is not surprising that they should be recurrent sources of comic material in films as elsewhere.<sup>120</sup>

The comedy films that King is referring to here are for the most part built on stereotypes and recurring images of certain social or ethnic groups. In his article “The Role of Stereotype” Richard Dyer clearly states that “it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve.”<sup>121</sup> Historically in French cinema we can dissect two types of representations that were the prevalent stereotypes of Arabs or North Africans. The first depicts them as colonized subjects, where they were either degraded as in *Pépé le Moko* (1937) or eroticized as in *Shéhrazade* (1966). The second, with few exceptions, portrays them as immigrants in France, where the only roles they were given were those of drug dealers, delinquents and prostitutes: *La balance* (1983) and *Tchao Pantin* (1983) are good examples of reference. North Africans were never given leading roles, neither as colonized nor as immigrants.

Building on Orrin E. Klapp’s distinction between social “types,” being those who belong to society, and “stereotypes,” being those who do not belong, Dyer argues that though both are

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<sup>120</sup> King, 129.

<sup>121</sup> Richard Dyer, “The Role of Stereotypes,” *Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (NY: New York University Press, 2000) 12.

constructed in an iconographic way in fiction, they are not attributed the same roles as they do not appear in all types of plots. While social types can play any type of role, stereotypes are confined to play specific roles that make them appear, for the most part, inferior to social type characters. In French movies, historically, Arabs or North Africans are presented either as objects of desire or as villains with marginal roles. Such representations aim at contrasting the two categories to perpetuate an inferior image of the “other.”

We can argue that with the emergence of Beur cinema, these “stereotypes” have finally become “social types,” as now we have started to see Beurs and immigrants in leading roles. *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed* (1985) and *Le thé à la menthe* (1984) depict respectively a Beur (Madjid) and an immigrant (Hamou) as protagonists. The use of stereotypes will reappear, though, particularly with Beur comedy. However, their usage was not to denigrate any social group but to unveil in a comic way the contradictions that exist in modern France. Beur comedy, thus, in order to create its comic narrative, feeds on misunderstandings tied to a certain type of social enactment of subjectivity. Beur comedy deconstructs the existing stereotypes by reintroducing them and revealing their social and cultural complexity. Beur comedies, in this respect, could be inscribed within what Deniz Göktürk defines as “Pleasures of Hybridity”<sup>122</sup>:

Films like *Bhaji on the Beach*, despite maintaining some elements of the social work scenario, succeed in displaying humorous enactments of ethnicity, repudiating an essential racial identity by offering fluctuating points of identification, playing on modes

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<sup>122</sup> “Pleasures of Hybridity” was first introduced by Sarita Malik in her article: Sarita Malik, "Beyond 'The Cinema of Duty'? The Pleasures of Hybridity: Black British Film of the 1980s and 1990s," in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed., Andrew Higson (London: Cassel, 1996) 202 -215.

of performance and incorporating elements of comedy, irony, pastiche and self-conscious masquerade.<sup>123</sup>

Since their beginning in the 1980's, Beur comedies have been constructed on the interplay between the Beurs' social state of being and their cultural modes of identification. Starting in the 80's until the end of the 90's, Beur comedy film was mostly focused on the experience of the Beur as an outcast who tries to force society to accept him as French. This is apparent in *L'oeil au beur* (1987), and *Salut cousin!* (1996). But since 2000, Beur comedy films have changed. In this last decade, they have developed their narrative strategies to problematize French national identity dynamics for the "true" French as well. At this level, Beur comedies work on subverting the very social concept of identity by reversing it as we can see in *Origine contrôlée* (2001), *Il était une fois dans l'Oued* (2005), and *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (2006). In the narratives of these three movies the modes of identification are reversed by making "true" French characters identify themselves as Maghrebis. It should be noted, though, that Beur comedy films have been exclusively dominated by Beur male characters. The only exception has been Yamina Benguigui's TV film series *Aicha* (2008) and *Aicha, job à tout prix* (2010).

In what follows I will discuss three Beur comedy films from different periods: *On peut toujours rêver* (1991), *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (2006) and *L'italien* (2010). The experience of subjectivity in these three films informs the viewers on the multifaceted aspect of identity construction without victimizing its characters. The unsuccessful Beur characters' stereotype is deconstructed to lift the lid off the main reasons behind such representation. One of the main issues that these films deal with is to show that it is not because of their lack of intellectual

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<sup>123</sup> Deniz Göktürk, "Turkish delight – German fright: Migrant identities in transnational cinema" In *Mediated Identities*, ed., Deniz Derman, Karen Ross, and Nevena Dakovic (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2001) 3.

abilities but due to an already constructed social image that the Beurs remain at the edge of the French society.

#### **4.1.1 ON PEUT TOUJOURS RÊVER (1991)**

*On peut toujours rêver* is a comedian comedy starring Smaïn Fayrouze and Pierre Richard, who is also the film director. Pierre Richard<sup>124</sup> is originally from Valenciennes in the North of France. After graduating, drawn to the theater, he moved to Paris where he studied drama at Dullen center and at Jean Vilar. After his experience as a theatre performer under the direction of Antoine Boursiller, his desire to express himself more freely encouraged him to experience the "Cabaret." About this experience he said: "the Cabaret is frank and honest, the only judge is the public. If you make them laugh, they accept you. Otherwise they reject you and you should leave." During the '60s, Pierre Richard participated in TV programs with Averty Jean Christophe, Pierre Koralnik, and Jacques Rozier. Yves Robert noticed him and cast him in the role of a deranged farmer in his film *Alexandre le bienheureux* (Alexandre the happy man) (1967). After this experience, he played Pierre in Christian-Paul Arrighi's film *La Coqueluche* (the idol) (1969).

With the encouragement of Yves Robert, Pierre Richard started writing for cinema. It took him one year to write the screen play of his film *Le Distrain* (1970). This film was directed following the *cinema d'auteur* style, where Pierre Richard was the screenplay writer, the director and the main actor. As he discovered himself as a director, Pierre Richard tried afterwards to create his own character and reflect his vision as a filmmaker. Pierre Richard has always refused

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<sup>124</sup> This biography is taken from Pierre Richard's official website. I have translated and adapted the parts that are relevant to my analysis. Pierre Richard, <<http://www.pierre-richard.fr/>, *Présence*>, 06 June 2011.

the idea of laughter for laughter's sake, saying that "the naïve reveals the absurdities of the world we live in." Becoming a filmmaker did not stop him from continuing to act. In 1972 he played François Perrin in Yves Robert's film *Le Grand blond avec une chaussure noire*.

In 1960, at 2 years of age, Smaïn Fayrouz arrived in France, and lived with a Moroccan-Algerian family. At the age of 22, Phillip Bouvard noticed him, and offered him a space in his "Petit Théâtre." His first beginnings were at the Café Theatre "Le Tintamarre." His successful first show *A Star is Beur* (1986) opened the door for other comedian Beurs. With this first show, Smaïn inaugurated a new type of comedy in France. Smaïn is mostly known for his sketch *Le Président* (Beur) (1986) that he replayed in 2010 with some modification to fit contemporary France. Smaïn was awarded a Molière prize in 1996 for his one-man show *Comme ça se prononce*. Even though he played in different films at the beginning of the 80's, it was in 1987 with Serge Meynard that his qualities as an actor shone in *L'oeil au beur noir*, a movie that won the a César for best film in 1988.

Smaïn was not just an actor but was also successful in his career as a one-man show performer. Even though most of his movies were comedies, his last was a drama; *Harkis* (2006) with Alain Tasma revealed other aspects of Smaïn's personality as an actor. *Harkis* traces back the history of Algerians who fought with the French in Algeria against the FLN movement. The movie portrays how they were treated in France after the independence of Algeria. Though Smaïn never knew his real parents, he has remained in touch with his Algerian origins. He says: "Algeria is my country of birth, and France is my country of recognition." Like many other Beurs, Smaïn has always been concerned with the social reality of his generation and the problems it faces in France. Smaïn has established himself as one of the most famous comedians in France through his experiences both as an actor and as a comedy show performer. It was not a

coincidence that Pierre Richard chose him to co-star in his movie *On peut toujours rêver*. Pierre Richard's film is not a Beur comedy just because Smaïn plays in it, but because Smaïn in the movie plays the role of a Beur who gives meaning to the movie narrative. Thanks to what he represents as a Beur the comedic narrative takes shape.

During the first fifteen minutes, we are introduced to Charles de Boisleve (Pierre Richard) who is known in the film by 'L'empereur' because he is a powerful wealthy business man. But at the same time as this introduction shows his power and influence, it also reveals him as a miserable lonely man. On the one hand, he is surrounded by people who praise him for his wealth. No one dares to criticize him or to contest his decisions, not even his son. On the other hand, he is not a happy man. His family does not care about him: his son just wants to succeed him, his daughter does not have time for him and his wife is preoccupied with her insomnia. The only person he gets to talk to is his taxi driver who is also the only one to know that Charles de Boisleve or 'l'empereur' is also a kleptomaniac. He often times goes to the supermarket to steal trivial objects. It is his obsession with stealing that will trigger change in his life.

While Charles is stealing, Rachid (Smaïn Fayrouze), a worker at the supermarket, sees him. Rachid is not the only witness; two security guards observing the cameras watch the whole scene but do not intervene. Rachid could not help but run to him and take all the items he had put in his pockets. While doing that, Rachid is also insulting him. To Rachid's surprise, when two security guards, not the ones observing the scene, finally come; they take him and accuse him of theft while Charles, 'l'empereur', is set free. This incident will utterly change Charles' life. It is not only the first time he is caught stealing, but also the first time someone insults him in such a way. Rachid, a French born Beur, catches Charles' attention, especially when Rachid steals Charles' belt before he leaves. Charles decided to follow him. This scene introduces us to the

world of Rachid and the *banlieue* where he lives. From an objective camera point of view, the viewer sees Rachid shaking hands with people of his neighborhood, playing with children, visiting his music group and then heading towards his second job. Rachid, we discover, is also a hairdresser.

The first two sequences, the one introducing Charles and the one introducing Rachid, are similar in terms of the camera perspective; but different in terms of their lengths. The objective point of view is an invitation for the viewer to become part of the story, with no previous value judgment. The length of the two sequences, though, is very telling. While Charles is introduced in the first fifteen minutes of the film, Rachid's introduction is given a third of that time. This contrast at the level the time allotted to each character shows the importance of Charles compared to Rachid. This contrast however is reversed at the level of roles. While Charles with all his wealth and power is living a miserable life, Rachid, though poor and living in a rundown suburb of the city, is happy and sociable. The beginning of the movie deconstructs the "Arab/Beur" stereotype in the eyes of viewers. The stealing scene ridicules the social construction of stereotypes about Beurs in particular. Everyone knows that Rachid is innocent, but he has to be the victim. The incident is left for viewers to judge.

The involvement of the audience is essential in this process of deconstruction. The scene is presented in such a way as to not have them miss the point. But Rachid is not presented as completely innocent either, when, angry at the reaction of the security guard and the sales clerk, he steals Charles' belt. This latter follows him to get it back, but at the same time, as he discovers where he lives and what he does for a living, he invites him to cut his hair at his house. Rachid, reluctant at the beginning, accepts the offer. Commenting on the character of Charles, Pierre

Richard says “it is a dreamer who has grown old, a clown who has lost his make up.”<sup>125</sup> This comment is of a great significance in relation to the position Rachid will occupy in the life of Charles. The presence of Rachid, not welcomed by the family members, will turn Charles’ life upside down. He will bring him to reflect on his existence by acting as his “fool.” The concept of the fool I am using, in this respect, is taken from the Shakespearean character, particularly the one we see in his play *King Lear*. Though many of Shakespeare’s plays use the fool, *King Lear*’s fool not only reflects how Rachid incarnates it, but also how Charles embodies the role of the king. In the movie, he is known as ‘l’empereur.’ This nickname is very significant when we consider the analogy between Lear/fool from the one side and ‘l’empereur’/Rachid from the other. Similar to a Shakespearean fool, Rachid is the one who is going to bring the comic into the movie. During the first part the comic elements are scarce if not totally absent. It is not until the encounter between Charles and Rachid takes place that we start noticing the irony implemented in the scene. Charles is astonished at Rachid’s honesty and frankness. While the security guards and the sales clerk sympathize with Charles, ‘l’empereur.’ This latter has found in Rachid what he has been looking for, someone to tell him the truth without being afraid of punishment.

Rachid represents the fool but he is not foolish nor does he pretend to be. He accepts staying with Charles out of his own will, and when we see him leaving Charles at the end of film, it is also voluntarily. Charles, throughout the film, does what Rachid suggests to him. Rachid does not have the Shakespearean’s fool’s wisdom, but he definitely has no problem saying what he thinks of others. His role is not to represent ‘reason’ as in Shakespeare’s play. What he says might not be the ‘truth,’ but it has such an impact on Charles that he considers Rachid’s opinion in matters he knows nothing about. Like the Shakespearean fool, Rachid speaks even if he is not allowed to, acts as he feels like without any consideration of who is

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<sup>125</sup> Pierre Richard, <http://www.pierre-richard.fr/Frameset-PR.html> 10 Juin 2011.



around. He succeeds in breaking the wall of silence surrounding Charles, and gains his confidence. All this and it is to be remembered that Rachid is a Beur, a fact highlighted since the beginning of the film, first at supermarket scene and afterwards at the security guards' office. There are two main stereotypes of Beur/Arab: the scary "Other," poor, unpolished, menacing and the exotic "Other," Sheik-like, courteous, an object of sexual lust. We can see these stereotypes clearly in two scenes.

The first scene takes place at the supermarket, when he was provoked by the security officer. This dimension of Rachid's "Beuritude" is reflected through his name, the neighborhood where he lives and his stereotypical facial appearance. However, neither Rachid nor Charles in their encounter makes reference to this fact. Rachid's origins are never revealed when he is with Charles. After they take Rachid instead of Charles, the security officer, holding in his hand Rachid's identity cards reads: "Rachid Merzaoui, c'est né en France ça?" Rachid in an ironic manner exclaims, "mais qu'est-ce que vous voulez, Hen !, tous les Arabes sont Français de nos jours." Doing the right thing, Rachid loses his job at the supermarket.

The second scene takes place at Charles' house. At the breakfast table, Charles' wife, Solange (Edith Scob), in the presence of her psychologist and her son recounts her last night's dream. She says, "j'ai croisé un *Arabe*. Dans la chambre bleue." Her son interrupts her saying, "il était comme Omar Sherif dans *Lawrence d'Arabie*." She continues, "il portait le pyjama aux initiaux de ton père." Then, her psychologist interrupts, "bien sûr, bien sûr, l'Arabe dans la chambre bleue..." She continues, "c'était un Arabe très courtois, il m'a saluée et il m'a dit, 'bonne nuit Madame.'" Her psychologist then tries to explain what she has seen and concludes, "il [le rêve] témoigne déjà que vos résistances au sommeil sont entrain de s'effriter." Her son, then, shows her an identity card that he found and asks her if the picture on the card resembles

the person she has seen in her dream. She confirms that it does. While the psychologist tries to explain that it must not be the same Arab and the son is starting to question the number of Arabs in their house, one of the maids enters. Twisting Rachid's arm and covering his mouth with her hand, the maid says, "J'ai trouvé un arabe entrain de cambrioler la chambre bleue, Madame."

Solange's "dream" has an exotic aspect to it, and her psychologist finds it relevant to legitimize his interpretation. However, Solange's son will spoil both his mother's 'vision' and her psychologist's surmise. The explanation of the psychologist is very revealing of the cliché images of Arabs in the Western imagination. The scene is reminiscent of a constructed fanciful imaginary world. Charles' wife before starting her narration says, "J'ai un peu honte." In Western popular fiction as well as in Hollywood films, such as the *Son of the Sheik* (1921), stories about Western women who end up falling in love with the exotic "Arab" men of their imagination are numerous. Given the stereotypical image of Beur/Arab, Charles' wife did not expect that an Arab, even in her dream, would be polite, except that he would be from this fervid, exotic, desert dream-world. This constructed image about "Arabs" stands in opposition to the supermarket scene. In that scene, Rachid is accused of stealing and his legal presence in France questioned, all because in encountering Charles and Rachid the authorities make the automatic assumption that the Beur should be named Mohammed and is the one at fault. These are the two major stereotypes that have been circulating to the extent that they have become generally accepted in the West.

As stereotypes around Rachid continue to feed the imagination of other characters, Charles and Rachid become inseparable. *On peut toujours rêver*'s narrative is founded on the contrast between how Charles sees Rachid and how the other characters see him. Each one of them has his or her own idea about him. For Charles' wife he is an exotic Arab, for his daughter,

Rachid reminds her of a Turkish worker whose name is Abdul, for Charles' acquaintances, Rachid reminds them of Ezzadine Alaïa, a Tunisian fashion designer, and for the detective, who is hired to follow them, he is simply an Arab. The only one who sees Rachid just for Rachid is Charles. As the narrative progresses, on the one hand, the stereotypes continue, on the other hand, Charles finds his lost self. The homosocial relationship between Rachid and Charles is founded on their common humanity. Charles always refers to Rachid using his first name, even when he introduces him to his family he says, "Monsieur Rachid Merzaoui est mon coiffeur particulier." The fact that Charles does not see Rachid as a Beur nor as an Arab with all the stereotypes and clichés these two words brings to a Western mind, make him realize the importance of being himself. Charles sees in Rachid someone who does not say things to please others, but to simply react with sincerity to whomever addresses him. Rachid for his part does not treat Charles as the others do either. He never uses the formal "vous" (you), and he dares to say and do whatever he likes with him. There are three major scenes that exemplify this relationship between Rachid and Charles.

The first of these scenes is where Rachid is trying to have Charles smile, the second where Rachid pushes Charles into the swimming pool and the third where Rachid decides to leave him. In the first scene, Rachid is with Charles working on his hair, listening to classical music. Rachid notices that Charles never smiles, and he encourages him to do so, while Charles questions Rachid about the music he is listening to. In a close-up shot we see Charles' face as he is looking in the mirror. He is trying to smile but is unsuccessful. Rachid describes his smile as "une entorse," "une grimace." After these comments, Rachid is finally successful in making Charles smile. It should be noted that he still never smiles except when he is with Rachid. What connects Charles and Rachid are not their ages, their social statuses, nor obviously their racial

origins. They simply connect as two human beings. The humor this scene tries to construct originates from the opposition between Charles' "classical music" and the simplicity of Rachid's character. It is as if we hear Rachid in a soliloquy saying, "what is the importance of 'grande musique' if it makes you remain unhappy."

The second scene takes place at the swimming pool of a Golf Club. Rachid comes close to Charles and pushes him into the water while he is still wearing his clothes. Rachid realizes that that might not have been a good decision, and Charles' children and his acquaintances expect that Charles will react angrily. Unexpectedly however, Charles climbs out of the pool, approaches Rachid and sprays water out of his mouth on Rachid's face. This second scene comes immediately after the smiling scene and it is connected to it. These two scenes establish the type of social relationship that exists between Charles and Rachid. Charles' message is that Rachid is not like everyone else. No one in the group dares to question Charles' decision, or to prevent Rachid from being himself with Charles. Charles' and Rachid's homosocial intersubjectivity has moved from being private to becoming public. This change will outrage all the rest of Charles' family and friends. I can argue that while the stereotype of Rachid, the Arab as he is called in the movie, is undermined/transformed, a counter stereotype, represented by Charles, comes to the surface.

The third scene takes place close to the end of the film. After a crazy night on mopeds, Rachid, the French Beur and Charles, the French gaulois, go to a coffee shop. This is reminiscent of a slogan from the Beur march of 1983: "la France c'est comme une mobylette, pour que ça marche elle lui faut du mélange." This connotation to the diversity that exists in France is an overt criticism to the advocates of a 'pure' French national identity. However, Charles having a friend for the first time that is so genuine forgets that friendship is a two way street. Rachid tries

to make it clear that happiness is not achieved under a signed 'contract' and friendship, as a human experience must be freely given. But he senses that Charles wants to possess him, and in a demonstration of his free will and to teach Charles a lesson, he rides off. Rachid, while celebrating this friendship of two such disparate people, wants to convey a message to Charles. This message has, above all, a universal value that transcends any social, geographical, ethnic or cultural barriers. Charles, after digesting what Rachid has just said and done, himself leaves – in the opposite direction. Rachid, on his way home, once again falls victim to French stereotyping and is picked up by the police. *On peut toujours rêver* is a comedy that functions on two different levels: first, Rachid, the French Beur, solving an existential crisis for Charles who represents the mainstream French, and providing him with a sense of fulfillment, and second, Charles' treatment of Rachid makes the narrative alternate from a socially constructed stereotypification to typification of the Beur.

#### **4.1.2 *BEUR, BLANC, ROUGE* (2006)**

*Beur, Blanc, Rouge* is a Beur comedy that builds its narrative around the Algeria/France soccer game of 2001, this game was an event that was supposed to reconcile France and Algeria, but instead the game turned into chaos. Though the game has become part of an unhappy memory, Mahmoud Zemmouri, the filmmaker, turns it into a comedy. The comic atmosphere it creates for its audience invites them to watch and enjoy the experience without feeling guilty about what happened. The movie uses the event to redirect attention to the real causes that led to its failure, but instead of using a tragic tone, Zemmouri constructs his narrative using comedic elements. To make his main character's story interesting, Zemmouri places Brahim (Yasmine Belmadi) in a liminal position where his subjectivity unfolds, building up comedic scenes while triggering the

viewers' curiosity to know more about Brahim and his relation with other characters. At the end, he finds that his subjectivity operates from within the possibilities that the state of liminality opens for him. Explaining the reasons behind choosing the game as the backbone of his plot, Zemmouri says:

[Faire] la genèse de toute cette jeunesse *Française* issue de l'immigration, qu'on appelle aujourd'hui hypocritement "minorité visible." Beaucoup de Beurs n'ont pas coupé le cordon ombilical et adoptent par mimétisme les valeurs de leurs parents qui ont une toute autre histoire. Les ghettos créés par les gouvernements français qui se sont succédés y sont pour beaucoup. Parqués dans des quartiers ou des cités, ces populations ne s'ouvrent pas sur l'extérieur et à fortiori pas sur la culture française. Les familles sont restées campées dans leurs traditions, leurs mœurs.<sup>126</sup>

Zemmouri shows the seriousness of the issue of Beurs by adding to his film narrative a political dimension. He relates the exclusion of the Beurs to the policies of the French government that have been neither successful in integrating the immigrants, nor in accepting the fact that the Beurs are part of France. In the same interview, Zemmouri answering a question on whether his film was about the 2001 soccer game between France and Algeria, replied 'no' and added, "it is about identity."<sup>127</sup> Zemmouri, in adopting comedy as a medium to communicate his understanding of the issue was not only aiming at entertaining the audience but also at posing the question as to where the Beurs as a generation belongs. At the same time he 'injects' elements in his narrative that enhance "true" French to reflect on their position as French citizens with regards to the mainstream political discourse. The character that represents this instance is Brahim's friend Gaby (Julien Courbey). Zemmouri also destereotypes the Algerian Saïd (Yacine

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<sup>126</sup> From an interview with Mahmoud Zemmouri <<http://cinefrancealgerie.e-monsite.com/pages/immigration-mirages-et-realites/05-beur-blanc-rouge.html>> 08 March 2012.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

Mesbah) when he presents him in a way that viewers do not expect. In my analysis, I will focus mainly on Brahim, but I will also analyze Gaby's and Saïd's modes of presence, particularly the modes of stereotypes they incarnate.

From the very beginning of the movie, we are informed that Brahim lives with his parents and his two siblings. Looking at the way his grandmother and his parents are dressed, and listening to their dialogue; we surmise that they belong to the first generation of immigrants. Of those who came to France after the Second World War the majority were either illiterate or had only basic school education. Brahim is twenty-four, unemployed, and does not even want to find a job. He spends his time doing nothing. Before I embark on my analysis, I would like to stress how Brahim is different from Madjid in *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1985). This brief comparison is to see how the Beur character has changed and evolved. Both characters are different at many levels. Though neither Brahim nor Madjid is doing much to change their situations, Brahim is content with his life while Madjid has gnawing doubts. This difference reflects, on the one hand, their identifications, and on the other hand, informs us about the development of Beur characters; both at the level of form and content. While Brahim is proud of his belonging to both Algeria and France, Madjid is portrayed as having no sense of belonging.

Brahim's impulsive nature leads him into situations where his decisions end up building comic scenes that are serious in nature. One of the main such scenes takes place during the soccer game when Algeria fell behind 4-1 against France. Brahim seeing the Algerian supporters, who were for the majority Beurs, invading the field, says, "yes, they are right." Brahim joins them without much thinking. Just a few minutes later, he is caught, and as they were arresting him, he was still shouting "long live Algeria" while holding the Algerian flag in his hands. A photographer catches this frame and the next day it makes the front page of most

newspapers. This scene puts him in two critical situations afterwards: first, he spends some time in jail and second, his mother decides to send him back to Algeria, a process much more complicated than anticipated. Zemmouri explaining this scene said:

Il faut bien se rappeler ce match, c'était un événement extraordinaire pour tous ceux qui avaient un lien avec l'Algérie. C'était la première fois après l'indépendance de l'Algérie que se rencontreraient sur un terrain deux pays avec une histoire commune si lourde. C'est normal que cela ait tourne au vinaigre.<sup>128</sup>

After he got out of prison for what he did, his parents accompany him to Algeria. His mother wants him to stay, thinking he will be welcome there. Brahim and his parents try to enter Algeria with their French passports. The parents think that since they are going to their home country they would not need visas. To their surprise, they are not allowed in because of their *French passports*. The mother, in a very comic way, tells the Customs' officer, "we enter our country and you ask us for a visa, you must be crazy" and the father, in broken French, adds emphatically "ah bon! Slimane, Brahim, et Khira Zaaytouch pourquoi ça c'est français, ça c'est la meilleure." This scene brings into question how we think of ourselves and account for ourselves as individuals and how we are somehow accounted for. The scene reveals the contradiction that arises when a legal perspective of identity superimposes itself on one's cultural identity. It also brings into question different ways of identifying selfhood. For the parents it is incomprehensible that they need visas to enter their "own" country. Zemmouri through this example highlights the incoherence between the notion of identity that exists at the legal level and how it contradicts the way we, as individuals, define ourselves.

Brahim, different than his parents, does not find any problem in identifying himself both as Algerian and as French. He, at times, talks about himself as French, and other times as

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



Algerian. His Frenchness surges to the surface when he is talking to his family mostly; and his Algerian-ness when he talks to his friends Moloud (Karim Belkhadra) and Gaby. Brahim's identification is dual; he alternates between the two identifications as he strongly believes that they reflect who he is. His enactment of subjectivity cannot be otherwise. We cannot locate where Brahim the Algerian ends and where Brahim the Frenchman starts. To better understand the dynamics that Brahim's subjectivity reflects, I will analyze the liminal position he keeps using elements that I have discussed in Chapter 1.

There are three stages that Brahim goes through, and they are represented in the movie by three major scenes each of which corresponds to a stage as described by Genep and Turner. At the very beginning of the movie, Brahim is entering into a 'ceremonial preparation' or what Genep calls the "preliminal phase." This instance is symbolized by the flags on his cars and by his enthusiasm for the Algerian team. Following Genep's rites of passage, the game represents the liminal, the transitional phase after which we anticipate seeing a new Brahim; however, this is not the case. Brahim's transition to the postliminal is unsuccessful, and the rite of passage to the next phase is a complete fiasco. In what follows, I will present these scenes and proceed to their analysis.

In the first scene, Brahim, while in the midst of showing his pride in supporting Algeria, reminds the grocery shop owner that he is French, "I am French and I will stay here." What intensifies his French-Algerian-ness is that while Brahim is emphatically reminding viewers that he is French, the camera shows the national Algerian shirt that he is wearing and it reads "Algeria." In the second scene, while in the stadium, Moloud, his friend, asks him to stand up to show respect for the French national anthem reminding him also, in a rhetorical manner, that he is French as well. Brahim, not denying that, responds that that he feels 200% Algerian at that

moment. In the third scene, his mother challenges him as she suggests that since he loves Algeria so much to go and live there. For Brahim, it is the moment of truth where he is pushed to the edge to explain his position. Brahim, so attached to Algeria but equally to his Frenchness, says, “I love Algeria, but from here”.

It is essential to remember that not accessing the postliminal state does not mean that the rite of passage failed. This is why Turner argues that the “liminal” experience should be looked at also as a “state” that has the potential to become permanent. My argument is that reintegration and reincorporation is not needed in the case of Beurs, especially when we consider their perspective as liminal subjects. In the construction of the film then, an argument is put forward that for the French, they might very well be failing to access the postliminal and consequently would not be reincorporated, but for the Beurs like Brahim, they feel they are French in their own way. In modern societies, where individual subjectivities are generally recognized as such, it is essential to look at the liminal experience from the point of view of the subjects who goes through it.

It is important to note that no matter what happens, Brahim is consistent in expressing his connection with Algeria. This fact shows that his enthusiasm for the Algerian team was not just for fun nor was it a temporary identification. The only one who understands what it means to be both French and Algerian is Brahim, and he is the only one who does not see this state of being as problematic. In the case of the Beur, it is more important to consider acknowledging their point of view as liminal subjects rather than forcing them to “abide” by social rules that do not apply to them.

*Beur, Blanc, Rouge* works also with reversing and negating stereotypes. As for the first, a “true” French character will get involved in a process whereby he identifies himself as Algerian.

As for the second, the Algerian “other” is positioned in a higher social position, thus defacing the generic western stereotype. The reversal of stereotype engages the “true” French Gaby in modes of identification that are alien to him. The negation of stereotype presents the Algerian “other,” Saïd, for whom France is supposed to be the land of economic prosperity, as a blond wealthy man. The two characters make viewers rethink their positions vis-à-vis the notion of “otherness.” Our subjectivities are defined more according to how we position ourselves than how “others” present us.

Gaby works as a baker and is a friend of both Brahim and Moloud. He brings them food whenever M<sup>me</sup> Poussin, the owner, leaves the bakery. Gaby, who since the beginning of the film identifies himself as Algerian, gets interested in the services of an “Agence Matrimonial” run by an Algerian immigrant. The “Agence” was established to convince immigrant families to have their sons marry girls from the “bled,” but they end up getting Gaby as a client instead. The interesting part is that for Gaby to get married, he would have to be circumcised. Gaby, reluctant at the beginning, accepts. The process of reversal is reflected through the fact that Brahim and Moloud, for whom the Agency is created are not interested in the agency’s services, while Gaby who is probably the last person to be targeted yet is the one who shows serious interest in getting married through it. Gaby, convinced by the desperate agency’s owner that an Algerian girl is what he needs, starts asking his friends how painful it is to get circumcised. The act is very symbolic as it engenders the difficulty France still has in reconciling with its colonial past. Gaby in the film, after he accepts the ritual, represents a postcolonial France. He is ready to pay the cost, though painful, to reconcile with Algeria.

Saïd, Brahim’s cousin, a successful Algerian business man, comes from Algeria to watch the game. Negating the stereotype that Algerians are poor, Saïd will be the one paying for

Brahim and his friends' expenses during his stay. Saïd's character challenges the Algeria that is thought of exclusively as a poor country where people are helpless, have no jobs and are stuck in the past. Saïd negates this stereotype and presents an Algeria that is dynamic and changing. Saïd is happy with what he has and with his visit to France which was not only to watch the game but also to have fun and enjoy the weekend. With his suit and his blond hair, Saïd debunks the stereotype that is constructed about North Africans in France. At another level, Saïd and Brahim's parents stand in opposition to destabilize the legal definition of selfhood. Brahim's parents who though French legally are Algerian culturally, and Saïd though Algerian legally embraces a modern way life. This contrast is significant because it explains once again that our cultural identity does not always reflect our legal one. It also poses questions on the fact that our existence is bound by the law more than by the culture with which we identify. Our existence is valued as *idemidentity* more than as *ipseidentity* in the sense that the first emphasizes our legal identity and the second our changing modes of identification.

#### **4.1.3 L'ITALIEN (2010)**

To the non-diegetic tunes of Toto Cutugno's famous song "L'italiano" (1983), the camera intercuts between showing Dino (Kad Merad) driving to work in Nice in a Maserati and showing him getting ready to go out. As we follow Dino to work, the camera alternates back to his apartment in extreme close shots: Dino shaving his head, trimming his circle beard, putting on his gold cross necklace, getting dressed "*à l'italienne*" to go to work in his grey, short, straight jacket and narrow trousers with shiny pointed loafers. To add to his Italian look, Dino, as a final touch, chooses one of his designer watches from the collection he has. In one of the intercuts

along the way, the camera, in a blurred close-up shot, shows the first page of a passport where the viewer glimpses “Fabrizzi,” “Dino” and “Ital...” A few minutes later, after Dino gets to his office, we learn that he works for a Maserati dealership and that the car he was driving was not his. As he walks in, he throws out a few Italian expressions to his co-workers. We also learn that Dino is competent, enthusiastic, cheerful, and that his work is appreciated by his boss.

That night, to diegetic music, this time Claudio Villa’s voice “My Wonderful Bambina,” Dino walks through a night club bar to meet his girlfriend H  l  ne (Val  rie Benguigui). After a short flirtatious exchange between the two, the next scene of this sequence moves to Dino and H  l  ne in bed. H  l  ne asks Dino whether he is visiting his family over the weekend. When Dino replies “yes” H  l  ne suggests going with him. Dino, running out of excuses why he has not yet introduced her to his family, claims that his family is very conservative and it would not be wise for her to go, but nevertheless promises to talk to his parents. Is Dino lying or is he telling the truth? The next morning, Dino is heading towards Marseille’s airport. At the airport, he asks whether the flight from Italy arrived or not. In the next scene, Dino, after parking his car, takes off his cross necklace and his ring, gets his suitcase and walks through the airport passenger arrival area as if he came by air. As he lifts his hand in greeting, a counter shot shows his mother waiting for him, but instead of calling him Dino, she calls him Mourad, and greets him partly in Arabic. As much as everything about Dino since the beginning leads to the conclusion that he is Italian, the blurred close-up of his passport is confirming but at the same time intriguing and suggestive. Dino/Mourad is the same person, but why is he hiding his real ‘identity’ at work? And is his identity as Dino hidden from his family too?

Mourad Ben Saoud is forty-two, and he is the eldest of three siblings, he has a sister Amal and a brother Karim. His parents Mohamed and Rachida Ben Saoud are originally from

Algeria. Mourad as far as his family knows works in Italy. The only one in the family who knows his ‘true’ story is his sister Amal. At work, everyone knows Dino is Italian and every weekend he goes to visit his family there, even his girlfriend. Apart from his sister Amal, there are two other people who are aware of his double identity, an airport parking employee and Dino’s Jewish friend Jacques. This latter, as he is a professional painter, is the artisan of Mourad’s Italian identity. Mourad has been using Dino as his work identity for five years. He has become habituated to it and he blends in well, his co-workers call him ‘*L’italien*.’ The movie is particularly interesting because it uses a stereotype in order to deconstruct another stereotype through a process of reversal. Mourad belongs to the Beur “generation,” he was born and raised in France. He is not an illegal immigrant, and he has full right to work in France as Mourad; but yet he chooses to adopt another identity that is not French to integrate the French society. It is as if we hear Mourad saying, “I am French but to integrate and succeed in my society I should become, in this case, Italian.” The movie builds on identity role-playing to construct its comedic narrative and to call the audience’s attention to the outcomes of social conditioning. Mourad would not have chosen to change his “legal” identity if he did not sense that his original one was not so much valued, particularly in the private sphere, as Mourad himself notes in the first scene of him at the lunch table with his Algerian family.

Mourad lives a happy life. He seems content in the skin of an Italian. Around the people who know him as Dino, and in order to impress them and play it right, he tries to “spice” up whatever he does with the minimal knowledge he has of Italy. He has a picture of the Italian soccer team as a wall paper on his office computer. He is satisfied with his position at work and is close to be promoted to the status of manager. He loves his girlfriend and plans to get married. At the same time, he is also happy with his family, except for his sister who knows of his

deception and does not agree with it. His father sees him as a model for all members of the family. But then the unexpected happens: Mourad's father gets sick and while in the hospital, he requests that Mourad fast during the month of Ramadan instead of him. Mourad tries to find an excuse but he ends up promising his father he will do it. This promise, although at the beginning not really about faith, does bring Mourad back to "reality." Mourad's experience in fulfilling this vow to his father shows that any subjective experience is constructed intersubjectively. Even though Mourad thought that he could continue to split himself in two to satisfy his ego, the experience of empathy with his father allows him to reflect on his existence and the existence of others around him.

Despite the seriousness of these confrontations, the movie is scripted in a comic rather than dramatic narrative, yet still manages to 'instruct'. After his decision to fast during Ramadan, Mourad confesses to the Imam, who was instructing him about Ramadan, that he had not fasted since he was fourteen. This is one facet of how *L'italien* de-stereotypes some of the existing misconceptions about Beurs, one of which is that it is believed that all Beurs are practicing Muslims. Mourad himself confirms that he knows nothing about Islam by buying a copy of the famous book series *L'Islam pour le nuls*. The experience of fasting is also 'instructional' for the viewers. They are intrigued by it through Mourad, and his lack of knowledge about fasting and about Islam itself. Mourad's meeting with the Imam and his first tentative ablutions are good scenes to reflect on. These two scenes are presented in a comedic manner as not to spoil the narrative sequence, but nevertheless they keep their 'instructional' value. The first is a long shot of the Imam and Mourad that shows that they are sitting inside a mosque. The camera then zooms in to construct the comedic through the reaction of Mourad when he starts asking about what he is allowed to do and what he is not allowed to do during Ramadan. The second scene is

when Mourad is doing the ablutions to get ready for the morning prayer. What creates laughter is that viewers notice clearly that Mourad is a beginner and does not know what he is doing. At the same time, on the screen, the viewers also read information about the prayers themselves. Mourad's fasting leads him to reveal his disguise as Dino; first, to those who know him in Nice, particularly his boss, and second to his family in Marseille. My analysis, however, will focus on the enactments of subjectivity that Mourad experiences at three levels. I will do this according to the three forms of 'habitant' proposed by Randall Halle that I discussed in Chapter 1. I have to note that I am not using the taxonomy Halle suggested in the same way he did. The levels of analysis are as follows: Mourad as Dino/inhabitant, Mourad as Mourad/cohabitant and Mourad as himself/exhabitant.

#### **4.1.3.1 Mourad as Dino/inhabitant.**

At work Mourad, though he is now observing Ramadan as Dino, tries to appear as normal as possible; however, in a couple of scenes his behavior and attitude come across as strange. The first is when his rival colleague for manager finds him emptying his office water cooler, and the second, is when he shouts at his secretary, Nadia, after she brings him coffee while his boss is watching. Mourad tries as Dino to appear as discreet as possible to avoid any suspicion about his 'origins.' Mourad is definitely keeping his promise to his father, but yet he is performing it as Dino, who is in the eyes of his co-workers a Christian. Mourad does not represent 'goodness' nor does he represent 'evil,' but rather it is his subjectivity as conditioned by the social norms that is reversed. It is mostly through comedy that such an experience can be performed at its best. What *L'italien* reveals to us is the personality of the character, his subjectivity rather than an 'ethos.' It is about sharing an intimate subjective experience of a character rather than 'spreading' a universal value.



Mourad's subjectivity is not enacted in isolation from others, but it is revealed in such a way to transcend the social norms in an attempt to expose its inadequacies. By doing so, Mourad is rediscovering himself. His struggle to find a place for himself in a society that rejects him as 'Mourad Ben Saoud' or simply as a Beur is reflective of an existing social reality. Mourad's choice to become Dino is one of the solutions to achieve his goal and de-stigmatize a derogatory social perception against Beurs and immigrants alike. The film narrative feeds on the character of Dino as a source to create laughter, and as a strategy to dismantle 'being French.' The film comedic narrative builds on the unexpected situations that Mourad is thrown into, and for which he has no time to think of how to react as they abruptly happen. The movie shows that an Italian can still be perceived as an 'inhabitant' of French society. It explicitly communicates the idea that not all foreigners are created equal. Even though the Italian is also 'different,' his difference is more appealing and flows well within the French social context. He has become part of the family in terms of integrating the French society and pursuing his career to its highest summit.

There are many scenes that illustrate this but I will make reference to one, a scene that begins with Mourad's boss suggesting that they go together to Rome. As there are no direct flights to Rome, they would have to go through Marseille where Mourad generally goes during the weekends. Since he could not reach his mother who always comes to pick him up, he panics as she might see him at Marseille's airport. He does get to Rome, but as soon as he gets there he waits for his boss to leave, and takes the first flight back to Marseille. Mourad is not yet ready for such a confrontation. He could lose his job, and his mother would not forgive him. It should be noted that Mourad does not repudiate his origins, but at the same time his identity change is neither legal nor ethical. He sees himself as a victim of social injustice, and he reacts against that. The fact that he does not choose a "true" French name is very significant in the sense that he is

already French. His acceptance of a “true” French name would mean that he accepts ‘assimilation,’ and he recognizes that to be ‘French’ you have to have a “true” French name. Towards the end of the movie, Cyril, his rival colleague, discovers Mourad’s origins as he finds him praying. Mourad’s reaction, though unconvincing, is significant. After Cyril asks, “J’ai toujours su que tu n’es pas italien, toi,” Mourad ironically replies, “tu n’as jamais vu d’italiens musulmans?!” Mourad’s rhetorical question is not about whether there are Italian Muslims but about the belief that a Muslim in France could not be but from the Maghreb.

Mourad’s subjectivity as Dino allows him to experience intersubjectivity differently. Being recognized as Dino, ‘*L’italien*,’ requires from ‘others’ who know him under this name, to treat him differently. Intersubjectivity, thus, is not supposed to be about the recognition of the other as a consciousness but as a subjective experience or as Merleau-Ponty puts it ‘the body subject’ or ‘the body experience.’<sup>129</sup> The body subject should not be thought of in the sense of the universal but necessarily as a presence that has differentiating physical characteristics and a legally determined status. To complement his ‘alternate’ identity, Dino Fabrizio shaved his head, trimmed short his circle beard, got a cross chain and wore clothes that are ‘typically’ Italian for the social status he represents. To make his name and his appearance fuse together, he learns a few Italian expressions that he constantly uses. Thus, at the level of what Ricoeur calls ‘sameness,’ Mourad does not change, he is the same person; but at the level of selfhood his enactment of subjectivity has changed. This change is not for himself, but for how he is perceived by ‘others.’ Mourad’s decision towards the end of the movie to reveal his ‘original’ identity both to his boss and his girlfriend originates in his fasting experience. Before quitting the job in front of his co-workers and his boss, he says to Nadia, “tu as raison Nadia, le Ramadan n’est pas une simple formalité.” Mourad is echoing Nadia’s words when he asks her, “et qu’est

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<sup>129</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (New York: Routledge, 1958) 231.

ce que vous gagnez ?” She replies, “une conscience reposée dans un corps plus sain” and she adds, “c’est très personnel. Ce n’est pas une formalité pour moi, c’est une quête.” Mourad has to go through the experience to feel what Nadia has told him; it is not about religion per se but about the self. Mourad’s experience of intersubjectivity as Dino allows him to rediscover and recognize himself. The construction of selfhood is quintessentially the result of the interplay between the subjective and the intersubjective.

#### **4.1.3.2 Mourad as Mourad/cohabitant.**

Even though we do not see much of this experience of Mourad as a cohabitant in the movie, the scenes that are available to us are very significant. With his family Mourad plays the role of the son who works in Italy and comes every weekend to visit bearing gifts that he claims are from Italy. His family believes whatever he tells them, with the exception of his sister who tries to spoil his ‘role-playing.’ Whenever his parents try to ask about visiting him, his excuse is always that he does not have enough space. Mourad has continued to do this since he started his job at the Maserati dealership five years earlier. For all these years Mourad has been ‘Dino’ more than he has been ‘Mourad’ and this explains why the sequences allotted to Dino in Nice are more than those where we see him in Marseille. Mourad’s inability to come clean with his family about where he works and under what pretensions emanates from his fear of being rejected and blamed for denying his origins just to get a job. Another reason is that he does not want to lose the esteem of his parents and his position in the family. Mourad has constructed an image for himself that is not all the way false but yet is deceptive. Though we see Mourad’s family house only once, it should be noted that it does not seem to be in the projects. This de-stereotyping can be understood in the sense that not all immigrants live in the projects, but that does not mean that discrimination is still not prevalent.

The longest sequence where we get to know Mourad's family is when he visits them at the beginning of the movie. However, the most significant scene that explains Mourad's choice in a twisted manner is when everybody is at the lunch table in what looks like a country house where the family is sitting out in the garden. A discussion ensues when Mourad says that he is going to be promoted to a higher position at his job. In the eyes of his parents, he is going to be promoted as Mourad and not as Dino because they do not know of the existence of the latter. Mourad however, will not be promoted in the end. Not because he is incompetent, but because he finally realizes that he should stop his 'disguise' - he wants to get the job as Mourad, not as Dino. No matter what the reason is, the fact that he is not promoted is reflective of a characteristic that is generally found in Beur films. It is almost impossible to find a Beur character in a film holding a higher position and in the end *L'italien* is not an exception. In all Beur films, even comedies where the possibility of breaking the social norms is more or less tolerated, Beur characters remain at the bottom of the social strata. Mourad's family pride, that their son represents the exception to the rule, is an excuse to keep his 'secret' hidden. All the same, Mourad's enactment of subjectivity within his family circle, though it brings a certain satisfaction, is not 'truthful.' When he declares his promotion to manager, his brother and his wife say that it is due to the politics of integration and 'positive discrimination,' but his mother, after showing her satisfaction says, "Sauf que des 'Arabes' directeurs generales, ça ne doit pas courir dans la rue, surtout en Italie."

#### **4.1.3.3 Mourad as himself/exhabitant**

The experience causes Mourad to begin an interior journey of self-discovery. Mourad changes utterly after Cyril finds out about his true name. His subjectivity starts to take another path at the level of his selfhood. Mourad begins to accept himself and assumes his responsibility

as such. Subjectivity at this point reflects Mourad's subjective experience at the level of 'sameness' and 'selfhood.' At both levels, Mourad accomplishes a certain harmony. To use Ricoeur's terminology of *idem*-identity, 'sameness', and *ipse*-identity, 'selfhood,' we note that the first supersedes the second and brings it back to 'reality' in order that his subjectivity becomes reflective of his sameness. This harmony that Mourad achieves is not without consequences, as the subjective always calls for the intersubjective. In the movie, the last thirty minutes or so are devoted to this experience. Mourad, after a session with the Imam who in the movie represents his 'conscience,' starts his 'confessions;' first to his girlfriend, then to his boss and finally to the French and Algerian authorities. Even though he tries to hide it from his parents, they end up finding out as well. Mourad, in agreeing to confess, has rejected himself before being rejected by all the 'others' around him. Mourad in doing so is criticizing society but at the same time he is also blaming himself for taking the easy way out. Mourad, thus, has accepted becoming an ex-habitant by taking the initiative and holding himself responsible.

The main scenes that I will analyze are those where he confesses to his girlfriend and where he explains to the Algerian authorities who he is. In the first of these two scenes, Mourad and H el ene are sitting at the 'corniche' as the camera zooms in from the back while Mourad is telling his story, "Au d ebut c' tait juste pour trouver un appartement mais quand tu t'appelles Mourad ben Saoud, tu ne trouves jamais rien...italien c'est bien, c'est dr le, c'est folklorique, c'est classe,  a marche tellement bien que tu recommences. Tu recommences, puis un jour tu connais la recette de lasagne mieux qu'un tagine aux pruneaux, puis comme par magie tu trouves un job, l a, tu ne peux plus faire marche arri re, 'Dino Fabrizio qui vend les Maserati,'  a rime bien." Mourad unraveling his story does not make him innocent, as he himself confirms, "Je [ne] cherche pas d'excuses, j'avais juste peur de te perdre," but his story does reflect a grim social

reality. Discrimination based on names that reflect a racial or a religious ethnicity of one's origin has been reported as being a problem for Beurs who sometimes feel the need to change their names to get jobs. The adoption of an alternate identity, for Mourad, has not been a problem; he has been able to 'be' Dino in Nice with no psychological complications and without losing his original identity.

Mourad's experience shows the transcultural dimension of his character. Mourad's confession does not negate nor reject his subjective experience as an Italian. It rather proves that our selfhood depends on our modes of identification, of who we chose to be. Mourad, in subsuming an Italian identity, is criticizing the social conditioning that predetermines the aspirations of the Beurs. After quitting his job, Mourad, in a close-up, is seen wandering aimlessly in the rain in the streets of Marseille. His facial expressions are revelatory of his miserable psychological state. This is a moment of 'truth' for Mourad that allows him to reflect on the decisions he has made and their consequences. For fear that his mother will know that he lied to her about Italy, he goes to the police and presents himself as an illegal immigrant so that he can be deported to Algeria.<sup>130</sup> This will take us then to the second scene that I will analyze.

Next, Mourad is in Algiers where he thought what would be an easy process turns out to be a serious problem. At the office of the Algerian customs service in a shot reverse shot, Mourad, exhausted, tries to explain his situation to an Algerian officer. This latter, after Mourad has explained to him that he has requested to be deported, tells him, "Mais je croyais que vous étiez français." Mourad then explains that he has a dual citizenship: he is both French and Algerian. The officer, perplexed, takes off his hat, smiles and asks Mourad, "Alors pourquoi ils vous expulsent." Mourad explains that if he told the French authorities he is French his mother

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<sup>130</sup> The French police officer tells Mourad that if he is an illegal immigrant, then he will be deported and the case of the mistaken identity will be dismissed. Mourad phones his sister to tell her to bring his French passport so that he can get it and stay as a tourist in Algeria then return to France.

would discover that he is not 'Italian' and that is the last thing he wants her to know. Then, in an ironic manner, the officer says, "Ouiiii! vous [n'] êtes pas italien." Mourad replies, "Oui je [ne] suis pas italien sauf au boulot, je suis italien." The officer, tiring of this identity wordplay says, "Pah pah pah! vous me faites mal à la tête." Mourad is imprisoned for lack of clarity about who he really is. Mourad is not long in prison before his father comes to get him. The prison stay deepens his subjective self-discovery as he continues to fast and pray not only to accomplish his promise but also to reach a sense of harmony within himself. Mourad's subjectivity becomes difficult to be contained within a given 'social identity.' When Mourad is taken to his prison cell, he shouts that he will call the embassy. The officer ironically replies, "laquelle, la française, l'italienne ou l'algérienne?" Mourad's 'legal identity' is devalued, devoid; what has taken its place is rather a cultural identity that is experienced through a spiritual quest. Mourad's experience shows the absurdity of 'legal' identity; his enactment as Dino reflects our inherent ability as cultural beings to adopt other cultural identities. After Mourad leaves prison, he marries Hélène and they go to Rome. However, before they leave his parents confess that when they first came to France and they wanted to go eat in a restaurant, they had to reserve under a French name to be able to get in. This confession of Mourad's parents' past is very telling of the process of discrimination that immigrants have gone through and their Beur children have inherited. It shows also his parents' understanding of his choice, he who had worried about losing their esteem and respect.

## 4.2 THE FUTURE OF BEUR COMEDY

The movies I have analyzed in this chapter along with the many other Beur films that have come out show that Beur comedy has the potential to continue to explore themes dealing with Beurs in France. Even though talking about identity is still considered a sensitive topic, on the whole, Beur comedy films' reception has been nevertheless positive. When we consider the historical development of Beur comedy, we will notice that it has changed over the thirty years since its emergence. Despite being only a small part of France's cinematic output, Beur comedy has made its way to the public. It is in the last decade, though, that Beur comedy has adopted new forms at the level of its comedic narrative in constructing humor and increased the number of film comedies dealing with Beurs. However, there are opponents of Beur comedies and they fall into two major categories.

In the first category are immigrants and Beurs who claim that these comedies rely on stereotypes and perpetuate the same clichés about immigrants and their families. The second category is represented by the "true" French who claim that Beur films, of which Beur comedies have become a prominent part, both in number and reception, still reflexively represent the Beurs as victims and blame it on racism and discrimination by French society. For the first group, though it is true that Beur comedies rely on stereotypes, some more than others, to create humor, it should be noted that many of those stereotypes are rooted in reality. Additionally, deconstructing a stereotype should be founded first, on recognizing its existence, and second, on exposing it. I am, however, excluding from this clarification Beur comedies that rely on exaggerating the stereotypes for the sake of profit, an example of which is Gabriel Julien-Laferrière *Neuilly sa mère* (2009). Despite the excellent performance of Sami Sghir as Sami



Benbouadaoud, the movie is full of unnecessary déjà-vu clichés and makes reconciliation a matter of misunderstanding that can be easily solved.

As for the second category, ‘true’ French who resent the portrayal of Beurs as victims, it is important to note that discrimination and racism are still prevalent in French society today. The debate on national identity launched by the ministry of immigration, integration, national identity and solidarity development (Ministère de l’immigration, de l’intégration, de l’identité et le développement solidaire) shows that French national identity has become targeted and that there is an urgent need to rethink identity formation in France. There are those in France who feel that French identity needs to be protected, particularly from Islam, the religion of the largest immigrant community in France. Whether it is based on their names, their physiognomy, their addresses, or their religion; the reality is that Beurs still find themselves under-represented in the public sphere and that Beur movies give glimpses of this uncomfortable reality.

The success of Beur comedies so far has relied on good comedic narratives, the use of well-known comedians and only to a much lesser extent focus on stereotypes. It is important to add that Beur comedy has attracted not only filmmakers who belong to the Beur generation, but also ‘true’ French filmmakers like Pierre Richard and Olivier Baroux. It is true though that those Beur comedies require some cultural knowledge about Beur Maghrebi cultural heritage, particularly Islam, the social position of Beurs in France and some particularities of French slang and Arabic dialects, especially for audiences outside France and the Maghreb. These aspects constitute a major part in the Beur comedic narrative and being aware of their implications helps in understanding the humor behind their use. The movies I have selected for this chapter are good examples of successful Beur comedies that build their narratives in order to capture the attention of audiences without losing their essence as Beur comedies. All three try to broaden the

scope of reception by employing different filmic techniques: *L'italien* by employing the stereotype that is recognized and widely known, *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* by choosing to alleviate the tension created by a memorable historical event and *On peut toujours rêver* through the use of the famous comedians Pierre Richard and Smaïn.

## 5.0 THE 'BEURETTE' AND THE HOMOSEXUAL BEUR

Films, as means of representation, play an important role in the construction of “otherness.” The visual ingredients of their narratives include, for the most part, entertaining elements to attract a targeted audience; meanwhile, films provide a vehicle for a discourse that conveys certain ideas and beliefs and, by means of repetition, they engrave them in the minds of their audiences. The visual delivery of these images provides viewers with minimum ingredients to formulate their own idea about the “other” on which they construct a judgment to serve their objectives. Even though films are not the only medium that performs this role, they have become, however, the most influential due not only to their entertainment aspect, but also to the accessibility of the setting and the experience it promises. It is also important to note that films, while portraying “otherness” feed on other modes of representation such as literature, paintings and postcards. While the impact of these mediums has decreased with the emergence of cinema, their discourse is still infused through film and other media, mainly the Internet. The changing of the medium did not contribute to changing the image of the “other.” In what follows I will show how the dynamics of film representation work with regards to Beur characters and how it has been challenged.

Over the last three centuries, Arab women and Arab boys have remained a rich source of phantasm for a number of painters, then also photographers, and now filmmakers. After the publication of the famous tales of *One Thousand and One Night* by the French orientalist

Antoine Galland between the years 1704-1717, the “Orient,” in the eyes of Europeans, has become a favored muse of inspiration and a much desired aspiration. This latter can be seen especially during the colonial era when colonizing nations encouraged their citizens to settle in the colonies. Since North Africa is close to Western Europe, it was easy to access, colonize and control. Representing North Africans became part of an ongoing process that constituted the colonial system. Conveying an erotically exotic image about the North African “other” was at the center of their interests.

Much has been written about postcards and paintings. Most of the research that has been done emphasizes the fact that the reality they presented was constructed in order to please their target audience. It was used as a means to make a stereotypical image about Arab women of the colonies prevail (Malek Alloula 1987), (Rana Kabbani 1990), (Malika Mahdid 1993), (Sana Makhoul 1998), (Linda Steet 2000) (Sylvie Frigon & Michèle Kérisit 2000), (Katherine Bullock 2002), (Peter Burns 2004), (Leila Sebbar 2006), (Safia Belmenouar 2007). These authors focus on visual materials and literary texts and contest the way Arab women, in particular, were portrayed. Their critique goes hand in hand with Edward Said’s dismantling of Orientalism as a project: “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of Romance exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”<sup>131</sup> But so pervasive were these images that they persisted into cinema.

Though painting continued as a medium of representing sexually lustful North African women, the advent of photography made it easier to circulate similar images of topless nude North African women while adding postcards of homoerotic North African boys.<sup>132</sup> As Rana Kabbani notes: “[Europeans were] led into the East by sexuality, by the embodiment of it in a

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<sup>131</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 1.

<sup>132</sup> Homosexuality was not a favored topic for painters but there are some paintings that reflect this reality particularly Henri Regnault’s *Hassan and Namouna* (1870) and Jean-Leon Gerome’s *The Snake Charmer* (1889).

woman or a young boy.”<sup>133</sup> Additionally, photographers found in their cameras the most suitable means to visually reanimate an existing image about an imaginative Orient to ‘authenticate’ what the Western audiences read in narrative texts or saw in paintings. Among the famous photographers of the period we find Lehnert & Landrock, J. Geiser and Neurdein P. among others. The production of postcards started an industry that flourished during the colonial era as it corresponded to the Western consumers’ desires: “Lehnert & Landrock proved immensely popular promoting Oriental beauty and exoticism with an erotic tingle.”<sup>134</sup> These same postcards are now used in digitized forms to serve the same purpose.<sup>135</sup> Whether there is a need for these images or not, I argue that their reappearance participates in ‘commercializing’ an image that frames the North African as an objectified “other.”

As visual media continued to evolve, the images of the sexually attractive North Africans remained unchanged even though they have become French themselves. The image of the ‘odalisque and maurèsque’ women and of the ‘jeune arabe’ (young Arab boy) have been replaced in movies respectively by the sexually eroticized Beurette and the sodomized Beur prostitute. In the history of French cinema, there are a number of movies that have been used to perpetuate the same image about North Africans only this time through the Beur generation. It should be noted that though the Beurs are originally of a North African origin, they do not share the same cultural experiences with them. However, instilling a visual culture that projects a colonial libido is indicative of an ongoing desire to negate the Frenchness of the Beurs. By continuing to place them as sexual objects, their “otherness” remains alien to ‘the French

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<sup>133</sup> Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora, 1994) 67.

<sup>134</sup> For more information on how images of North African women were used see: Robert F. Aldrich, *Colonialism and homosexuality* (NY: Routledge, 2003), 172. See also: Dana S. Hale, *Races on Display: French Representations of Colonized Peoples 1886-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008) 119-120.

<sup>135</sup> <[www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)> is one of the websites that sells digitized images of North African women in different formats. Next to the product where there is always a picture of topless North African women there is a short descriptive text teasing the viewer to buy the product. The category under which these postcards are listed is: *Sex & Relationships*

culture', useful only when it measures the distance through the exotic desire it creates. This position is the outcome of the instability that the Beurs are infusing within the borders of the Hexagone.

This chapter, thus, will trace back the connection that exists between the present representation of the Beurs in films and that of Arab women and boys during the colonial era. It should be noted that even in some Beur or immigrant authored films, the sexually attractive single Beurette and the Beur male prostitute, though kept to marginal roles, constitute an important element in the film narratives. The Beur and Beurette gendered bodies are identified through their physicality. They have been presented as “sexual bodies” that pass to the act with minimum thinking or sentiment. This chapter will also include the analysis of movies that challenge these stereotypical images of Beurs and Beurettes. These movies attempt to “culturally” situate the Beur gendered body in a juxtaposed position to make the viewer realize the ways in which the Beur gendered body has been constructed and perceived.

On the one hand, I argue that the Beur gendered body has not changed much since its appearance in French mainstream cinema until recently. Its presence is paradoxical: it remains at the margins of the narrative, but is essential to the representation of the Beur as an Orientalized ‘other’. This marginalization has prevented the emergence of the Beur as speaking subject. Nothing new could be said or learned: the characters were flat and uni-dimensional (like postcards). On the other hand, I argue that the Beur gendered body has become aware of its existence as a body subject that needs to present itself instead of continuously being spoken for. My analysis will primarily focus on the roles that have been ascribed to the Beur gendered body in non-Beur and Beur films. I will divide Beur films into two categories: the first category includes films that have continued to use the Beur gay and the Beurette bodies as directly

connotative of the sexual. The second category includes films whose narratives are constructed introspectively. They are for the most part founded on personal experiences and can be considered unique. While the first category follows the prescriptive standards of social norms that locate the gendered body within the normative order and thus passive, the second category challenges this mode of representation; and instead it allows the Beurs as body-subjects to experience their agency as an active consciousness.

The first section of my chapter focuses on the depiction of the Beurette and the Beur. It will shed light on how the sexually exotic postcards that reflected the colonial libido have changed from being “still images” to becoming “moving images” in films. It is crucial to note that though these images are not that dissimilar, they are not reflective of the same experience. This shift of framing the body in sexually erotic, and sometimes pornographic, poses reflects a certain insistence on the part of filmmakers to keep the clichés integral to the filmic narrative and make of them cultural stereotypes that continue to be perpetuated. The second section of my analysis will shed light on how these images have been questioned and reintroduced in manners that can be considered daring in terms of the filmic narrative structure around which they are constructed. For my analysis in each section, I selected two films that I consider representative. I will also make reference to other movies as needed to clarify my argument. There are four films: the first and the second films will constitute the core of the first section: *P’tit con* (1984) and *Un fils* (2001). The third and fourth films will be part of the second sections and can be contrasted against the ones in sections one: *The Road to Love* (2004) and *Des poupées et des anges* (2008).

## 5.1 *P'TIT CON* (1984)

*P'tit Con* is a coming-of-age comedy that narrates the story of Michel, an adolescent French boy of a bourgeois family. The movie opens with a close-up of Michel's hand writing on paper with a voice over reading: "18 ans! J'ai 18 ans depuis un mois, et qu'ai-je fait de ma vie ... RIEN !!!" Michel decides to change his life and do what he wants. There are two things that preoccupy him. First of all, class struggle and the social inequalities that govern French society. Michel could not find a better place to declare his opposition than in his family. This is why he starts revolting against his parents and their bourgeois way of life. Second, his sexual life, Michel does not have a girl-friend and has never had one. As he is writing, along with the voice-over reading, the camera is panning around his room at a slow pace reflecting the monotony and disorder he is going through. Michel is confessing his failure and expressing his rejection of the social conditions he lives in.

As the camera moves around, a book title catches the viewer's attention: *L'opposition ouvrière* by Alexandra Kollontai. Michel's way of thinking is influenced by Marxism, which explains his revolt against and criticism of his family. Later when he meets Salima the "Beurette" prostitute, he starts thinking about different ways to concretize his Marxist ideas and find ways to help her. Michel however is not interested in Salima's social condition alone but in having sex with her as well. These two themes had preoccupied 'la nouvelle vague' in their early careers as filmmakers and as critics, particularly Goddard. The addition in Lauzier's film is that class struggle and prostitution have become racialized. For Michel Salima incarnates misery and desire: misery in relation to her family situation and desire because she is the first woman with whom Michel establishes contact. Being of Algerian origin and exposing her nude body brings in the colonial memory of exotic North African nudes, not for Michel – as he sees her as a female



body – but for the viewers. The movie alludes to homosexuality as well but does not exploit it much. In fact, we see Salima's stepfather intend to have sex with Michel when he helps him go home one night after he was thrown out of a bar. This incident is reflective of a stereotypical image about the homosexual relationships North African males had with French visitors. The reference to Michel's potential homosexuality reappears towards the end of the movie when his friend will express that he loves him. This revelation brings in Michel's unresolved sexuality and explains his failure with Salima.

The film narrative is built on the encounter between Michel and Salima and though Salima remains a flat character; she propels the events of the story. Salima's subjectivity remains inactivated, and all we see of her is through the eyes of Michel. Her physical appearance depends on Michel's presence. Even though Salima is presented as a free, independent woman, she is also portrayed as a prostitute. Her independence and freedom are the result of rejection and contempt on the part of her community. There is a scene that shows Salima's mother and other immigrant women beating her for hurting her stepfather without ever inquiring about the reasons that pushed her to do that. As Michel comes back to her rescue, we learn that she was defending herself against her stepfather who wanted to rape her. Though the scene is short, it clearly establishes an image about "otherness" in the eyes of Michel and viewers alike. On the one hand, the women are portrayed as barbaric and clueless for not even knowing the reason for which they are beating Salima. On the other hand, the stepfather, both in his interaction with Michel and later with Salima, is represented as a barbaric and chauvinistic character, which is a typical stereotype often associated with North Africans and Arab men in general "This stereotype [of the Arab men] was often represented as virile yet savage."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> For more information on this subject see: Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (London: Tauris, 2006) 78.

Even though the character of Salima is flat she is essential to the film narrative. Michel's transformation is due to her presence with him. She is the one who will initiate him to 'manhood,' as he thinks of it, after agreeing to have sex with him. To Michel she is also the one who makes his life meaningful. However, Salima is not even aware of her effect on him which makes of her an unconscious object of desire. The fact that the story is narrated from a subjective perspective makes Salima's visibility dependent on Michel. The camera perspective allows Michel to remain "un sujet regardant" and keeps Salima constantly in the position of an "objet regardé." The camera eye correlates with Michel's point of view. It is not necessarily he who sees but the camera is on his side at the level of space and time that he occupies as a character "[Autrui] est encore objet *pour moi*. Il appartient à *mes distances*"<sup>137</sup> (emphasis original). This quote explains the subjective perspective in *P'tit Con*, for as long as the perceiving subjects – Michel and viewers remain the angle from which events are narrated - the "Other," in this case Salima, is perceived as an object.

Salima is depicted as a wild and a primitive "other", especially when she squats in Michel's sink to pee. This scene adds to the voyeuristic aspect that she offers for both Michel and viewers. Salima is not given any opportunity to hold a subjective perspective such as Michel has. Thus, she never becomes a perceiving subject. Here objectification reduces her to be constantly looked at once she appears in a scene. We never know how Salima thinks; we only know how she reacts. Her reactions are abrupt, without thought and extreme. This image of her is exposed through different scenes in the movie, one of which is her reaction against her stepfather. Another scene is when Michel invites her to meet the family of one of his friends. As she starts looking at one of the painting that Eric has painted, she says: "c'est complètement débile, c'est pas de la peinture. Un môme de quatre ans peut en faire autant." As she expresses her

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<sup>137</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris : Gallimard, 1943) 295.

view, Michel and the Eric laugh at her reaction. Eric considers it as “spontanée” and “vraie” but adds that she didn’t get the message. This is the only time when she is given the opportunity to express herself but it just served to make her look uncultivated and silly.

Salima’s body is culturally and geographically marked; it is presented to the viewers as a North African body resembling the bodies of Maghrebi women on the colonial postcards. The only difference is that the North African Moresque of the postcards has been replaced by the Beurette living in France. Her body is accessible from within the Hexagone, but she has lost control over it because it is no longer hers. It has become a body without soul, useful only when it is consumed. Salima’s worth is her body and how it appeals to others. She has lost any sense of emotion. It is her body that speaks for her. The difference that Salima’s body brings in is that it is no longer a body on a piece of paper but is turned into an “animated” body that revives the colonial fantasies. The postcolonial subject continues to function as a sexually erotic object celebrating the triumph the colonial desire.

The colonial gaze not only frames the “other” as an exotic sexual object, but reinforces an image of servitude and cultural dominance. I will focus in the following discussion on how Salima’s physical appearance in *P’tit con* is used to represent the body on the colonial postcards that is not hers. This projection that the “Beurette’s” body is engaged in has become systematic, and it indicates that there is a desire to perceive her as an objectified colonial “Other.” I have selected six frames from the movie and three postcards that I will use to clarify my argument.



**Frame 1 Salima**



**Frame 2 Salima and Michel**

[Frame 1 and 2] shows Salima after she escapes from the women who were beating her when Michel comes to her rescue. It is obvious that Salima in this frame is the center of focus for both Michel and viewers. As Michel follows her we do not yet know where she is. In a long shot, the camera looking for her shows but only one side of her body. As it closes in to a medium shot,

the rest of Salima appears next a wooden door. This frame is typical for one type of colonial postcard, one where we see a North African woman posing against a door [postcard 1].<sup>138</sup>



**Postcard 1 Type d'orient 723**

This scene takes 18 seconds where both Michel and viewers are looking at Salima's torn shirt that shows her cleavage in the most appealing way. It is very suggestive that the camera does not show Salima right away. The progression in exposing her body is to stress the door next to her that is reminiscent of the colonial postcards. This idea is also conveyed by the fact that Michel does not run to her until the shot of Salima against the door is clearly established. The door is not only a décor that was added to the colonial postcards, but it is also an invitation to come in. The exposed body of Salima against the door is an invitation that welcomes the viewer to discover what is behind the door/clothes which Michel and viewers will discover later.

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<sup>138</sup> All the images used here are reproductions of colonial postcards. I use them to highlight the resemblance they share with the frames from the movies. All these images are taken from < <http://michel.megnin.free.fr/tp.htm> > 3 Dec 2011.



**Frame 3 Salima and Michel**

[Frame 3] is taken from a scene where Salima enters the room at night and Michel, opposite to where the camera is positioned, is pretending to be sleeping. The camera in this scene, as in other similar scenes, represents the viewer's gaze. The first frame of this scene is a medium profile shot of Salima taking off her white shirt in the dim light coming through the window. The opposed perspectives of both Michel and viewers give a look at her bare breasts from different angles to complete the act of gazing. While lying down she tries to cover herself with a sheet but only to put it between her legs as they stay exposed. Her body then is nearly fully exposed, appealing for a voyeuristic gaze [postcard 2]. It is then that the camera zooms to a close-shot of Michel gazing at her while she is asleep. The fact that the camera does not share the same angle of perception as Michel's is very suggestive and makes the act of seeing shared, creating a voyeuristic scene that must be collectively experienced. Salima's body participates in reconstructing a fictional image of a vulnerable body that is not accessible yet, and reviving the colonial gaze that is constructed from within France.



**Postcard 2 Bedouine 745**

One of the most important aspects of this shift from postcards to film is that the body in films moves. The movement of the body makes it discoverable and alive: discoverable because it exposes the body fully and alive because we see it moving, talking, breathing and reacting. It is to be noted though that this shift from a still image to a moving one did not affect the connotation of the colonial postcards. Though Salima's body is contextualized in modern France; its imaginative configuration appeals to an experience that transcends both space and time. Salima walks in the present day streets of the Hexagone, she wears 'modern' clothes and enjoys watching Alain Delon and Jean-Paul Belmondo; nevertheless, in the eyes of the French viewer, she still reincarnates her ancestors.

## 5.2 UN FILS (2003)

Homosexuality has been present in Beur films since the beginning. This presence, however, does not amount to representing Beur gay experience in France. Most films produced since the eighties representing homosexuality among Beurs are for the most part framing it under the labels of prostitution and transvestitism. The theme of a Beur who prostitutes himself is recurrent in a number of Beur movies. Most of the characters that are presented as such opt for prostitution to earn their life. In *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1985) Mehdi Charef points out the stereotypical image of the Beur prostitute through the character of Madjid whose uses the label to rob the 'true' French. *Open Bodies* (1998) by Sébastien Lifshitz portrays Beur male prostitution in action through the character of Rémi (Yasmine Belmadi). *Un fils* (2003) by Amal Bedjaoui, which is the subject of my analysis, foreshadows the dramatic experience of a Beur prostitute, Selim.<sup>139</sup> In *La grande école* (2004) Robert Salis takes another path and presents a Beur named Mecir (Yasmine Belmadi) in a relationship with a student from the "Grande École." Apart from these roles Beur characters have appeared in porn movies, especially those directed since 1984 by Jean-Daniel Cadinot and set in Morocco for the most part.

Gay Beur as an identity has not been subject to public discussion until recently, for Beurs are not thought of as gay or of having the possibility of becoming so. Gay men identity is connected to whiteness, and even though the Arab is present as a partner he is seen as maintaining his heterosexuality.<sup>140</sup> It should be noted also that in identifying themselves as gay men, Beurs had to assume the consequences that may result from such a declaration. It is not

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<sup>139</sup> It is also noteworthy to stress the fact that the theme of prostitution is also common among immigrants in France and it has been the subject of a number of films like Mehdi Charef's *Miss Mona* (1987) and Liria Bégéja's *Change moi ma vie* (2001)

<sup>140</sup> Maxime Cervulle, "French Homonormativity and the commodification of the Arab body," *Radical History Review* 100 Win: 2008, 175.



easy for them, not necessarily just due their cultural heritage but also because of the way their peers in the *banlieue* will treat them. To express their sexual orientation freely and live it from within their community as a Beur gay is not an option and mainly for these reasons, a number of Beurs have remained silent about their sexual identity.<sup>141</sup>

While the identity of a Beur prostitute is temporary and conditioned, the gay Beur identity is permanent and it marks a shift in their sexual orientation. Seeing a Beur prostitute was more common as in the majority of cases he does it to earn money. Most Beur prostitute characters are built around the need to survive. All they seek is to be able to earn money and live a ‘decent’ life. Their experiences are constructed on tormented experiences that call for viewers’ sympathy as we shall see in *Un fils*. Accordingly, the level of rejection that a Beur prostitute may face is far less than what a gay Beur confronts. This is one of the reasons for which homosexuality manifested itself in the form of Beur male prostitution in early Beur films.

The Beur in these movies is usually depicted as a victim trying to escape the *banlieue* and find refuge somewhere else particularly in cheap hostels, like in *Un fils*. Or the Beur is trying to hide his sexual adventures from his family like in *Open Bodies*. Even though these movies do not present the Beur as gay, they keep viewers wondering about the future of these characters. Selim’s sexual identity is not clear in *Un fils* but the reason for ‘selling’ his body has one objective; to earn his living and help his father have a surgery. Throughout the movie Selim suffers internally, the moments of happiness for him are rare, and they often times occur when he is with his father. The father does not know what Selim does but he is suspicious. Selim regularly visits his father, but his visits are never enough to break the silence between the two. The relationship between the two is tense and they rarely finish a discussion without arguing.

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<sup>141</sup> In 2006, the French TV channel *LCP* presented a documentary by Mario Morelli di Popolo entitled *Banlieue gay* where a number of Beurs explained the problems they face when they reveal their homosexuality in the *banlieue*, but some of them did not want to reveal their identity because they were afraid of being recognized.

Conscious of his father's sickness, Selim tries hard to share moments of joy with him but unfortunately, the father has lost any sense of living and life has become meaningless. He has plunged himself into pessimism and all he does is take his pills and visit the grave of his wife.

Selim is torn between his love for his father and the hardships imposed on him. His ultimate goal is to collect enough money for his father to have his surgery. Selim's life is nocturnal; he never appears in daylight except when he goes visit his father. This aspect of his life is indicative of the dark side that he internalizes. At night, he puts on his transvestite clothes, his make-up and joins his friend Louise (Isabelle Pichaud) in a bar. His Maghrebi look and the way he dresses make him attractive and appealing to "white" French males. His friend Louise is the one who negotiates the price and checks for clients. Even though the camera is constantly in the footsteps of Selim, we do not learn much about him. *Un fils* exposes the conflict that exists between the satisfaction of "self" and "other." The "other" in the case of Selim is both his father and his clients. What remains of Selim's self-alienation is a stereotypical image of his body.

The frames that the movie uses to present Selim are reminiscent of the "jeune arabe" poses on the colonial postcards, and the movie poster is one of them. The movie runs at a slow monotonous pace and is built on cliché images of the North African male who has a strong muscular body and is sexually attractive. It brings back the colonial depictions of 'Arab boys' and their readiness to have sex with the western colonizer for some money. It has to be noted also that colonial literature was used along with postcards to portray young Arab males as sexual objects. Many of these authors were French,<sup>142</sup> and they depict in their writings their homoerotic experiences in North Africa. Similar to Salima in *P'tit con*, Selim's role is to give pleasure to the "white French other" and never enjoys it himself. Selim's body incarnates two different clichés

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<sup>142</sup> I am referring to authors who either wrote about homosexuality or experienced it in their trips to North Africa and the Middle East, particularly Pierre Loti *Aziyadé* (1879), Flaubert *Flaubert in Egypt: a sensibility on tour* and Andre Gide *L'immoraliste* (1902) among others.

that have been associated with North African males: They are either portrayed as hypersexual ‘wild beasts’ or as young boys that can be sodomized. Looking at Selim’s body, viewers find something of both characteristics: Selim is a tall young man with a well-built body; however, this body does not meet the expectation of the stereotype because Selim does not play the role of the hypersexual. But, what we see is a soft and docile body that is not even able to defend itself when beaten by a group of youths from the *Banlieue*.

Selim is not different from Salima in *P’tit con* in the sense that both are identified as bodies. In Selim’s case, however, the narrative is more dramatic as he ends up committing suicide. Selim suicide reflects the passivity of his character. His inability to move beyond the claustrophobic room he lives in and the dark noisy nightclub he goes to are indicative of his psychological instability. Selim’s selfhood is constructed within a constrained transitional space that he fails to recognize. Hotels and nightclubs can be associated with what Foucault calls heterotopia of crisis “the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers.”<sup>143</sup> Space plays an important role in shaping Selim’s experience. The decision he takes to live in a hostel and prostitute his body in a night-club are implicated in the socio-cultural atmosphere that surrounds him. To overcome the crisis that he is experiencing in the heterotopic space made the transition to assume his homosexuality impossible.

The transition means that Selim recognizes his gay identity, but this recognition will complicate matters for him. On the one hand, since ‘race’ still plays a crucial role in determining one’s sexual identity, being gay would mean becoming a Beur gay; an identity that is still negotiating its place in “white French gay milieu.” Nick Rees-Roberts explains the situation of the ethnic gay in France by saying “in terms of representation, gay identity and Beur and black

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<sup>143</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” <<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>> accessed 01-20-12.

subjectivities are bound to mutual exclusion in order to protect both the racial homogeneity of white, middle class gay identity, and the dominant masculinity of heterosexual men of color.”<sup>144</sup> On the other hand, this confession will increase the gap between him and his father and will deepen the father’s wounds. Selim’s tormented self is the result of continuing to act a sexual identity that he is unable to assume. The gay Beur is culturally and racially “othered”: culturally as he takes on a sexual identity that is condemned by his cultural background and racially because his gay identity is unaccepted, since gay men has been co-opted by “white” culture.

Selim’s subjective experience in *Un fils* is determined by two major elements: his sexuality and his origin. They are both crucial in understanding the movie because they provoke a sense of desire and rejection. Selim is seen through the eyes of his clientele, and the camera functions in the same way as in *P’tit con* with Salima. In both *P’tit con* and *Un fils* the camera is complicit with Michel and Max respectively in establishing the colonial gaze. To attract their attention Selim generally sits where he can be easily seen. His North African look and his red sequined sleeveless shirt adds an exotic aspect to his already sexually appealing pose. The film opens with a close-up shot of Selim’s back and of his face reflected in a mirror. The over the shoulder shot is meant to establish a subjective perspective of Selim’s face in the mirror. Selim is not looking at himself in the mirror but when he raises his head his face in the mirror looks back at the viewer. The mirror functions as an intersubjective medium between Selim and “others.” The mirror image is very significant because it underscores an important aspect in the character’s lived experience: “At the same time that the image of oneself makes possible the knowledge of oneself, it makes possible a sort of alienation. I am no longer what I felt myself, immediately, to be; I am that image of myself that is offered by the mirror.”<sup>145</sup> The self-alienation that Ponty

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<sup>144</sup> Nick Rees-Roberts, *French Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008 )17.

<sup>145</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception* (Evanston.: Northwestern UP, 1964) 137.

refers to here becomes more serious when is exercised by “others” because as he puts it: “[Others] have only an exterior image of me, which is analogous to the one seen in the mirror.”<sup>146</sup> What the scene communicates is a physical image of Selim. It should not be understood that his selfhood is completely detached from this image but it establishes a distance between how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by “others.”

Selim’s body in the French context in particular is not like any other body; it is racially and historically marked. In a number of scenes viewers can easily make the connection between Selim and the colonial postcards of the “jeune arabe.” In a collection of postcards and letters entitled *L’album des nus masculins 1905-1934*, there are many postcards that Lehnert & Landrock took portraying nude Arab boys. The interest of these two photographers, known for their “*Scene et Types*” postcards, in framing nudity among North African males indicates that there was a demand for such postcards. This obsession with the male North African body was already apparent in literature, as I have said earlier, and continued through painting, and, now, with the advent of technology survives on the internet and in film. Selim’s racially marked body makes his experience more appealing and separates it from the stereotype of the rejected male prostitute.

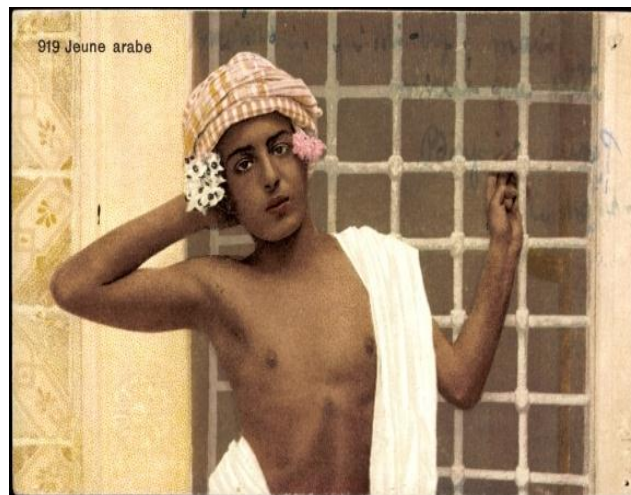
In Selim’s experience rejection takes different forms; from his father who prefers to listen to Blues music rather than talk to him; to when the group of Beurs beat him for dressing like a transvestite. But the one that ignites his decision to commit suicide comes from Max. For Selim, Max (Oréline Recoing) becomes more than a client, so much so that he refuses to take Max’s money. Max’s rejection of Selim not only alludes to the impossible love between a “white French” character and a Beur, but also the impossibility for the Beur to complete his transition to becoming gay. The destiny of Selim is to accomplish the desires of the neocolonial “other” and

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

remain an object of sexual exploitation. Max is driven by the exotic “other” that Selim represents, and he is not interested in becoming his partner, with the equality that would infer.

In an interview, the director Amal Bedjoui stresses the fact that Selim is “trop beau.” The camera which stands for the viewers’ gaze frames fragments of his body voyeuristically. The extreme close-ups of his face are not used to increase the dramatic element, but instead, the insistence on the face emphasizes the desiring an otherness that finds its roots in the colonial past. It is the same face that we find in the postcards, and it speaks the same homoerotic language through the body poses [Postcard 3 and 4]. The bodies’ poses with the way they are dressed and with the roses placed around the ear construct a homoerotic desire that seeks to effeminize the homosexual North African “other.” When we look at Selim, we can detect that he fits this description as well [Frame 4 and 5]. Selim and the North African boys participate in arousing desire and giving pleasure to satisfy a neocolonial sexual appetite.



**Postcard 3 Jeune Arabe 919**

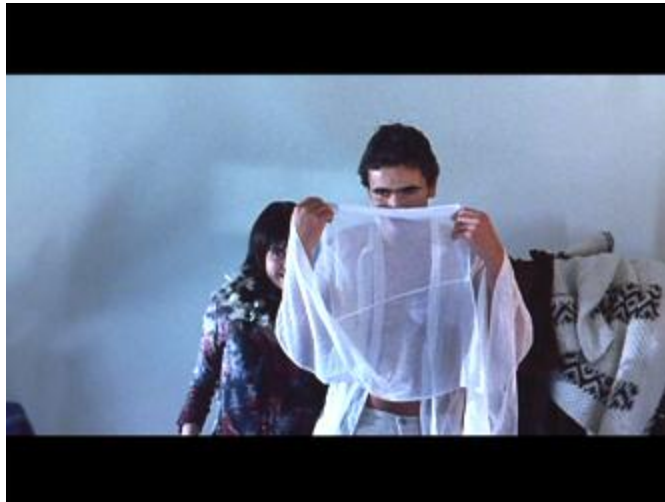


**Postcard 4 Jeune Garçon 699**

The narrative discourse in *P'tit con* and *Un fils* feeds on colonial images that are revived through the characters of Salima and Selim. Their depiction as objects of desire replicates the postcards of their 'racial' ancestors and strips them of their sense of self. Salima and Selim's alienated subjectivities are the product of a discourse on "otherness" that is constructed on stereotypes. Often times these images are infused into the film narrative to make it more appealing. By doing so it contributes to perpetuating a colonial representation of the "other" through individual characters who are historically and culturally distant from them. In his film *Bye Bye* (1996), that I analyzed in Chapter 3, Karim Dridi's representation of Yasmine is very suggestive of this case. Yasmine's pose against the window and Ismail's looking at her is reminiscent of a type of postcards where the North African male appears next to a woman. In the case of Ismail, the distance between the two is enforced by the "white French" boss/friend Jacky (Frédéric Andrau). This distance will reappear as both Yasmine and Jacky are lying in their swimming suits and Ismael is looking at them from afar. It is in this vein that I selected Nora Hamidi's *Des poupées et des anges* (2007) and Rémi Lange's *Tarik el Hob* (Road to Love) (2001) to present another perspective on homosexuality and gender among Beurs.



**Frame 4 Selim and Max**



**Frame 5 Selim and Louise**



### 5.3 *DES POUPEES ET DES ANGES (2007)*

“Beurettes” have been either objectified or neglected in both mainstream French cinema and Beur filmmakers’ films alike. The existing movies that speak to their situations and bring their experiences to the forefront are very few. *Des poupées et des anges* is one of the movies that challenges these representations of “Beurettes” as mere sexual objects such as they are portrayed in the earlier movies *Le grand frère* (1982), *P’tit con* (1984) and *Bye Bye* (1996) to name but a few. The narrative agency in *Des poupées et des anges* reflects a subjective awareness on the part of the main female characters: Lya and Chirine. Though paradoxical, the two of them experience and express this awareness in a complementary way. For Lya, it is from an early age, as she explains in one of her voice-over reflections, that she started questioning her cultural heritage. For Chirine, however, the revolt, even though late, is directed against the modern social system of exploitation. The two sisters in the process of enacting their subjectivities engage in what Abdelkebir Khatibi’s calls “double critique.” It is a system of thought whereby the Maghrebi postcolonial subjects are led to reconsider their position vis-à-vis their Islamic and colonial heritage. To achieve this position they have to start revisiting both their Islamic cultural heritage as well as the Western thought that has become part of their history.

The exercise of this “double critique” starts with the awareness of their position as postcolonial subjects. Lya and Chirine challenge the cultural practices that are imposed on them, dismantle the stereotype that draws on the colonial image of North African women, and critique the racial inequality that is still present in the French social system. Their involvement in this critique is reached through two opposing visions because they never come to an agreement with each other. The contrast between the two is so intense that during the movie whenever they talk to each other they quarrel. This insistence on individualizing subjectivities informs the viewer

that the expression of selfhood among the “Beurettes” is not collective. If the character of Chirine is constructed by reframing the position of the exotic North African woman stereotype, Lya’s character is reframed in a more uncommon manner. Her agency brings into being a new model of the “Beurette”: “la beurette rapeuse.” All her voice-over reflections in the movie are structured in a rap style narrative. To stress the ‘Slam’ style of her texts the non-diegetic music that is absent from the rest of movie is played in these scenes. This image of the “Beurette rapeuse” opens new prospects that are more challenging to her social milieu and that deviate from the French republic’s model of integration.

The use of rap music alludes to the BBB (Black, Blanc, Beur) notion that was used since the early nineties in *banlieue* France as reaction against racism; however, rap music as part of hip-hop culture has been associated overwhelmingly with males from the *banlieue*. Even though there have been contributions from female “rappeuses” since the early 90’s, they have not attracted as much media attention as their male counterparts. One of the reasons that hip-hop culture is so male dominated is that since in the *Banlieue* “the street,” which is an exclusively male space, is the only place to practice this type of culture, females have been denied access to it. Lya, with her two friends Waneessa (Nina Melo) and Marie (Alice Mensil), subvert this notion and integrate the female perspective stressing the fact that they are also part of this space, and that their presence should be recognized as well. This message is strongly announced by the fact that the *banlieue* in this movie is mainly dominated by girls both during the day and at night. In one scene, Lya walks in the street close to where she lives, and a group of youngsters warns her that she should not walk alone at night. Lya does not care about their warning and she says: “allez-vous faire foutre.” Lya and her friends object to the idea that the *banlieue* as public space

has been deemed a male space. The girls' presence in the *banlieue* is reflected through a regular physical presence, dress style and a symbolic dimension articulated through graffiti.

The movie begins with Lya's voice-over introducing her sister Chirine and explaining the relationship to their father. The background information Lya provides makes it clear that she has more problems with her father than Chirine does, because as she puts it, "elle était toujours sa préférée." Chirine is her father's "poupée" as Lya explains, and even though he doesn't agree with the way she dresses, he does not say anything. For this reason he turns his anger towards Lya and his wife. At the supper table, as the family is eating the camera moves in to close-ups showing the tension on their faces. Chirine sits next to her father and he looks at her shaking his head expressing his disagreement. Chirine is dressed in an 'inappropriate' way according to the standards of her father, she exaggeratedly presents herself in a sexually attractive manner. His inability to really talk to her originates in the fact that he feels guilty about the young woman she is becoming. As they are eating, Lya brings up her renewal of a subscription she has at a taekwondo club. The father angrily expresses his disagreement "depuis quand c'est les filles qui se battent?!" When his wife tells her she should follow her sister's footsteps, the father interjects: "je ne sais pas si Chirine est le bon exemple" and Lya leaves the table reminding everyone she will become "majeure" and she will do whatever she wants. Lya, knowing she will be beaten, goes to her room and puts on extra layers of clothes to protect herself before her father arrives. It is evident that this scene happens often enough that Lya knows how to prepare for it. When her mother intervenes, Lya's father pushes her and starts hitting her head on the floor.

This sequence establishes the type of relationship that the father has with his wife, Lya and Chirine. It also informs us about the position of Lya, particularly the way she responds to her father. Lya rejects the way her father treats her and her mother, and despite the punishment that

may result from her opposition she continues expressing her views. Lya's rebellious spirit is also manifested in her writings, where she finds her freedom. At home, she does not find anyone to support her decisions, even her mother is always on the side of her father. The submissive character of the mother is also another aspect that pushes Lya to revolt. She does not want to live the same life as her mother and her assertive discourse is what brings her trouble. The way she performs her subjectivity is too much for her father to accept. Even though Lya's sexual orientation is not what her father expect it to be, his disapproval of her behavior is founded on her "masculine" character. His rhetorical question "depuis quand c'est les filles qui se battent" indicates that "fighting" is not a women's field. In expressing her position in this way, Lya is not only criticizing patriarchal dominance symbolized by her father, but also expressing her selfhood in a manner that is not yet common among "the Beurettes" of the *banlieue*, especially in film.

Chirine, on the hand, lives in dream land with her collection of "style" and "cliché" magazines and awaits "le prince charmant." She is the opposite of Lya as she prioritizes her beauty and expresses herself as a sexual object. She incarnates the image of the women in colonial postcards but in a different manner. What makes her different is the fact that she is conscious of how she is perceived. When she goes to the mirror, she reaffirms herself as an attractive woman. This narcissist vision of self makes Chirine aware of her body's beauty that she does not mind sharing with others. Her intent is to use her body as a means to achieve her goals. Within the family, no one dares to speak to her directly. She has total freedom to go wherever she wants, and get back whenever she desires. She remains silent when her father talks and she keeps her distance from everyone in the house. Chirine is a step ahead of Salima in *P'tit con* because she is aware of the onlooker. Chirine is also different from her sister Lya because she does not stay in the *banlieue* but rather goes to the most expensive areas of the city with her

“white” French friend Gisèle (Léo Seydoux). Her exotic physical appearance makes her noticeable among others. Chirine plays on exhibiting her beauty to confirm her presence, assert her subjectivity and subvert the image of exploited “Beurette.” To reach her aim, Chirine gets involved with Alex (Gianni Giardinelli) who pretends to be a fashion agent. He uses her as a prostitute by claiming that all models have to have sex with their future bosses: “elles sont toutes passées par là.” Chirine discovers that he has lied to her and Alex, fearing she will leave, sends her photos to a fashion agency knowing she will not be picked. To his surprise, Chirine gets an interview. Her application was about to be thrown out when it was spotted by Simon (Samuel Le Bihan), the agency director, whom she will later marry.

The father is a Beur himself and his relationship with his family is based on dominance and authority. When he notices his dominance as a father is waning, he tries to regain it by beating his wife and his daughter. He always blames the mother for the conduct of their daughters. Even though this is a stereotypical image of the father figure, it does reflect an existing practice of authority exercised by the male in the family whether that is the father, the brother, another relative or a male neighbor. From the very beginning we learn that the mother accepts to stay home and not work. When Lya brings this up after her father leaves for three months working in another city, her mother tells her: “C’est comme ça.” She tries to warn Lya not to oppose her father but she does not accept that and insists on talking back. As the film narrative is constructed to make the authoritative male presence a minor one, the father falls while doing construction work and becomes paralyzed. The father, though present, has lost his authoritative function. The physical presence of the powerless father is connotative of a symbolic absence.

In the second part of my analysis, I will focus on specific scenes that speak directly to the expressions of selfhood on the parts of Chirine and Lya. Before proceeding to the analysis, I would like to mention that the movie alternates between the subjective narration represented by Lya's voice-over, and an objective camera perspective. I want to draw attention, here, to the voice-over narration in particular because of its importance in the film narrative as a whole and in Lya's subjective experience in particular. András Bálint Kovács in his book *Screening Modernism: European art Cinema, 1950-1980* argues that:

We can consider voice-over narration as the manifestation of the need for deepening the psychological and the intellectual content of the narrative, and at the same time, as the first sign of the consciousness in cinema that narrative truthfulness is dependent on subjective presentation.<sup>147</sup>

Lya's voice-over is used to implement a subjective perspective between sequences and each time she does it, she is on the building's roof. Her retreat to the roof gives her a sense of freedom and makes reference to the movie title as well. Lya is an "angel" who takes the responsibility to care for her family and expresses her concerns. It is also a reference to her independence and strong presence in the film narrative. The voice-over thus stresses her corporeal presence as a main character and emphasizes a female narrative voice.

The first two scenes I will start with concern Chirine's character. The first is when she meets Alex, and the second at a restaurant while she is with Simon. Chirine escapes her classes to go the most "chic" stores in Paris, and as she is walking one day Alex notices her. In this particular scene, Alex asks Chirine "vous avez un visage particulier. Vous êtes métissée, vous êtes de quelle origine?" She replies "je suis française," and adds "mes parents viennent de

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<sup>147</sup> András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 246.

Kabyle en Algerie.” Then, he says “Kabyle ! je comprends mieux, c’est pas pareil.” Though viewers have been introduced to Chirine earlier through her sister Lya’s voice-over, Alex’s remarks brings in a new dimension for viewers to think about. No doubt that Chirine is French, but according to Alex she is of a different type. His emphasis on the reference to Kabyle and Algeria is to remind the viewers of the exotic “Beurette” or the “reincarnated” Kabyle woman in *Scenes&Types* postcards. Though the scene is short, it is very significant because Alex’s reference will be taken further by Simon’s “collaboreteur” Picaud. It is in the second scene where viewers will discover Chirine’s reflection on their comments.

In the second scene, Chirine is sitting with Simon. Picaud arrives and since Chirine does not know him Simon introduces him. Picaud, kissing Chirine’s hand says, “Chirine quel joli nom !, j’adore ces noms du sud. C’est musulman, non?” The close-up of Chirine’s face shows her smiling. Picaud leaves and Chirine for the first time will reflect on this issue and express her point of view. Chirine assertively reminds the viewer by addressing Simon that she is French and the same applies to her parents. The most important part of her discourse is when she talks about the image of the “Beurette” as the exotic “other.” While the camera continues to focus on her face, Chirine continues, “...mais cet homme [referring to Picaud] j’aime très bien comment il me voit. Il est dans le fantasme de la beurette et comme lui j’en vois plein” and she adds, “ils pensent que j’ai honte de mes origine alors que c’est eux qui’ont un complexe avec ça. Moi je suis à l’aise avec ça, je suis avec les gens qui me plaisent, c’est tout.” Chirine’s reflection forces viewers rethink her position in the film narrative; it makes them question the stereotypical image that they have constructed about her. Chirine’s emerged selfhood reframes the perception of “otherness” that is founded on distancing the “self” and the “other.” Her reference to her origins

and her pride in being French are what bring the “self” to encounter its “other” to open the possibility for a transcultural selfhood.

For Lya, there are many scenes that I can choose from, but there is one that I believe summarizes her position and expresses her point of view better than the others. It takes place in her room in one of her reflective moments. In a close-up shot of more than two minutes, we see Lya’s face as she is sitting on her chair writing, with her voice-over sharing her thoughts with viewers in what sounds like a Slam song:

Comment dire [maman]

C’est plus fort que moi

Malgré moi je peux pas t’écouter

J’ai besoin de montrer que je veux pas être ce que t’es

Je veux te dire je t’aime [maman] mais je refuse ta position

Te ressembler

Je peux pas accepter

Je peux pas accepter l’inacceptable de ta relation avec cet homme

Qui s’appelle mon père

Je t’en veux d’obéir toujours

Je sais que t’as pas le choix

....

Je dois me battre

C’est vital

Si non rien...



The Slam poem that Lya is writing stresses her rejection of the position her mother accepts in her relationship with her father. The presence of the pronoun “je” indicates her presence as a subjective consciousness. It is the “je” in the feminine form that is speaking against patriarchy. The character of Lya as a “Beurette” does not constrain her within her parents’ culture of origin, and the problem her mother suffers from is not specific to North African cultures. This position makes of the “Beurette’s” subjectivity a shared one. It is in this direction that *Des poupées et des anges* moves.

It establishes the origins of Lya but it does not make them the focus of the narrative. The “Beurette” who is caught inside her parents’ cultural origins and whose ultimate goal is to free herself from their influence is not reflected in this movie. Lya’s character and her Slam poetry participate in emancipating Beur subjectivity from a defensive position that is being ascribed to it. Rather than presenting it as racially and socially marked, the narrative identity of Beur subjective experience has taken a new path towards universalism. It opens new prospects for more transcultural identifications. It is in this context that Beur transcultural subjectivity is starting to find a place for itself from within transnational dynamics. They have become transcultural subjectivities in transnational context.

#### **5.4    *TARIK EL HOB (ROAD TO LOVE) (2001)***

*Road to Love* is a coming-out Beur film where Karim (Karim Tarek), a sociology student, decides to make his final term project a study of homosexuality in the Maghreb and within the Beur community in France. This documentary style film plays on two major themes that are intertwined. The narrative starts tracing the experience of Karim as he gradually discovers his

own homosexuality and, in the process, reveals through his research the history of homosexuality in North Africa. The excavation of a buried history of homosexuality in the Arab world leads to the unfolding of his sexuality. Knowledge plays an important part in this experience. At the beginning of the movie Karim identifies himself as heterosexual; his relationship with Sihem (Sihem Benamoun) is an indication of this. This position as a heterosexual makes of him an “outsider,” an “other,” to the Beur gay community. His perspective remains ‘objective’ and his status as a heterosexual researcher establishes a look from without not from within. Thus, a distance between him and the subject of research is emphatically reflected in his comments and discussions with Sihem.

As Karim invests himself in his research, he starts to reflect on his sexual orientation. Todd Reeser in his book *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* makes reference to an important element that may lead to the rediscovery of one’s sexual identity. He argues that “male cross-dressing...can also be taken as a desire to flirt with homosexuality.”<sup>148</sup> Building on this notion, Karim’s camera/eye replaces “cross-dressing.” Karim discovers his homosexuality through his Beur interviewee subjects. The act of looking allows him to “try on” homosexuality. Later in the film, he attracts the attention of the Beur gays, particularly Farid (Riyad Echahi). Ultimately, his position as a heterosexual ‘voyeur’ leads him to rethink his own sexuality, and claim a gay identity. At this point, Karim becomes the object of his own research. The role as researcher/voyeur is instead played by the camera. Karim’s documentary camera is replaced by the film director’s camera, inviting the viewer to continue observing Karim’s self-discovery and learn about the history of homosexual culture in North African countries.

*Road to Love*, as the title indicates, narrates a love story between Karim, the sociology student and Farid the flight attendant. This romance is not constructed on the fanciful depiction

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<sup>148</sup> Todd Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An introduction* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011) 125.

of “otherness” that other filmmakers like Cadinot use in their films. It concentrates on a mutual attraction that is founded on love rather than on sexual objectification of the body. The movie could be criticized for focusing on the Beur community, but this choice has its reasons. In my discussion of *Un fils* earlier, I discussed some of those reasons; but I will bring to the readers’ attention another aspect that contributed to this neglect.

The homosexual Beur has been either represented as sodomized or as “sodomizer”, but not recognized as gay. Cervulle notes that “there is no room for queers of color as speaking subjects; rather they appear as erotic bodies in ethnic porn, in productions by the Dragos, Replay, and Jean-Noel René Clair studios, or else as suffering bodies called on to confess all on the set of the gay channel Pink-TV.”<sup>149</sup> This denial and sexual objectification of the Beur homosexual intensifies the desire for his body especially when we consider the Beur as a representation of what Hiram Perez calls the “brown body,” for it is neither ‘white’ nor ‘black’: “[The brown body] provides the cosmopolitan gay male subjects with objects of desire and with a superabundant raw material from which to compose the story of that desire.”<sup>150</sup> The brown body constitutes a site of spectacle on which “whiteness” projects its desires and dominance. This latter is reflected through the absence of the brown body from “representational spaces”<sup>151</sup> as Denis Provencher puts it.

Recognizing the color of one’s body is acknowledging the trace of difference it carries. This difference positions the body as culturally exotic and politically resistant from the perspective of the mainstream French culture and leads to its exclusion and marginalization. It is

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<sup>149</sup> Maxime Cervulle, “French Homonormativity and the commodification of the Arab body,” *Radical History Review* 100 Win: 2008, 177.

<sup>150</sup> Hiram Perez, “You can have my brown body and eat it too!” *Social Text* 23: 171 (2005) 15-16.

<sup>151</sup> Denis S. Provencher, “Trancing queerness and sexual citizenship in *Drôle de Felix* and *Tarik el Hob*” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 12: 1 (2008) 1.

very telling though to note that during the colonial period Europeans and Americans enjoyed the freedom that the colonies offered for homosexuals:

The number of gay and bisexual male writers and artists who have traveled through North Africa in pursuit of sexual gratification is legion as well as legend: André Gide lost his virginity on the dunes of Algeria in 1893...Morocco has also served as a mecca for the gay and bisexual literati vacationing in North Africa.<sup>152</sup>

*Tarik el Hob* participates in establishing this mode of resistance without framing the body within the boundaries of exotic desire. Karim's research on the history of homosexuality in North Africa escapes the hegemonic discourse of the "white" gay in France. The return to the 'origins' functions as a critique of those who claim to find freedom and liberty in France to express their homosexuality. Karim and Farid's romantic encounter takes place in Marrakech, in Morocco and is constructed on the culture of "homosexuality" that was common in North Africa and the Middle East regions. The reference to the poet Abu-Nawas is a clear indication of not only the homosexual practices but of a queer sexual identity for which he was known. There is also an intellectual dimension to the film narrative in enabling the Beur to situate his gay identity from inside his cultural background. This mode of identification destabilizes the dominance that "white" gay discourse proclaims over the brown body.

*Road to Love* is low budget film as we can easily see through the 'amateur' hand-held camera technique that Rémi Lange opted for in directing his first film. We also see it in the minimal décor of the mise-en-scene. The filming technique works for the benefit of the film, however, because it makes it more attached to 'reality' and viewers feel like they are watching a documentary, particularly in that most of the main characters keep their original names (except

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<sup>152</sup> Joseph Boone, "Vacation Cruises, or the Homoerotics of Orientalism," (1995), ed., Hawley, John C, *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, (Albany: State Univ. of N. Y. Press, 2001) 44.

Farid for narrative purposes that I will explain later). *Road to Love* is one of the earliest movies to discuss the issue of the Beur gay from a decentered perspective. As Robert-Reets puts it: “[*Tarik el Hob*] decenters gay visual production by ousting whiteness from the field of vision altogether, thereby managing to avoid any trace of historical voyeurism or ethnographic condescension in the process.”<sup>153</sup> “*Tarik el Hob* avoids the fantasies and involvement of white men altogether...Lange’s protagonist Karim discovers his sexual desires for other men as bound up in his own Maghrebi cultural history and postcolonial milieu.”<sup>154</sup> The movie opens on Karim trying to dance and keep his balance standing on a ledge outside a window while his girlfriend Sihem calls him. This scene is a metaphor for Karim’s lack of sexual fixity. The metaphor also reflects Karim’s risk taking in terms of the research project he is about to start and the decision he has to make with regards to his sexuality. The ability to dance on a window ledge alludes to the fluidity of his body and the potential it has to incorporate a different sexual identity. These aspects of Karim’s personality are put forward immediately in a condensed manner when he selects one of the topics he should prepare as a part of final projects for his DEUG II degree in sociology.

Karim is sitting by his computer typing possible topics, and in a close-up of the screen we see the possibilities he comes up with:

La virginité au Maghreb (virginity in the Maghreb)

La *difficulté* d’être un *homo* (my emphasis) (the hardships of being homosexual)

La sexualité avant le mariage (sexuality before marriage)

Vie moderne et respect (modern life and respect)

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>154</sup> Nick Rees-Roberts, 38.

Then, there is a cut to a documentary on the history of homosexuality in North Africa that Karim and Sihem are watching. The camera alternates between the images on the TV screen and Karim's face which shows excitement. Part of the documentary is an interview with Abdellah Taia introducing his novel and making references to marriages among men that were common in parts of North African countries until the first half of the twentieth century. The part of the documentary presented is instructive for both Karim and viewers alike. It helps Karim to choose his topic and to conceptualize the research project as well as it informs viewers of the necessity for such a research. Karim's choice indicates the challenging nature of the topic not only because of what the word "difficulté" implies, but also because it is not a common topic compared to the others. At another level, it shows Karim's initiative to explore an issue that is not easily accessible to a heterosexual. In addition, it manifests an interest he has of which he was unaware until this point.

Karim, triggered by the documentary he has watched, embarks on a journey to find Beur gays for possible video-taping sessions. The *cinema vérité* style and the close-shots reflect the tension and the anxiety Karim experiences as he tries to access the Beur gay community. A still shot of a poster reading 'Ethnic and Gay Tea Dance' communicates the inaccessibility of entering their milieu. Even though Karim finds someone he thinks is a Beur gay, he is hesitant to address him because he knows the sensitivity of the topic. After he manages to formulate his question, the fierce rejection on the part of the person he asked clearly indicates the hardships he will encounter. It should be noted that until recently the Beur gay were able to express themselves openly even though there are still a lot of them who are afraid of revealing their sexual identity. North African countries are homosocial societies in terms of how same-sex relationships function, these practices should be understood from within the cultural background

that governs them. I would argue that homosociality in North African countries has more to do with the restrictions imposed on opposite sex relationships, which explains the degree of intimacy that gets ‘transferred’ to same sex relationships often independently from sexual desire.

It should be admitted that homosociality in these countries has created queer heterotopic spaces such as the *hammams* (public baths) as Ibrahim Abraham suggests: “The *hammam* works then as something of a *heterotopia* where queer desires beyond the everyday are made possible.”<sup>155</sup> The *hammam*, where the nudity is culturally accepted, is the space where homosociality is pushed further inviting a male-male or female-female erotic gaze. Bouhdiba notes that homosexuality is one of the common practices in the *hammam*.<sup>156</sup> The *hammam* thus becomes a microcosmic representation of ways in which sexuality unfolds itself. Homosociality, accordingly, is reflective of a latent queerness that North African societies experience. This explains also why:

Many heterosexually identified men have traveled to the [Arabic] Orient in pursuit of erotic fulfillment as well, but even these adventures have had to confront the specter of male-male sex that lurks in their fantasies of a decadent, lawless East; such encounters put into crisis assumptions about male sexual desire, masculinity, and heterosexuality that are specific to Western culture.”<sup>157</sup>

It is only when Karim posts an ad through a Beur gay association that he gets some volunteers. Even this experience does not go well at the beginning. Youssef, the first Beur gay he interviews, wants to have sex with Karim instead. At this point, Karim is still keeping his distance as a researcher and his gender identity as a heterosexual. In the second interview with

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<sup>155</sup> Ibrahim Abraham, “The veil and the closet: Islam and the production of queer space,” *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*. <[www.dab.uts.edu.au/conferences/queer space](http://www.dab.uts.edu.au/conferences/queer_space)>

<sup>156</sup> Bouhdiba Abdelwahab, *La Sexualité en Islam*, (Paris : PUF, 1975) 205-07.

<sup>157</sup> Boone, 44-45.

Farid, Karim is more comfortable even though he is not satisfied with the information he gets. The encounter between the two shows how they both appreciate each other, but while Farid explicitly shows his interest, Karim, still ‘clinging’ to his heterosexual self-image, shows resistance. Karim, though, agrees to share with Farid his appreciation for ‘belly dancing’ and describes it as ‘sensual’ and ‘romantic.’ Karim’s subjectivity at this point is split between his body’s desire to transcend the cultural codes and his mental state that keeps pulling him to heterosexuality. After he leaves Farid’s apartment, we see a back shot of Karim dancing in front of the mirror. The fluidity of the dancing body is contrasted to the rigidity of the culturally constrained self.

This split intensifies when Sihem gets him a picture of *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* and he puts it next to one of his photos. A close shot of the two pictures at the same time shows the similarities of their pose and their gaze. The resemblances are worth considering given the fact that they relate to Karim’s sexual experience. The first resemblance, a physical one, is the stare the face of the girl has that shows her courage to confront her audience. The other resemblances are metaphorical; this metaphor of the girl on the painting unfolds through the juxtaposition with Karim’s picture and what he will experience later. The second metaphorical resemblance is her transition to womanhood which parallels his recognition of his homosexuality. The third is the jealousy she is going to create in the household where she lives just as Karim’s relationship with Farid will excite jealousy in Sihem who will leave him. Karim at this stage is also not afraid of expressing his homosexual tendencies even if jokingly. In one of the scenes that follow when Karim is showing Farid the video he took while interviewing him, he tells him that he looks good. Farid then says, “You too when your turn comes.” Karim says, “Inshallah” (God willing).



As Karim progresses in his research, he also starts to question his heterosexuality. After he leaves for Marseille to film other Beur gays, he receives letters and postcards from Farid who begins to express his feelings for him. Karim's heterosexual self begins to dissipate as he progresses in his research. The homosexual 'Other' that his body manifests and which he resists accepting is now apparent. After Farid introduces him to a friend of his, this latter asks him about his sexuality and Karim hesitantly answers "heterosexual." Then he asks him about his motives to study homosexuality because, according to Farid's friend, there must be a connection between his research and his sexual identity. These questions push Karim further to focus on his sexuality more than on his research. He becomes aware of his attraction to Farid but is still unable to express it. A telling shot of Karim's face replacing a bride's face on a film poster starring "Farid al-Atrach" in *Min Agli al-Hob* (for the sake of love) reveals the inner feelings of Karim. The resemblance of names: the actor's real name and the Beur gay Farid are very indicative of Karim's aspiration.

After this scene, Karim becomes the object of his own camera. Farid starts filming Karim and asking him 'intimate' questions about his sexuality. His first question is "have you ever slept with a boy?" Then he asks him about his relationship with Sihem and the possibility of marriage. The last question is "what if you find out you love men after marriage?" These questions raise Karim's anxiety especially when he starts thinking about putting an end to his project, and instigate a sense of curiosity, on the part of viewers, as to what will happen next.

His resistance to Farid's temptation does not last long, and in one scene as Farid returns from a flight Farid gives him a book entitled: *Do You Love me*. The dedication reads: "pour toi ce livre de poems perses...et ma dédicace c'est Jean Genet qui va la faire à ma place" and on the next page is signed: "Farid qui pense à toi." The reference to Genet is very suggestive of the type

of relationship Farid wants to have with Karim, and we shall see it coming back at the end of the movie as Karim decides to accept Farid's ring. This ending is the culmination of their visit to Marrakech in Morocco where Farid wants to be alone with Karim and give him a chance to come to terms with his homosexuality. The trip to Morocco and a visit to Genet's tomb are two significant elements in Karim's experience as they indicate that though his gay identity does not originate from a western context, at the same time he does not negate its influence. The relationship between Karim and Farid is founded a mutual attraction that does not present the Beur body as intrinsically exotic or even erotic for that matter.

At this point of my analysis, I will focus on contrasting the appearance of the brown body in both *Un fils* and *Road to Love*. Selim's body in *Un fils* is founded on a fantasized colonial image of the North African male body. This imaginative body is represented as 'perfect' and sexually appealing. The effects of editing, lighting and mise-en-scene infuse a homoerotic dose that frame Selim's body in an objectified position receptive to visual pleasure. In *Road to Love*, however, Karim's body is 'imperfect.' In fact most Beur gay bodies in the movie are presented as such. They are presented as living bodies without much editing or mise-en scene. Thus, Karim's imperfect body is not portrayed as exotic, and Farid's interest in him is not based on sexual objectification. Desire is reciprocal and it does not entail a dominant subjective gaze from either part. While Selim's body performs to satisfy the 'white' other's exotic desire, Karim's body enacts a sexual identity through a process of self-discovery.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

The establishment of geographic borders seeks to separate nation-states and create a sense of belonging founded on historical, cultural, linguistic and religious affinities among individuals. These components seek to differentiate between citizens of nation-states and characterize what constitutes their ‘identity.’ Identity formation following this model is based on the exclusion of other ‘identities’ as they are looked at as foreigners, strangers or visitors. These modes of identification can transcend the geographic barriers where nation-states, driven by economic and political interests and sharing a common historical background, allow free movement of individuals from nation-state to nation-state, such as in the EU, for instance. However we have seen that even with common threads of history and culture there will be some identity tension for these individuals. In 2004, the *Polish plumbers*,<sup>158</sup> an expression used by the French politician Philippe de Villiersin, became famous as a reference to the *Directive on Services in the Internal Market* of the EU. The fear of some Western European nations, among them France, was that this “*Directive*” would open the flood gate for lower wage Eastern Europeans to replace Western European workers and/or depress their wages.

These tensions, however, worsen when other groups whose culture, religion, color, race and/or language are noticeably different cross the borders of nation-states for economic, political or other reasons. These groups usually remain at the fringes of the “host” country’s society, even

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<sup>158</sup> The expression “*Polish plumbers*” has been used by other immigrant groups to allude to their exclusion: “Après le plombier polonais, l’ingénieur marocain,” and “Du plombier polonais au géomètre malien.”

when granted citizenship. Individual immigrants, like for instance a Samoan family immigrating to France, will have identity issues but eventually the larger society will swallow the family up and there will be little impact on the “host” country. Groups on the other hand no matter how shunted to the side or even despised will have an impact eventually on the “host” society. These immigrants enter nation-states, and they undoubtedly leave traces. However, even though large migrations have always characterized the history of humankind, today’s nation-states do not usually recognize this fact and when they do they are selective in what will be part of their historical memory.

Colonialism and WW II both played major roles in bringing workers from the ex-colonies and poorer countries to rebuild Europe after 1945. Europe needed more workers and in their colonies they knew where to find them. In France as in some other European countries, this process has had long lasting effects when the workers decided to stay and settle. The problem that has arisen is that a large percentage of these laborers came from countries that do not necessarily share cultural and/or religious similarities with Europeans. One of the most important differences is that “they brought not only an ethnic minority, but also a non-Christian religious minority into the country.”<sup>159</sup> Even though Halle is referring to Germany, his statement applies to other European countries as well. As these waves of immigrants continue to come searching for a “better life,” the “host” countries found themselves facing a major problem. The immigrants came to stay and they established “a social existence.”<sup>160</sup> Given that the social and economic conditions in the ex-colonies keep deteriorating, the influx of immigrants crossing the borders into Europe has continued to increase. In France, according to INED (Institut national d’études démographiques) between 2002 and 2008, Maghrebi immigrants exceeded the number of

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<sup>159</sup> Randall Halle, 136.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 137.

immigrants from the EU despite the greater legal obstacles they must overcome to come to France to work and stay.<sup>161</sup> Additionally, a greater percentage of these Maghrebi immigrants come to France to make it their home than do the immigrants from the EU.<sup>162</sup> It has to be noted also that the number of immigrants from the Maghreb had already significantly increased between 1962 and 1999.<sup>163</sup>

Even though the presence of any immigrants can be considered a burden to France, Maghrebi immigrants more than others are seen as problematic, not only because they come from the ex-French colonies, but also because they are of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Maghrebis bearing the colonial history as colonial subjects come from a religion that believes in proselytizing and has had hostile interaction with Christian Europe. These differences have become more acute as their children start to gain consciousness of their parents' as well as of their own inferior status compared to the mainstream Christian or secular French citizen. The Beurs, though still a small minority in France, have made themselves visible and have become engaged in French political discourse. They, compared to all other immigrant groups, have also emerged as the social category with the most artistic and literary productions that were not simply recycled into the French category. These productions reflect on their experiences as well on those of their parents.

This study focuses on cinema because Beur movies emerged simultaneously with Beur political visibility. This is not surprising given that film narrative relies on the visible. The accessibility of films to the public at large is also another reason for analyzing cinema. At the beginning Beur cinema attracted filmmakers who were for the most part either Beurs or

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<sup>161</sup> <[http://www.ined.fr/fr/pop\\_chiffres/france/flux\\_immigration/depuis\\_1994/](http://www.ined.fr/fr/pop_chiffres/france/flux_immigration/depuis_1994/)> 04 Feb 2012.

<sup>162</sup> Xavier Thierry, "Évolution récente de l'immigration en France et éléments de comparaison avec le Royaume-Uni," *Population*, 59.5 (2004) 734-35. <[www.ined.fr](http://www.ined.fr)> accessed 02-04-2012

<sup>163</sup> Chloé Tava, "Les immigrés en France: une situation qui évolue," <[http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs\\_ffc/ip1042.pdf](http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs_ffc/ip1042.pdf)> 04 Feb 2012.

immigrants, with only a minimal interest on the part of non-Beurs. In the last fifteen years however, this genre has so imposed itself that many non-Beurs filmmakers have started to focus on Beur issues. Now, in about thirty years of existence, Beur cinema has accumulated a corpus that has greatly evolved at the level of both narrative discourse and the Beur experiences it presents.

Based on these facts, I have argued that Beur cinema has all the ingredients necessary to be considered a genre. When I say genre, I am referring to the components that construct a film's narrative discourse, and the changes they have undergone since its inception. We have seen that the film narrative in early Beur cinema was more constrained in terms of space and time as it was also simpler in terms of plot, while the Beur characters were usually presented as victims of their social condition and as such, they lacked complexity and depth. After thirty years, the Beur film narratives, although largely working with the same ingredients, have become more complex in terms of how characters are constructed and how events are narrated. For instance, the Beur character is no longer confined to the *banlieue* and its attendant problems of integration. There has also been a shift to addressing the gender variable. Over the last twelve years, the focus on the "Beurette" and the Beur homosexual has increased and what has long been considered taboo is now visible in films. I have to underscore also that Beur cinema did not remain static with respect to adopting the aesthetics of particular genres, branching out from dramas to road-films, comedies, and gay movies. This shift is very significant in terms of how the experience of Beur subjectivity manifests itself. The Beur character has become aware not only of his or her 'reality' but of the 'reality' of others. Comedies have allowed the Beur to express his or her selfhood without any social, political or cultural restrictions and road-films liberated the Beur from being

chained to the *banlieue*. These changes have opened new horizons for Beur cinema, ones that are surely going to be addressed in the future.

In my analysis, I have traced this shift through a particular focus on the experience of subjectivity. What I have concluded is that the Beur experience in France is playing a significant role in shaking the standards that shape the French notion of identity. This process is both “reflected” in and “assisted by” Beur films. “Reflected” means that their narrative discourses trace some of the currents of thought threading through the Beur subjective experience over the last three decades. “Assisted by,” in that these films, with their ability to reach large audiences, not only validate the aspirations of their Beur audiences but help inform mainstream French audiences about the ways in which Beurs have become a constituent of French society. This can be seen in my choice of film directors, and this is the reason why I decided to disregard the origins of the filmmakers in my definition of Beur cinema. I wanted to see how other filmmakers who are considered “true” French by the mainstream discourse get interested in making films about Beurs. I would argue that this move is both a recognition that the Beurs are part of the Hexagone and an engagement in decolonizing France through its “true” French subjects. Similarly, this process of decolonization is also seen at the level of how mainstream French characters are presented in some Beur movies. One example is Patrick Morel (Patrick Ligardes) a “true” French in *Origine contrôlée* (2001), who disguised as a woman, is mistaken for an illegal Algerian immigrant.

This study reveals the Beur experiences’ ability to enforce their presence as French citizens through film narratives. The Beurs and along the same line other groups engaged in similar experiences are rewriting the narrative identity of Europe. The children of the “others” who once belonged in the colonies and/or were conceived of as primitive and uncivilized have

become part of the nations that treated them so. The films I analyze underscore that the Beur is no longer negotiating a mode of presence in French culture and that his or her visibility has to be recognized. They plainly show that the Beur presence in France is already involved in changing the landscape of French national culture. Recognizing that this ‘change’ exists is now more of a political choice than the assessment of what is taking place in France today.

The Beurs in France, the German-Turks in Germany, the British-Pakistanis/Indians are all participating in changing Europe’s cultural identity. Their experiences in these countries, with respect to what differentiate them, have initiated through their presence new modes of belonging that Europe, though having difficulty ‘digesting’ them, is forced to recognize. These new subjectivities that carry grains of their immigrant parents’ origins have already established themselves as part of European culture. They have become part of its memory and they have become involved in writing its history from within. Their mode of existence as body-subjects with the differences that the visibility of this body suggests is substantiated through their contributions and their ways of manifesting their selfhood. Cinema has been a useful tool for them to express their modes of being and reflect on how these modes interconnect to rethink and revisit European culture. The Eurocentrism that has shaped the European ways of thinking for decades is now questioned in terms of its legitimacy.



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