

**HISTORY, GENRE, POLITICS: THE CINEMA OF YAMINA BENGUIGUI**

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## **HISTORY, GENRE, POLITICS: THE CINEMA OF YAMINA BENGUIGUI**

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This dissertation illustrates the ways cinema intervenes into questions of history, politics, immigration, and national identity and community through the films of contemporary French filmmaker Yamina Benguigui (1957-). This study traces these interventions from her earliest films in the mid-1990s to her most recent productions in 2008. France, and the way it is represented to and by its people, has been undergoing significant transformations in recent decades as a result of an increasingly multicultural population and external pressures due to globalization and European unification. Benguigui's corpus reflects these transformations and the evolution of these debates while also contributing to them, thereby consolidating her status as a *cinéaste engagée*.

A range of theoretical texts inform the analyses of Benguigui's films. Colonial theory, as articulated by Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, illustrate to what extent the colonial dynamic continues to structure contemporary French society decades after decolonization. Jacques Rancière's *La méésentente* (1995), a rethinking of the concepts of democracy and politics, provides the framework for an examination of Benguigui's cinema as political practice. Benguigui's films intend to open an imaginary space for immigrants and their descendants in French national narratives; Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" is therefore particularly relevant to her cinematic project.

This dissertation is organized thematically, beginning with an analysis of the ways Benguigui's films address colonial history and its consequences in the latter half of the twentieth century. The second chapter is an examination of her preferred genres—the documentary and tragicomedy—and how they serve her cinematic and political project. Her films are situated within the documentary tradition as well as within French and Italian comedic conventions. The relationship between politics and cinema is studied in chapter three. Benguigui's most recent films, treating social unrest and inequalities in French society, have assumed an overt political cast, but a political project can be traced throughout her cinematic corpus.

Yamina Benguigui advocates for a more inclusive and egalitarian society; this study illustrates the role art can and must play in these struggles.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, events have occurred in France that demonstrate to what extent it has not adequately addressed its colonial heritage, whose repercussions continue to manifest themselves within French society. Some of the more spectacular incidents include the 2001 soccer match between the French and Algerian national teams, a match that the media had deemed an historical event and “lourd de symboles”<sup>1</sup> because such an encounter had not taken place in forty years. What could have been a symbolic gesture of historical healing between the two countries, as it took place almost forty years after Algerian independence from French colonial rule, instead came to an abrupt end when fans began swarming the field waving and wrapped in Algerian flags. Approximately a half-decade earlier, on May 8, 1945, the waving of the banned Algerian flag in Sétif, Algeria had provoked riots and massacres, resulting in the deaths of more than thirty thousand Algerians, according to some estimates.<sup>2</sup> The 2001 soccer match was indeed “lourd de symboles,” but this was not exactly the symbolic token many had anticipated or desired. More recently, in 2008, a small number of fans booed the singing of *la Marseillaise* at a soccer match in Paris between Tunisia and France, mirroring a similar incident during a France-

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Bordenave, “France-Algérie, une rencontre aux multiples enjeux,” *Le Monde* Online Edition. 6 Oct. 2001. <[www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr)>. 4 July 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Millet, “Les mercredis de l’histoire”: Sétif, l’autre 8 mai 1945,” *Liberation* Online Edition 10 May 1995. <<http://www.liberation.fr/medias/0101143027-les-mercredis-de-l-histoire-setif-l-autre-8-mai-1945>>. 4 July 2009.

Morocco match in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Coincidentally, the Tunisian singer Amina Annabi, who played the role of Malika in Yamina Benguigui's 2001 film *Inch'Allah dimanche*, was present at the France-Tunisia match to sing the Tunisian national anthem. The perceived insult to the *Marseillaise* infuriated French president Nicolas Sarkozy and other politicians and led to the decision to stop future matches immediately should the French national anthem be booed. Such confrontations were not limited to the soccer field, however. In 2000, a riot broke out in a suburb of Strasbourg as a result of an incident involving a young man who had allegedly robbed several banks. When the police entered the neighborhood where he was reportedly hiding out to arrest him, a few hundred of the neighborhood's residents, primarily young men of Maghrebi origin, confronted them with various projectiles and proceeded to "s'attaquer à divers symboles (la Cité de justice, la Caisse d'épargne, quelques boutiques du centre commercial)."<sup>4</sup> These spaces were symbolic because the rioters have either been the targets of these institutions (the law) or excluded from them (the economic life of France). In 2005, in Seine-Saint-Denis (Saint-Denis was also the site of the 2001 soccer match), riots would again erupt as a result of the electrocution deaths of two young Maghrebi Frenchmen who had been pursued by the police. Some called the unrest and violence that occurred there the worst since 1968.<sup>5</sup> Another outbreak of violence would occur two years later in 2007 in Val d'Oise, a Parisian commune that neighbors Seine-Saint-Denis. These episodes, which all took place in France, can be interpreted as symptomatic of an historical relationship between France and its former colonial subjects that has not yet been reconciled.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Crumley, "Booing the Marseillaise: A French soccer scandal," *Time* Online Edition 15 Oct 2008. <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1850831,00.html>>. 4 July 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Beaud and Michel Pialoux, "Révoltes dans les quartier: émeutes urbaines, violence sociale," *Le Monde diplomatique* 18 July 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Sciolino, "Paris suburb riots called 'a lot worse' than in 2005," 27 Nov. 2007. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/27/world/europe/27iht-riots.4.8500200.html>>. 4 July 2009.

On the other hand, progress has been made, although in much less spectacular fashion than the incidents previously mentioned. 2003 was celebrated as the “Year of Algeria” in France, whose aim was to “open up the field of dialogue, to bring sharing and culture into the heart of relations between peoples.”<sup>6</sup> A museum dedicated to the history of immigration in France opened in 2007,<sup>7</sup> and in recent decades there appears to be more willingness and openness on the part of the French state to discuss the colonial era and the decades following decolonization that witnessed massive labor migration from the former colonies and the settlement of these immigrants in France, both of which continue to have a profound impact on French society.

It is in this ever-evolving social and historical context that filmmaker Yamina Benguigui enters the scene through her cinematic, and more recently political, interventions. Herself a product of these aforementioned historical circumstances, her films bear witness to the dynamics that structured the colonial relationship as well as those that continue to configure contemporary French society. The present study aims to trace the encounters between art, in this case cinema, and the larger questions of history, memory, immigration, and politics in Benguigui’s films, from her earliest productions in the mid-1990s to her most recent films. France has become increasingly multicultural in the last few decades as a result of international migrations, many originating from former colonies. The fact that many of these immigrants and their children settled permanently in France has brought into contact different cultures and histories and has forced a rethinking of what it means to be French. Benguigui’s films bear witness to these transformations and debates while at the same time participating in them.

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from Dominique de Villepin’s opening speech on November 6, 2002. < <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Algeria-Year-Opening-speech-by-M.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the museum documents immigration from Europe and France’s former colonies but does not address the question of colonialism or decolonization.

Born in Lille in 1957 to Algerian Kabyle parents, Benguigui's personal trajectory at the same time converges with and is different from that of the immigrants and their children whom she frequently features in her films. Her father was not an immigrant laborer but rather a leader in the Mouvement national algérien (MNA) who came to France in the 1950s to precipitate strikes in French factories among Algerian immigrant workers.<sup>8</sup> This is not merely an historical anecdote; rather, it attests to the complexity of the Algerian war and its after-effects. At the onset of the war, circa 1954, the MNA, founded by Messali Hadj, was a considerable rival to the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale). Both organizations were active in the struggle for an independent Algeria, and as historian Benjamin Stora points out, both coveted the role of representative of the Algerian people.<sup>9</sup> Their often bloody disputes were not limited to Algeria either; both vied for influence among the Algerian immigrant population in France and circulated among them to recruit and to collect funds for their cause. Benguigui's father was imprisoned and placed under house arrest by the French for his political activities, and was never able to return to France because of the FLN's assumption of power after independence.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of his status or reasons for being in France, however, he was treated in the same fashion as an immigrant laborer. As Benguigui observes "Pour mon père qui était un intellectuel, le regard des autres le considérait toujours [...] comme Ahmed, un ouvrier."<sup>11</sup> Although she broke with her father for personal reasons, it is not inconceivable to speculate that his political commitment would later inform her own engagement as an artist and public figure.

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<sup>8</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Catherine Humblot, "Les silences dévoilés de la mémoire maghrébine," *Le Monde* Online Edition 25 May 1997. <[www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr)>. 11 Apr. 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Stora, *Algeria, 1830-2000: A Short History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Thomas Lemahieu. *Périphéries.net* 2008. <<http://www.peripheries.net/g-beng.htm>>. 11 May 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Lequeret and Charles Tesson, "Cinq cinéastes," *Cahiers du cinéma* Feb. 2003: 48.

The preceding familial and historical episode demonstrates that the Algerian war not only set pro-colonial Frenchmen against Algerians aspiring to independence, but also pitted Algerians against other Algerians and, as will be discussed briefly in chapter one, Frenchmen against Frenchmen. The idea of a unified Algerian populace marching in solidarity towards independence is a myth, as is the notion of a contemporary Maghrebi “community” in France. The Maghrebi community in France is comprised of peoples of different national and historical experiences. While Tunisia and Morocco were treated essentially as colonies, they were juridically protectorates, whereas Algeria was considered integral to the French nation, another province, so to speak. The European settlement that took place there over the 130-year colonial history and the violent conclusion of that particular episode renders Algeria unique in the history of French colonization and therefore distinguishes it from the Tunisian and Moroccan experiences.

Benguigui speaks from a very singular historical and personal perspective, yet she aims to speak for a Maghrebi community. The specificity of her experiences, both past and present, invites us to question whether Benguigui can speak for those whom she desires to represent, primarily Maghrebi immigrants. This tension may already be present cinematically in her documentaries, as she routinely effaces her presence from her films and instead gives the cinematic space to immigrants and their children, allowing them to speak for themselves. As director, though, she still exerts a considerable amount of power over the images and audio she opts to include in her films. Benguigui inhabits an interstitial space: as the daughter of Algerian immigrants, though not immigrant workers, as a French citizen born to Algerian parents, as a Beur who has attained a certain level of success and renown in mainstream French society, and as an advocate for the disenfranchised who now works alongside politicians and people in

power. Thus far she appears to have successfully negotiated her different subject positions, and continues to work on behalf of immigrants and minorities who are victims of racial and ethnic discrimination. It is perhaps the latter reality that allows her to speak for Maghrebi and African immigrants and their children: while the individuals she features in her films may come from different historical circumstances, they are unified in the sense that they are systematically treated as “immigrants” and subject to pervasive discriminatory practices.

Like many children of Maghrebi immigrants, Benguigui has had to navigate a French society that she often found hostile to her as well as a family that had traditional expectations of a Muslim woman’s role within the family and in society. This struggle is a leitmotif in the literature and cinema of the Beur generation. Further elaboration of her personal and professional difficulties, and how they would influence her work, will appear in the chapters that make up the scope of this study. Despite these adverse circumstances, she managed to escape the limitations imposed on her by both her family and society to become an acclaimed filmmaker, recognized in both cinematic circles and in journalistic and political milieux. Beginning with her training alongside avant-garde filmmaker Jean-Daniel Pollet, to her collaborations with Rachid Bouchareb in the 1980s and 1990s, and culminating in her independent documentary and fiction projects beginning in 1994 with *Femmes d’Islam*, Benguigui has come to be recognized as an important participant in discussions about immigration, integration, and other contemporary social concerns that have arisen as a result of these issues.

Her personal and professional trajectories cannot be discussed without mentioning a cultural movement that emerged in the 1980s, commonly referred to as the Beur movement.

Alec Hargreaves, who has worked extensively on the question of Beur literature and postcolonial cultures in France, describes this group of work in the following terms:

Un nouvel espace littéraire est aujourd'hui en train de se créer. Il a ses racines dans l'immigration maghrébine en France, et plus précisément parmi les nouvelles générations issues de celle-ci. Alors que les primo-migrants étaient pour la plupart analphabètes, les jeunes ont tous appris à lire et à écrire grâce à leur scolarisation en France. Ce processus a permis à cette nouvelle génération de produire pour la première fois une littérature de la communauté immigrée, par contraste avec la littérature *sur* l'immigration que nous devons à certains auteurs maghrébins et français. Leur acculturation en France a distancé ces jeunes auteurs de leurs aînés maghrébins sans les intégrer pleinement à la société française. Ils sont situés à la jonction-et parfois en marge-de deux cultures.<sup>12</sup>

Although he could not have predicted it at the time of the publication of his work, Hargreaves was defining a movement that appeared to already be in decline, or rejected by many of those who were labeled as such, the latter acknowledged by Hargreaves. Some authors who emerged in the 1980s continue to write and produce, such as Tassadit Imache, Azouz Begag, and Mehdi Charef, but there is no longer discussion of a Beur movement per se. In fact, the key texts that continue to be referenced when talking about Beur literature are Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* (1983) and Azouz Begag's *Le gone du Chaâba* (1986), both written and published over twenty years ago. What seems to have happened to some extent, and for the better, is that these authors are now acknowledged more for their individual artistic contributions

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<sup>12</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, *La littérature beur: un guide bio-bibliographique* (New Orleans: Celfan Edition Monographs, 1992) 5.

rather than being examples of a particular literary tendency or of a particular ethnic group, although their origins continue to bear on the way their works are studied and categorized.

Beur-authored cinema also emerged during the 1980s; both Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archimède* and Bouchareb's *Bâton Rouge* were released in 1985. Carrie Tarr has devoted much scholarship to this corpus of films, arguing that unlike the mainstream French cinema that preceded it, Beur cinema works to "reframe" difference by foregrounding the ethnic other rather than relegating him or her to the margins. In *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue filmmaking in France*, she poses the question: how do filmmakers foreground difference and in what ways do they challenge the notion of 'Frenchness'? While she does not delve into a full discussion of Benguigui's work in *Reframing Difference*, it will become clear in this study that Benguigui's films do not, in fact, place emphasis on difference; rather, they accentuate the commonalities that exist between minorities and 'les Français de souche.' Her films do, however, open a space for a broader definition of Frenchness. With the exception of *Femmes d'Islam* (1994) and *Le jardin parfumé* (2000), which deal with issues specific to Muslim cultures and communities, her films feature primarily French-speaking subjects in French contexts. The difference that distinguishes Benguigui's cinematic subjects is the rejection they face on a daily basis based on their origins.

Benguigui belongs to the same generation as Begag, Charef and Imache, all of whom were born in the 1950s, but she did not emerge as an independent artist until 1994, with the documentary film *Femmes d'Islam* and more noticeably with the 1997 documentary *Mémoires d'immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin*. Unlike many of the Beur artists, her initial works were not autobiographical fictions detailing her negotiations between the culture of her parents and life in France, although her films certainly reflect her personal experiences. From the beginning, the

stories she told were expressed in a multiplicity of voices and experiences, some overlapping with her own. Given her preoccupations with societal issues, perhaps she recognized early on that the public would be better served by her art if she focused on collective questions and not solely personal ones, although one cannot deny the political dimension of Beur autobiographical works. Benguigui's films are a clear demonstration of her commitment as an artist to the political and social exigencies of her time. The emergence of the Beur movement in the 1980s provided conditions favorable to Benguigui's own coming to film; her continuing and prolific production has solidified her status as an artist in her own right.

What further separates her from her contemporaries, with the exception of Begag,<sup>13</sup> and Rachid Bouchareb, is that she is still producing today and there is no indication that she will disappear from the scene any time soon. Her cinematic output has increased dramatically in the new millennium; since 2001 she has produced several documentaries for television and cinema, as well as her first fiction film and a short film she contributed to a collection on racism and discrimination. Her most recent projects include a documentary on Seine-Saint-Denis, *9/3, mémoire d'un territoire* (2008), a film that she felt compelled to make following the 2005 riots in that commune as well as another feature film starring Isabelle Adjani titled *Le paradis? C'est complet!*, which has not yet been released at the time of this study. She continues to remain artistically relevant in terms of production and politically and socially pertinent in regard to the issues that she addresses.

Additionally, in 2008 she entered the political scene as deputy mayor to Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë, responsible for the promotion of human rights and anti-discrimination

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<sup>13</sup> Begag continues to remain very visible as a writer and as a political figure; he served two years as delegate minister for Equal Opportunities under Dominique de Villepin and has written extensively in recent years on many of the same issues that concern Benguigui, such as equal opportunities for minorities and integration.

policies, further cementing her status as an advocate for the disenfranchised of society. Her advocacy also inhabits her films; her most recent documentaries argue for the need to address questions of discrimination and integration from a practical, legislative perspective. If we return to the earlier quote by Hargreaves, in which he writes “Leur acculturation en France a distancé ces jeunes auteurs de leurs aînés maghrébins sans les intégrer pleinement à la société française,” it is evident that more than twenty-five years later the same problems persist for a significant portion of the French population, rendering Benguigui’s work all the more imperative. The problems she explores in her films have a value beyond the borders of France as well; other European countries with large populations of disenfranchised citizens could also be served by the insights derived from her work and the debates to which they give rise. As Etienne Balibar argues in *We, the people of Europe: Reflections of Transnational Citizenship*, Europe is undergoing a fundamental transformation in the way it and the nations that constitute it view themselves, and one of its major challenges in the coming years is how to deal with the diverse and divergent peoples that now traverse it. “In all its points, Europe is multiple; it is always home to tensions between numerous religious, cultural, linguistic, and political affiliations, numerous readings of history, numerous modes of relations with the rest of the world...”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, his characterization could very well be describing France at this particular historical juncture. The interior exclusion of individuals is one of the issues addressed in his study, and it is a line of investigation that Benguigui has actively pursued in recent films. Her participation in

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<sup>14</sup> Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe/ Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004) 5.

Project Equal,<sup>15</sup> which aims to address employment discrimination on a European level, confirms the wide-reaching import of her cinematic interventions.

Scholarship on her work is just beginning to catch up to her production. In the face of the awards that her films have garnered, the public distinctions with which she has been honored,<sup>16</sup> and now the political persona that she has adopted, it is surprising that her films have not attracted more critical attention. To date, there are four doctoral theses that address some aspect of her work, although all four are multi-author studies situating her within female-authored texts, francophone women artists, or questions of immigrant identity.<sup>17</sup> Some collections of essays on topics such as immigration and identity include analyses of her films, such as Sylvie Durmelat's article titled "Transmission and Mourning in *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin*: Yamina Benguigui as 'Memory Entrepreneur.'" In Tarr and Freedman's *Women, Immigration, and Identities in France* (2000), Martin and Ingram's essay "Voices unveiled: Mémoires d'immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin" in Rueschmann's *Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities* (2003), or Rosello's "Remembering the Incomprehensible: Hélène Cixous, Leïla Sebbar, Yamina Benguigui and the War of Algeria" in Mudimbe-Boyi's *Remembering Africa* (2002).

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<sup>15</sup>The objectives of this project are as follows: "Pour lutter contre toute forme de discrimination et d'inégalité dans le monde du travail et de l'emploi en Europe, le Fonds social européen, à travers le programme d'initiative communautaire EQUAL, impulse et soutient des actions expérimentales." <[http://www.equal-france.com/frontblocks\\_racine/default.asp](http://www.equal-france.com/frontblocks_racine/default.asp)>.

<sup>16</sup> Her official website lists the following honors: Chevalier de l'ordre de la légion d'honneur, Officier dans l'ordre des arts et des lettres, Chevalier et officier de l'ordre national du mérite, and Membre du Haut Conseil à l'Intégration < <http://www.yaminabenguigui.fr/>>.

<sup>17</sup> The four dissertations are as follows: *Shooting the Canon: Feminine Autobiographical Voices of the French-speaking World* by Sarah Elizabeth Mosher (University of Arizona, 2008); *Teaching the Nation: Pedagogical Strategies of Postcolonial Francophone Women Writers and Filmmakers* by Lisa Lee Walters (Brown University 2003); *Contemporary Cinematic Constructions of French and Francophone African Immigrant Identities (1980-the present)* by Kristen Gail Barnes (Duke University 2003); and *There's No Place Like Home: Homemaking, Making Home, and Femininity in Contemporary Women's Filmmaking and Literature of the Metropolis and the Maghreb* by Stacey Weber-Fève (The Ohio State University, 2006).

By and large, though, her films have not yet attracted the scholarly attention that a prolific filmmaker such as Benguigui warrants, especially given her public personality.

The present study endeavors to make a small contribution to the still limited but growing academic interest in Benguigui's cinema. The dissertation is divided thematically into three chapters: history, genre, and politics. In the first chapter, the question of colonial and immigrant history is explored in several of her films. Although France is a country of immigration, immigrants have been largely absent from French historiography. Through cinema, Benguigui aims to integrate North African immigrant narratives into French national narratives, a difficult task due to the colonial heritage with which France has not come to terms. Benguigui's 1997 documentary, *Mémoires d'immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin* is the result of her efforts. A compilation of interviews with immigrants, their children, as well as administrators and experts, supplemented by contemporary and archival footage, combine to create both an historical document and a *lieu de mémoire* of immigration for immigrants and French alike.

In addition to the problems facing a substantial segment of the French population, whose presence is a reminder of the former colonial relationship, Algeria and the question of colonialism is still very much a current event in France. Although contemporary France is frequently situated in a postcolonial context, Benguigui's films illustrate that colonial dynamics between the French and the formerly colonized were exported to France from the colonies and have persisted in structuring present-day French society. The legacy left by colonialism is present in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, but fully manifests itself in Benguigui's first fiction film, *Inch'Allah dimanche* (2001). An analysis of the relationships portrayed in the film reveals the devastation wrought by colonial policies and ideologies. Colonial theories, particularly those articulated by Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, inform my analyses of key scenes in

Benguigui's films. Given the psychological trauma that both insist occur as a result of colonialism, it is not surprising that cinema would be a privileged space to explore the consequences of the colonial dynamic.

Chapter two is a discussion of genre. To date, Benguigui has made several documentaries, a short fiction, a feature-length film that she refers to as a tragicomedy, and a very successful made-for-television film titled *Aïcha* for which she has been asked to transform into a mini-series. Her second feature-length fiction, titled *Le paradis? C'est complet!* and also a tragicomedy, is in post-production and is expected to be released soon. Her privileging of the documentary and tragicomic forms demands an interrogation of how these genres work to promote her overall historical and political project, whose ultimate objective is a more equal and just society in France for those who have been excluded from it, namely Maghrebi immigrants and their descendants. Chapter two is an attempt to respond to those questions. Documentary has provided an economically accessible cinematic space for those who have been historically denied a voice: women, minorities, and other marginalized individuals and groups. Its didactic and political possibilities would appear to be equally appealing to a filmmaker such as Benguigui, given the scope and aims of her project. I situate her documentaries within a larger documentary tradition, both in France and beyond, identifying the particularities of her brand of documentary while also demonstrating the ways in which the form lends itself to social and political agendas.

Tragicomedy is Benguigui's other preferred genre, and it too is placed in dialogue with classical tragicomic conventions and French and Italian comedies. Tragicomedy, with its stock characters and familiar plotlines and the alternation between the comic and the tragic allow her to both draw on the set of expectations that accompany the genre as well as elicit the affective

responses necessary for engagement with the protagonist and the story. At the same time, viewer expectations are displaced throughout *Inch'Allah dimanche* to call attention to various questions raised in the film, such as the psychological and physical violence engendered by the colonial experience and reproduced in familial and societal relations.

Any discussion of immigration and cinema must be brought into dialogue with politics, and this is what is at issue in chapter three. As a filmmaker, Benguigui has been engaged in political activity in the way that Rancière has articulated it—as an assertion of equality and a reconfiguration of the sensible order—in a number of ways, including making cinema, showing immigrants on the big and small screens, and having them speak about their lives and about history. All of her films contain a political dimension by dint of the topics she treats, but her more recent documentaries have taken on a particularly political cast. *Le plafond de verre* (2004) and *9/3, mémoire d'un territoire* (2008) both deal with politically salient issues, discrimination and social exclusion. *Le Paradis? C'est complet!* (yet to be released) features a young Maghrebi politician tapped to become Prime Minister who has to arrange her Muslim father's funeral in the public eye. Beyond cinema, Benguigui has become a political figure in her own right, as mentioned earlier in this introduction. This opportunity has opened up space for her to effect tangible changes on these issues. Of course, she may never have turned to cinema or entered the public political scene if immigration and its consequences had not been politicized to the extent that they are in contemporary France.

Given the current state of affairs in the symbolic and spatial margins of France, Benguigui's interventions as an artist and a political figure, as well as the contributions of others like her, are all the more crucial. It remains to be seen how the debates on history and

immigration, as well as on contemporary issues such as the banlieue and discrimination, will evolve in the coming years as a result of these types of efforts. Benguigui's films will certainly bear witness to these changes and discussions.

## 2.0 HISTORY

“Reconstituer l’histoire de l’immigration, c’est aussi reconstituer l’histoire de France.”<sup>18</sup> The following exhortation appeared in an open letter published in *Le Monde* on November 10, 2005, amid the urban unrest following the electrocution deaths of two young men being pursued by the police in Clichy-sous-Bois, a commune of Seine Saint Denis located in the suburbs of Paris.

Chers enfants, la France est notre pays[...]Ne laissez pas les discours de haine vous envahir pour vous monter contre ce pays que nous avons construit ensemble[...]Chers responsables politiques, la France est notre pays[...]Nos ancêtres appartiennent à l’histoire de France[...]Construisons une mémoire collective pour un avenir ensemble en insistant plus que jamais sur des références communes qui permettent de nous unir.<sup>19</sup>

The “Appel des mères à la responsabilité,” as the letter was titled, had four signatories: Alima Boumédiène-Thiery, Green party member of the Sénat, the sociologist Dounia Bouzar, the singer Sapho, and Yamina Benguigui, filmmaker and subject of this study. The letter was addressed both to the participants of the riots, comprised largely of disaffected minority youths, and government leaders, whom the authors suspected would resort to inflammatory rhetoric,

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<sup>18</sup> Benguigui quote from CFPDC (Coalition Française pour la Diversité Culturelle) site <[http://www.coalitionfrancaise.org/arch/renc\\_paris/benguigui.php?r=arch&sr=>](http://www.coalitionfrancaise.org/arch/renc_paris/benguigui.php?r=arch&sr=>).

<sup>19</sup> Yamina Benguigui, “Appel des mères à la responsabilité,” *Le Monde.fr*, 10 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

obscuring the economic and social inequalities deemed by Benguigui to be at the root of the discontent. The much publicized use of the term “racaille” by then Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy to refer to the rioters confirmed those fears and served to exacerbate the conflict. The authors, all products of mixed cultural heritages, use as a point of departure the idea of common history as common ground between all involved parties. This insistence is an attempt to shift the debate away from such provocative and ultimately unproductive rhetoric, and points to one of the major threads in Benguigui’s cinematic project: constructing a common history.

The objective of inscribing North African immigrants and their descendants into French historiography is woven through Benguigui’s entire corpus. Her project is multifaceted, as the verb “inscrire” can signify multiple acts: “écrire quelque chose...afin de conserver le souvenir ou de transmettre l’information,” “ tracer ou faire apparaître,” and “placer dans un cadre plus général.”<sup>20</sup> Each of these significations is locatable in her films, as they work to transmit one generation’s history to the next, make visible a history that has heretofore been perceived to be invisible<sup>21</sup>, and situate it within a larger transnational history resulting from colonial conquest. Using cinema as her pen, she writes immigrants into a common history that is situated within the parameters of the French nation but that does not exclude those from former colonies who have settled there. Labeled “memory entrepreneuse” whose “basic task, then, is to construct, with the help of oral accounts, a place for the collective memory of Maghrebi immigration in France, a memory that has hitherto been marked by national amnesia<sup>22</sup>, the silence of the parents, and the

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<sup>20</sup> “Inscrire,” Le Grand Robert de la langue française, 2001 ed.

<sup>21</sup> In the book version of *Mémoires d’immigrés*, Benguigui writes : “Du passé de leurs pères et de leurs mères, les enfants que j’ai rencontrés, venus en bas âge ou nés sur le sol français, ne connaissent que des bribes : colonialisme, guerre d’Algérie, indépendance, immigration...De l’histoire personnelle, du vécu de leurs parents, ils ignorent tout, ou presque.” 11

<sup>22</sup> See Noiriel’s *The French Melting Pot* (1996).

ignorance, or rather, the indifference of French society”<sup>23</sup> her films aim to speak to both the immigrant community featured in them and French society at large. Benguigui attempts to reorient discussions of immigration by focusing on its historical and economic dimensions, as well as the lived experiences of immigrants. “La société française doit comprendre qu’on est issu de cette histoire qui est un moment de son histoire économique.”<sup>24</sup> Immigration, in this case and in many instances, is born from economic necessity. France’s demographic deficits and growing economy in the postwar period required her to recruit labor from elsewhere, and it was largely to the Maghreb that France turned. It is ignorance of this history, she contends, that contributes to and feeds into present-day inequalities, hostilities, and prejudices.<sup>25</sup>

It is not only ignorance of colonial history, however, that has fomented the antagonisms between certain segments of French society and minorities. In fact, an analysis of the way the past is represented in Benguigui’s films demonstrates that this history is not history at all, and that the mentalities, false consciousness, and outright racism that buttressed the colonial machine continued and continues to structure relations in France well beyond the end of colonialism. Using cinema as her *arme de guerre*, Benguigui takes aim at the psychological processes that have obstructed an authentic reckoning with the past, a necessity that even Jacques Chirac recognized amidst the controversy surrounding the February 23, 2005 law on the positive role of colonization in North Africa: “Comme toutes les nations, la France a connu la grandeur, elle a connu les épreuves. Elle a connu des moments de lumière et des moments plus sombres. C’est

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<sup>23</sup> See Sylvie Durmelat’s article in Tarr and Freedman.

<sup>24</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Catherine Humblot, *Lemonde.fr*, 25 May 1997. <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

<sup>25</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Catherine Humblot, *Lemonde.fr*, 25 May 1997. <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

un héritage que nous devons assumer tout entier, c'est un héritage que nous devons assumer dans le respect des mémoires de chacun[...].<sup>26</sup>

It is in this context that colonial theory as articulated by Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi proves to be particularly relevant. Although developed for a different time and for a different context, their diagnoses of the colonial condition inform the work of Benguigui. Colonial theory, is, after all, where the historical and the psychological meet. In order for colonization, the historical event, to have been successful, certain psychological processes had to occur on the part of the colonizer and the colonized. Benguigui's films expose these processes and attempt to respond to them.

The preoccupation with history is not unique to Benguigui's cinematic project; rather it can be situated in a wider field of inquiry that takes the past as its object of study. In recent decades, a reassessment of French history, particularly of the Occupation and the colonial era, has generated much discussion and analysis in academic, journalistic and political circles. The work of such scholars as historian Benjamin Stora and the literary critics Naomi Greene and Henry Rousso<sup>27</sup> are symptomatic of the fascination with history and especially its representations in literature and film. A cursory glance at the French press reveals continued interest in and debate about the French national past,<sup>28</sup> suggesting that there remains much to be resolved and many stakes in the outcome. Gérard Noiriel, author of *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*, calls attention to the political stakes related to

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<sup>26</sup> Déclaration solennelle de Jacques Chirac sur la colonisation, *lemonde.fr* <[www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3224,36-719581@51-715341,0.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3224,36-719581@51-715341,0.html)>.

<sup>27</sup> Stora's *La gangrène et l'oubli*; Greene's *Landscapes of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema*; Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the series of articles published in *Le Monde* in 2005 provoked by the controversy surrounding the efforts to recognize the 'positive' aspects of colonization in university curricula; Philippe Bernard's analysis of the suburban riots in 2005 in which he draws parallels between police measures against Algerians during the 1950s and 1960s and those put in place to control the rioters of 2005 (*Le Monde*, 18 Nov. 2005).

discussions of immigration in France, noting that history, or the writing thereof, has become a “pawn”<sup>29</sup> in current debates about immigration and foreigners. For some, debates about the French national past have devolved into a never-ending blame game, whereby France has been essentially placed on trial for her crimes.<sup>30</sup> As an historian, Noiriel recommends a severing of immigration from political considerations and instead proposes examining it from an historical perspective. As a filmmaker, however, Benguigui does not attempt to divorce her project-representing immigrants and their histories-from politics and social change; they are intricately bound to one another. “Un film, face aux lois, face aux idées, ça peut paraître assez mince. Finalement, c’est très important, l’impact de l’image et de la représentation. A partir du moment où, d’un seul coup, on se montre et on parle, quelque chose se passe.”<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, cinema has made many interventions into discussions about the colonial past, including the emergence of Beur writers and filmmakers and the popularity of the heritage film during the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike literature and film from Beur authors, which are largely autobiographical and focused on the experiences of the so-called ‘second-generation,’<sup>32</sup> and heritage films, often laden with nostalgia for a lost and somewhat mythical golden era<sup>33</sup>, Benguigui emphasizes the processes and consequences of immigration proper, a sort of foundational moment that had and continues to have a profound impact on French society. This

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<sup>29</sup> Gerard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*. U Minnesota P: Minneapolis, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Conan, “Faut-il avoir honte d’être français?” (*L’Express*, 21 Sep. 2006) 24-33.

<sup>31</sup> Benguigui, *Périphéries.net*

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) by Azouz Begag, *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1983) by Mehdi Charef, and *Une fille sans histoire* (1989) by Tassadit Imache

<sup>33</sup> See Phil Powrie’s analysis of the French heritage film in the introduction to *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (1999); see also Will Higbee’s chapter in *French National Cinema*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hayward, 2005) in which he positions Benguigui opposite the heritage film: “...Maghrebi-French directors such as Benguigui and Guerdjou have brought previously ‘hidden histories’ of post-war Algerian immigration to French screens in a way that counters the Eurocentric white-washing of colonial history and distancing of France from the legacies of its post-colonial present...”

sentiment is echoed by other filmmakers, such as Mehdi Charef, who have taken the North African minority community as subject of their films. “C’est avec les parents que l’histoire débute, pas avec l’Algérie. Le père d’abord, qui prend le train dans un petit village et va à Oran prendre le bateau, qui arrive en France analphabète: ça nous a plus remués que l’Algérie...Donc je suis d’ici.”<sup>34</sup> While filmmakers like Charef focus more on the descendants of immigrants in France (the Beur generation) rather than the event of immigration itself, the consequences of immigration as familial and national rupture emerge through the themes of generational conflict, feelings of not having one’s place in society, whether it be Algerian or French, and a lack or ignorance of personal and national histories.

## 2.1 FEMMES D’ISLAM (1994)

Indeed, Benguigui identifies the work of memory and history as the central problem facing France today, and each of her films to date addresses this question either indirectly or explicitly. Her first solo venture into documentary film resulted in *Femmes d’Islam*, which aired on France 2 during the summer of 1994. A three-part documentary which took as its subject the lived female Muslim experience in different countries, it is the first part that is of interest here, for it treats the question of Islam in France. Titled *Le Voile et la République*, the film presents testimony from a variety of women, including the wives who joined their husbands in the 1960s and 70s, their daughters and granddaughters who were either born and raised in France or arrived here at a very young age, as well as more objective or expert testimony from sociologists and

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<sup>34</sup> Lequeret and Tesson, “Cinq cinéastes”, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 2003

teachers with firsthand knowledge of this experience. What emerges is a composite and often contradictory image of contemporary Islam, but what is at the heart of the first part of *Femmes d'Islam* is the question of immigration. The historical, cultural and familial ruptures that immigration effects is at the root of the conflicts that Muslim women face in France. As the narrator observes:

Les mères ont pourtant transmis les interdits de la tradition. Mais il y a l'école, où leurs filles, en plus d'être musulmanes, se découvrent françaises, et font l'apprentissage de la citoyenneté. Intérieur, extérieur, comment trouver sa place entre ces deux mondes auxquels ces jeunes filles sont toutes aussi attachées ?<sup>35</sup>

While some of the women interviewed have been able to “find their place” in France with varying amounts of success, others attest to the intense amount of pressure that results from the ever constant need to negotiate the demands and restrictions of the family with those of the laic society of which they are part. This constant battle ends, as the interviewees demonstrate, all too often in depression, a break with the family, or more tragically, suicide or so-called ‘honor’ killings. Current statistics on these issues remain problematic as these types of crimes tend to remain un- or underreported, but occasional sensationalized cases, especially of honor killings, turn the public’s attention to the plight of these young women<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> *Femmes d'Islam*, 1994

<sup>36</sup> For example, the organization *Ni putes ni soumises* issued this report 4/8/08 to commemorate the Day of Honor Crimes : « Mais les crimes d'honneur sont répandus dans plusieurs pays et touchent aussi à des femmes d'origine immigrée en Europe. Il y a quelques mois, Ni Putes Ni Soumises a élevé sa voix pour dénoncer l'assassinat de Sadia Sheikh en Charleroi, en Belgique le 22 octobre dernier. Cette jeune belge d'origine pakistanaise a été abattue pour avoir refusé un mariage forcé. Une enquête de la police fédérale en Belgique indique qu'un crime d'honneur y est commis tous les quatre mois ; les forces de l'ordre en Grande Bretagne relatent que quelque 17 000 femmes par an dans leur pays subissent des violences liées à « l'honneur familial. » Malgré l'absence en France des rapports officiels traitant les crimes d'honneur en particulier, nous constatons la présence de cette forme d'oppression—prenez le cas de Fatima, assassiné par sa famille le 15 janvier à Clichy sous Bois ». <<http://www.niputesnisoumises.com/actualite.php?numactu=174>>.

Other women turn to Islam as a means to resolve the mixed cultural heritage that they have inherited. One interviewee, a young woman named Atisse, discusses her feelings of alienation in both France and Algeria, both countries viewing her as a foreigner. She finds refuge in Islam, an identity that for her transcends national boundaries and gives her a home no matter in which country she finds herself. “On n’a pas choisi d’être ici [...] le problème de nationalité ne veut absolument rien dire pour moi.” Yet this peace comes at a high cost and denial; not only has she ceded her rightful place in France, she willfully ignores the mistreatment of women justified by certain interpretations of Islam. When pressed to respond to questions of instances of Muslim women’s oppression, Atisse denies that such oppression exists and states “La femme musulmane n’a pas de problèmes.”<sup>37</sup> While clearly oppression is not solely a female issue nor is it tied to any one religion, in the case of young Muslim women in France, this issue is intricately tied to immigration and to the competing and often contradictory ways of life that it produces.

## 2.2 MÉMOIRES D’IMMIGRÉS, L’HÉRITAGE MAGHRÉBIN (1997)

Benguigui addresses the question of immigration more explicitly in her second major documentary, *Mémoires d’immigrés, l’héritage maghrébin*. *Mémoires* is a three-part documentary, titled respectively *Les pères*, *Les mères*, and *Les enfants*, that juxtaposes immigrants’ and their descendants’ oral testimony with that of French officials who were involved in the recruitment of immigrant laborers in the years following the Second World war.

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<sup>37</sup> *Femmes d’Islam*.

Interspersed among the interviews are clips of archival footage from the same period—the recruitment process, daily life as an immigrant, militancy during the Algerian war—all serve as a backdrop for the testimony of the interviewees. Explaining her desire to treat immigration in her film, she notes “L’immigration, et plus particulièrement l’immigration maghrébine, c’est quelque chose qui fait encore très mal aujourd’hui.”<sup>38</sup> The wounds left by Maghrebi immigration, especially Algerian immigration to France, can be attributed to a number of factors: the experience of being colonized and the Algerian war of independence, the past unwillingness by the French state to recognize immigration as a component of French history, and the continued treatment of these individuals and their children as second-class citizens in contemporary France, among others.

*Mémoires d’immigrés* initially aired on Canal Plus (also a co-producer of the project) in 1997, then released in movie theaters in 1998. The film was well-received by critics, and as Durmelat notes: “*Mémoires d’immigrés* [...] constitutes a successful, even profitable televisual, cultural and economic operation, indicating that ‘immigration’ as a cultural object is finally *showable* and, more importantly, acceptable.”<sup>39</sup> Yet she also suggests that the success of the film comes at the expense of that which is excluded or only briefly alluded to, specifically the question of the Algerian war, the unrest in the banlieues of France, and the presence of a fundamentalist and reactionary Islam within the Maghrebi immigrant community. Responding to a similar reproach from the MIB (Mouvement de l’immigration et de la banlieue), Benguigui states :

Reste qu’un film, ce n’est pas un fourre-tout, je mets un peu de ci et un peu de ça ;  
ce n’est pas une galette des rois...Pour *Mémoires d’immigrés*, j’ai voulu raconter

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<sup>38</sup> Benguigui, *Périphéries.net*.

<sup>39</sup> Durmelat 172.

une histoire qui était celle de la mémoire. Ces vieux vont partir sans rien nous laisser... Rien n'a été réfléchi sur la suite, je voulais juste inscrire nos parents dans l'histoire.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these criticisms and the reconciliatory tone that marks Benguigui's film, a critical discourse does emerge from the interweaving of the different elements that make up the documentary, especially in the first part which focuses on the immigrant workers who emigrated to France following the Second World War. The composition of the film not only highlights the diverse as well as common experiences of the immigrants interviewed (from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco), it also points to the discordance between the economic imperatives that fueled immigration, the political climate engendered by the colonial situation and decolonization, and the lived experiences of immigrants in France.

*Les pères* highlights the fact that although decolonization was taking place across the Mediterranean, within metropolitan France the immigrant worker was still very much living the colonial condition. French employers and government officials in all the countries involved had created a recruiting system within which men from the Maghreb and West Africa were exploited, isolated, and evaluated like cattle; treatment that paralleled that of the colonial subject. While all labor is exploited to a certain extent, non-European labor, primarily from Africa, was subjected to the additional burdens of racial biases and stereotypes.

Immigration, already perceived as a blind spot in French historiography (although this appears to be changing), is also dealt a double blow when originating from former colonies. This is confirmed by the very necessity for a film on Maghrebi immigration. If it had a visible place

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40 Benguigui, interview with Thomas Lemahieu, *Périphéries.net* Nov. 1998, 12 Aug. 2009. < [http://peripheries.net/article201.html?var\\_recherche=yamina+benguigui](http://peripheries.net/article201.html?var_recherche=yamina+benguigui)>.

in French history, the imperative to undertake such a project would not seem so urgent. This is indeed at the heart of any postcolonial project, for as Memmi observes, “The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community.”<sup>41</sup> While the newly emerging Algerian nation was already actively creating its own history (and myths, some would argue), the Algerians who had emigrated to France, mostly for economic reasons, were all but forgotten or ignored by both their home and host countries. The issue of immigration was omitted from the narratives that both sides were fashioning for themselves: for the Algerians, national unity and liberation, for the French, a future-oriented society fueled by the postwar economic boom, commonly referred to as “les 30 glorieuses.” The colonial experiment and its violent demise was to be relegated to history. Then and now, the part played by immigrants from France’s former colonies during those prosperous years tends to be overlooked or ignored. As Fanon noted in 1961, “The well-being and the progress of Europe have been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians, and the yellow races”<sup>42</sup>, although no credit is given to them for it. Little has changed in this respect.

In fact, once the economy began to falter in the early 1970s, the idea for an “aide au retour” was born. No longer in need of labor, the French government instituted a plan to return immigrant workers to their countries with a mere 10 000 francs for their services. This plan failed, however, as those who took advantage of it tended to be of European descent. As one official interviewed in *Mémoires d’immigrés* comments, those profiting from the ‘aide au retour’ were precisely those that France would have liked to have seen stay, namely the Portuguese and the Italians.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Memmi, *Portrait* 91

<sup>42</sup> Fanon, *Les damnés* 96

<sup>43</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d’immigrés; Mémoires* 133

Benjamin Stora, an historian who has studied the franco-algerian question extensively, argues in *Le transfert d'une mémoire* (1999) that the mentalities and conditions that existed during the colonial era are present today in France, particularly in the far-right wing discourses of such individuals as Jean-Marie le Pen. The colonial mentality, however, appears to be much more pervasive than Stora would suggest and extends beyond the racist and nationalist leanings of the far right. *Mémoires d'immigrés* seems to show that the newly “liberated” colonized subject arrived in France only to be colonized once again, or, in the case of many immigrants, never decolonized at all.

If decolonization is, as Fanon describes it, “a program of complete disorder,”<sup>44</sup> whereby “the last shall be first and the first last”<sup>45</sup> then clearly this process was not taking place in France, where the Maghrebi immigrant’s existence and relationship to the French had not changed considerably. Even today, many descendants of these immigrants are unable to enjoy first-class citizenship and cannot access the same opportunities as white French. In the aftermath of decolonization, life for the French continued as if nothing had happened/was happening. In fact, even during the Algerian war, work immigration continued unabated. François Ceyrac, former president of the Conseil national du patronat français (CNPFP), recalls in *Mémoires*:

J’ai été saisi, je me souviens, plusieurs fois, d’un rapport disant... nous avons le sentiment, la preuve, la certitude de X qui est l’homme qui fait la liaison avec telle usine est un collecteur du FLN. Bon. La question a été posée. Et nous, nous avons dit, le problème du FLN, le problème est un problème politique. Nous, en tant qu’employeurs, nous devons imperturbablement continuer comme si de rien n’était. Nous n’avions pas à nous faire des auxiliaires de la police. Il y a la

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<sup>44</sup> Fanon, *Les damnés* 66

<sup>45</sup> Fanon *Wretched* 30

police, il y a les services, etc. Et c'est la deuxième fois où le problème a été posé. Le besoin de main d'oeuvre dans les années 50 a été considérable. C'était une période de développement rapide. Par conséquent le système mis en place dans les années 50 a continué à fonctionner imperturbablement. (*Mémoires d'immigrés*).<sup>46</sup>

Ceyrac's account highlights the paradox that the colonial/political/historical situation of that time engendered. Despite the war that was raging in Algeria and the pro-independence political activities that were taking place within the immigrant community, business went on as usual in the factories and on construction sites.

Referring to the multiple factors that resulted in the need for labor, among them the lack of a labor pool in France and the growing economy, Ceyrac continues:

Là il s'agissait de s'adresser à l'Afrique du nord, essentiellement l'Algérie. Pourquoi? Parce qu'à l'époque l'Algérie était un département de France. C'étaient pas des musulmans! C'étaient des citoyens français! Seulement, au lieu de venir de la Corrèze ou de l'Auvergne envahir les bistros parisiens, ils venaient d'Algérie pour faire marcher les usines françaises. Il n'y avait pas le sentiment, si vous voulez, d'un appel à quelque chose d'extérieur à la France. Ce n'était pas comme faire venir les Portugais ou les Italiens qui avaient des statuts nationaux particuliers. Les Algériens étaient des citoyens français. Il y avait des problèmes algériens bien sûr ; sur un plan juridique, institutionnel c'étaient des citoyens français.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Yamina Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés*.

<sup>47</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés*.

It is impossible to decipher whether Ceyrac's statements represent genuine bewilderment at the actions of Algerians or whether they are statements made in bad faith. Whichever interpretation the spectator draws from this scene, the ensuing scenes and interviews leave no doubt as to the very real conditions that these "citoyens français" endured in France, strategically presented through immigrant testimony and archival footage in juxtaposition to these "official" accounts. Although explicit condemnations of the employers and the government are absent in the documentary, for Benguigui erases herself from the interviews and only the answers of the interviewees are retained for the film, the viewer is left, or rather led to his/her own conclusions by the very way Benguigui uses immigrant testimony and archival footage as counterpoint to "official" accounts of this time period. This cinematic structure makes the testimony and footage all the more powerful because of the contradictions that it highlights.

The immigrant worker's living conditions closely mirrored those of the colonial subject in Algeria. In Fanon's diagnosis of the colonial condition, he notes the compartmentalization that occurs in colonized societies.

La ville du colonisé, ou du moins la ville indigène, le village nègre, la médina, la réserve est un lieu mal famé, peuplé d'hommes mal famés[...] C'est un monde sans intervalles, les hommes y sont les uns sur les autres, les cases les unes sur les autres[...] La ville du colonisé est une ville accroupie, une ville à genoux, une ville vautreée.<sup>48</sup>

Within France this colonized space continued to be perpetuated. The archival footage that Benguigui opted to include in *Mémoires d'immigrés* draws particular attention to the living spaces and conditions of the immigrant workers. Whether in the *foyers*, the barracks, the

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<sup>48</sup> Fanon, *Les damnés* 69-70

*bidonvilles*, or the *cités de transit*, immigrant workers, and later their families, lived in deplorable, unsanitary conditions, literally steeped in mud. Men were often placed four or more to a room, with no heat, electricity, or running water. One of the children interviewed in the third part of the documentary, by then a man approximately 40 years of age named Ahmed Djamai<sup>49</sup>, describes the  *cité de transit*  where he spent the first 18 years of his life as resembling the third world countries he learned about at school. In the book version of *Mémoires d’immigrés*, published shortly after the film’s release, a fuller account of this “learning” experience is provided:

Un jour, l’instituteur nous a avertis qu’il y aurait une projection dans la classe. Nous avons poussé des cris de joie. C’était tellement rare ! Nous avons vite rangé nos affaires, on a fermé les rideaux et dans la demi-obscurité le générique est apparu sur l’écran. J’étais tremblant d’émotion. Soudain, je vois des cabanes en planches, des enfants sales, des ordures, de la boue, des carcasses de voitures, des mouches...Un vrai cauchemar ! J’étais sûr qu’on allait me reconnaître. Déjà, je commençais à disparaître sous ma table, mort de trouille et de honte, quand j’entends la voix du commentateur dire que ça se passe en Amérique du Sud, que ça s’appelle le « tiers-monde ». Il manquait quand même deux choses au tiers monde du film pour qu’il ressemble vraiment à la cité : les barbelés et les flics !

Les barbelés m’ont toujours donné l’impression d’être dans une sorte de prison,

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<sup>49</sup> A young man named Farid has a remarkably similar experience in the book version of *Mémoires d’immigrés*. It isn’t clear whether Farid and Ahmed are one and the same (the details seem to suggest that they are) or rather two different people. Interestingly, there are differences in the way the documentary and the book presents the immigrant experience. In the film, the chapters are divided thematically and within each chapter the interviewees are introduced by their full names. The book, like the film, is divided into three parts: Les pères, les mères and les enfants. Each of the three parts, however, is titled by a first name and then a specific experience or issue. This presentation would seem to suggest that the film aims to show how history and immigration affected individuals, whereas the book focuses on the universal experiences of immigrants by keeping the interviewees relatively anonymous. This question is explored further in Chapter 2 of this study.

surtout avec les panneaux « Défense d'entrer », « Silence », accrochés à l'unique entrée de la cité . Les flics surveillaient cette entrée de jour comme de nuit [...].<sup>50</sup>

The parallels between Ahmed's/Farid's description and Fanon's characterization of colonized space are apparent :

Le monde colonisé est un monde coupé en deux. La ligne de partage, la frontière en est indiquée par les casernes et les postes de police. Aux colonies, l'interlocuteur valable et institutionnel du colonisé, le porte-parole du colon et du régime d'oppression est le gendarme ou le soldat.<sup>51</sup>

The spaces allotted to immigrants and their families, then, reproduced the compartmentalization of colonial societies proper in which the indigenous population was segregated from the ruling European settler community. Ahmed's anecdote, however, makes no mention of the colonial precedent on which his living situation was likely modeled, possibly signaling a lack of awareness of his parents' history. The footage he references in his remembrance, likewise, depicts South America, not former colonies. The absence of the colonial referent is perhaps yet another manifestation of the aversion to come to terms with this episode.

Not only were colonized societies and post-colonial France divided along similar racial lines, the apparatus of force that maintained this arrangement in the colonies was exported to the metropol, further contributing to the atmosphere of repression. To make matters worse, the individuals policing the cités were often former pieds noirs repatriated to France, because, as one official remarks in *Mémoires*, "ils connaissaient l'indigène."<sup>52</sup> Colonial spaces and colonial dynamics were thus able to endure.

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<sup>50</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés* 141-2.

<sup>51</sup> Fanon, *Les damnés* 68

<sup>52</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés*.

Immigrant housing was naturally cut off from the rest of French society, further segregating this already isolated population. In an interview with Abdellah Samate, a worker from Morocco, he describes his arrival in France as essentially a closed circuit in which his travel to, from, and within France was entirely organized by the employer so as to ensure that these workers would have no contact with the outside world. Immigrants from Portugal, Spain, and Italy lived in equally deplorable conditions<sup>53</sup>; however, the colonial and political context adds another dimension to the plight of immigrants from the Maghreb.

While laborers from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and West African nations were subjected to similar treatment and regarded with the same indifference by French employers, Algeria's special status sets it apart in the history of colonization and immigration. After the French conquest of Algeria in 1830 and its subsequent pacification of it in the following decades, Algeria alone became the site of considerable settlements of French and other Europeans in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, to the extent that Algeria became "une petite République française,"<sup>54</sup> or as Benjamin Stora characterizes it, "son simple prolongement outre-Méditerranée."<sup>55</sup> For the settlers as well as for those living in the metropol, then, Algeria was simply an extension of France. In this 'republic,' however, Europeans and Algerians were not equal partners in the development of the colony. The indigenous population was ruled by a special code which made them susceptible to a series of disciplinary measures for the slightest of transgressions, and full citizenship rights were reserved for a select few. This untenable situation would come to a head in the mid-twentieth century as more and more Algerians protested their inferior status in colonized Algeria, culminating in the Algerian war which would last almost ten

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<sup>53</sup> Weil 48.

<sup>54</sup> Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine* 43.

<sup>55</sup> Stora, *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale* 23.

years. The uniqueness of Algeria's status-both in the minds of those defending French Algeria and from a juridical standpoint-adds a political dimension to Algerian immigration that complicates discussions of immigration and colonial history.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon wrote of the manicheism that results in the last instance in the dehumanization of the colonized, as well as the demystification of economic oppression that usually remains well-hidden in capitalistic societies but that is exposed in the colonies. "Aux colonies, l'infrastructure économique est également une superstructure."<sup>56</sup> In France, the immigrant worker, already a colonial subject, was doubly oppressed by the complicit capitalist system that further dehumanized him and viewed him as a commodity. The interview with Joel Dahoui, recruiter for the OMI (Office des migrations internationales) in Morocco from 1963-1995, is particularly telling in this respect. Unlike Ceyrac, who remembers turning to Algeria for labor as a logical choice because after all, it was a "French" department, Dahoui claims that French companies were rather reluctant to hire Maghrebi workers and it was only as a result of "leur besoin faisant force de loi" that they looked to North Africa.

D'une façon générale, nous avons préféré pour des raisons de mentalité, nous avons préféré sélectionner en zone rurale qu'en zone urbaine. Comment je vais vous dire...Il y avait peut-être une plus grande...c'est pas une question de discipline...une plus grande maniabilité de la personne, souvent plus disposée à travailler en France. Je sais pas je peux pas vous dire parce que le sélectionneur est à la fois psychologue. Le sélectionneur, il a quelqu'un devant lui pendant 4-5 minutes. Pendant ces 4-5 minutes il doit déterminer si le travailleur...parce que notre responsabilité était en jeu...si le travailleur qu'il envoie va être, je m'excuse

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<sup>56</sup> Fanon, *Les damnés* 70

de l'expression, j'aime pas ce mot, un produit de valeur pour la personne qui a sollicité ses services. Je dois dire qu'avec la main d'œuvre marocaine, il y avait très très très peu de déchets, moins de 2% de déchets...<sup>57</sup>

In this account it becomes evident that the dehumanization of immigrant workers was occurring on a very real level during this time period, but it is also taking place within the very discourse that Dahoui employs in his explanation. The immigrant regresses from “personne” to “produit” to “déchet” within the space of a few sentences. Alongside this progression, or rather regression, emerges an ambiguous discourse of self-justification. The frequent interjections of expressions such as “Comment je vais vous dire” and “Je m'excuse de l'expression” reveal that at some level, Dahoui is acknowledging the process that occurred / is occurring but at the same the viewer again is left wondering whether his apologies are sincere or rather an attempt to appear more sympathetic to the (inter)viewer. It is clear from his remarks in the film that a very high level of dehumanization and degradation, hearkening back to the colonial situation and reinforced by capitalism, was present in the discourse surrounding these immigrant workers.

With the mothers of the second installment of Benguigui's film, we pass from the male public space to the female domestic space, and *Mémoires d'immigrés* reflects this by filming the interviews with the mothers primarily in the private space of the home. By many accounts, the arrival of the mothers and their children sealed the fate of immigrant families and dispelled the *mythe du retour*, although as many of the children point out in Part 3 of the documentary, the *mythe du retour* remained a “leitmotif” of their childhoods. Both the fathers and mothers interviewed in *Mémoires* cite the children as their primary reason for staying in France. In the interviews, these women testify to the hardships they faced within their own families--arranged

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<sup>57</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés*.

marriages, lack of education, domestic violence--as well as in France, including the dreadful living conditions and the isolation, often bordering on imprisonment, that they endured. Like their husbands, many of these women describe their desire to pursue otherwise unattainable opportunities in France, such as education, and while both the immigrants and their wives faced many obstacles in this endeavor, many of the women whom Benguigui chose to include in Part 2 seem to have carved out a space of freedom for themselves and their children. One striking example of this is a woman named Zohra Flissi, who went from working in a factory and illiteracy to owning her own business, a café. Her musings on French society, of which she claims to feel more a part than Algeria, where she “is bored” and “suffocates,” lead her to a reflection on racism in France, about which she makes the following observations: “Les vieux Français sont bien, les jeunes sont bien, mais ceux du milieu ne sont pas bien.”<sup>58</sup> This intriguing statement is left without further comment in the film, but the book version offers a possible explanation.

Tu sais, ma chérie, l’Algérie, à l’époque, c’était comme qui dirait un département, comme le 75 aujourd’hui. Mon grand-père était sous-douanier, pour les Français. Et mon père, il est entré très jeune dans la police, pour le gouvernement français en Algérie. Alors, faire la guerre à côté des Français, c’était normal. Et même si nous ne sommes pas trop allés à l’école, nous avons tous appris à bien parler français, sans l’accent.<sup>59</sup>

She alludes to her father’s participation in both World War I and II, but it is not clear as to what role he might have played in the Algerian war. Zohra’s testimony emphasizes the diverse and often ambiguous relationships between French and Algerian subjects as well as

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<sup>58</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d’immigrés*.

<sup>59</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d’immigrés* 93

between different generations of French and Algerians and can be viewed positively as either a successful integration or negatively, as having internalized French colonial discourses.

The question of generations is one that is at the heart of Benguigui's project, as well as one of the crucial dilemmas that immigration produces. As a disruptive event par excellence, immigration can potentially unlink families and histories, both personal and national. When the question of colonization and economic oppression are added to this already traumatic process, the results can have and have had far-reaching consequences that France continues to deal with today. The originality of *Mémoires d'immigrés* stems from the first-person testimonies of immigrants, a generation perceived to be silent and un(der)-represented in film, literature, and the public space in general.

This perception points to the very *raison d'être* of the film, as the third part, *Les enfants*, demonstrates. Not only are the experiences of these immigrants absent from public, or official histories, the children and grandchildren, for the most part French citizens, have little to no knowledge of their family histories. As Benguigui, herself member of this generation, succinctly puts it:

Face à la rumeur qui sourd de toutes parts, charriant le soupçon et la violence, que puis-je dire, sinon interroger à mon tour: Qu'avez-vous fait de mon père? Qu'avez-vous fait de ma mère? Qu'avez-vous fait de mes parents, pour qu'ils soient aussi muets? Que leur avez-vous dit, pour qu'ils n'aient pas voulu nous enraciner sur cette terre, où nous sommes nés? Qui sommes-nous, aujourd'hui? Des immigrants? Non! Des enfants d'immigrants? Des Français d'origine étrangère? Des musulmans?<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés* 9-10.

In a nation for which one's place in a collective cultural and political history constitutes an integral part of national identity and belonging, a lack or absence of such a history for an important segment of the French population is indeed problematic. Citing the constant humiliation suffered by their parents, the parents' fear of being exposed and thus expelled, and the ever-present *mythe du retour* as reasons for this absence or silence, the parents, especially the fathers, were unwilling or unable to communicate their experiences to their children. This can be explained by the very nature of the immigration experience, an often involuntary but necessary exile for these workers, and cultural norms that do not encourage this type of communication. Another explanation comes from an interviewee at the beginning of the film; stating that he does not want to transmit hate to his children, he has refrained from speaking about his arrival in France and the conditions he endured.

Unlike the first and second parts of the film which featured the experiences of the mothers and fathers, the third part, that devoted to the children, who by and large did not take part in immigration per se, is the most pessimistic of the three. This is true of both the film and the book, and this brings us back to the quote that opened the chapter. While providing a fuller and more accurate history is important in Benguigui's work, what is truly at stake in this endeavor and for contemporary France is the generation of children and grandchildren who, in too many cases, are finding it impossible to find their place in French society. If, in many ways, France was and is still a colonized society, as Benguigui's films seem to suggest, then it remains to be seen what solutions are available. As Memmi noted in 1957:

Colonized society is a diseased society in which internal dynamics no longer succeed in creating new structures. Its century-hardened face has become nothing more than a mask under which it slowly smothered and dies. Such a society cannot

dissolve the conflicts of generations, for it is unable to be transformed. The revolt of the adolescent colonized, far from resolving into mobility and social progress, can only sink into the morass of colonized society, unless there is a total revolution.<sup>61</sup>

In a colonized society, as in contemporary France, the question of generational change and transformation is of utmost importance. For Fanon and Memmi, the colonial condition can only be reversed by complete and utter revolution and decolonization, in other words, historical processes. This may be possible in colonized countries subjugated by powerful nations, but what about powerful nations that have within them a “colonized” population? The colonized condition is no longer propped up by law, and yet socially and psychologically the colonial mentality continues to exert a considerable force in French society.

The urge to revolt subconsciously against the colonial condition arises from time to time in various forms, as the peaceful 1983 Marche des Beurs and the less peaceful 2005 riots confirm. For Mounsi, a writer interviewed in *Mémoires* who came to France to live with his father during the Algerian war, revolt came in the form of delinquency. He describes his frustrations at his father’s silence and resignation in the face of constant humiliation, and soon came to the realization that he, Mounsi, would refuse to accept the same treatment. This refusal, in the form of criminal activity as “souteneur,” was for Mounsi a “pulsion de vie”<sup>62</sup> even though he ended up in prison. He later turned to writing, and his novel *Territoire d’outre-ville* (1995) is another form of response to his father’s humiliation and by extension the generation that he represents. On Mounsi’s website, the novel is described as thus:

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<sup>61</sup> Memmi, *Portrait* 99

<sup>62</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires d’immigrés*.

L'immigration relie les générations l'une à l'autre par des raccords historiques : je suis dans cette fraction du temps. Nos pères ne criaient pas, ne s'expliquaient pas. C'est ce silence qui vous est demandé de déchiffrer dans le hurlement de leurs enfants. Nos pères étaient naturellement vus comme des analphabètes. Or, avec les fils et les filles nés sur le sol français, il s'agit justement d'entendre des voix qui se mêlent de la façon dont on les interprète. La version originale de nos vies n'a rien avoir avec la version sous-titrée qu'on vous présente.<sup>63</sup>

He is likely alluding to largely negative journalistic representations that have dominated perceptions of his generation, which would depict it as either immigrants like their parents or as troubling elements in French society.

By ending *Mémoires d'immigrés* with the testimony of the children, Benguigui thus concludes the film with a sense of urgency, and at stake is the very future of France. As a daughter of an Algerian that emigrated to France in the 1950s, she has a personal stake in the resolution of this question, but she admits that she herself was not always as conciliatory towards France as she now is. Her own personal trajectory is rife with the tumultuous history and aftermath that Algerian decolonization brought about:

J'ai vécu tout ce qu'ont vécu ces enfants qui se révoltent violemment. L'humiliation, le racisme, je sais ce que c'est. Avoir des parents algériens, je sais ce que c'est. La guerre d'Algérie, les suites et les conséquences, je sais aussi. Mon père n'est pas venu comme travailleur immigré, il est venu comme leader du Mouvement national algérien [MNA]. Il est venu, il a été emprisonné, mon oncle a été assassiné dans une forêt. Je viens d'une famille qui a été assignée à

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<sup>63</sup> [http://www.mounsi.com/FR/Page\\_fiche\\_livre.php](http://www.mounsi.com/FR/Page_fiche_livre.php)

résidence à Saint-Quentin pendant les années de la guerre d'Algérie. J'ai perdu beaucoup de membres de ma famille pendant ces années-là. Mon père a fait quatre ans de prison, dont presque un an de mitard. Je n'ai pas été élevée dans du coton. J'ai été élevée dans la haine, vraiment la haine de la France. Le premier Français que je rencontrais, je le descendais, j'allais directement au paradis. C'était une horreur, bien avant les grands discours de FIS. Moi, c'est le cinéma qui m'a amenée sur ce regard-là.<sup>64</sup>

Making cinema, then, not only allows Benguigui to gain a better understanding of immigrant history, and therefore her own history, it also provides a space where she can distance herself from an emotionally-charged personal experience. Cinema in this respect is a means to critically evaluate discourses, mentalities, behaviors, and policies that have created the current situation involving Maghrebi immigrants in contemporary France. For Benguigui, cinema is also a tool that can effect a change in mentalities. It remains to be seen whether this will be sufficient.

### 2.3 PIMPRENELLE (2001)

A few years later, in 2001, Benguigui would pass from documentary to fiction. *Pas d'histoires! 12 regards sur le racisme au quotidien* is a series of 12 short films that resulted from a collaboration between young French writers and well-known filmmakers. Organized by the group *d.f.c.r (Dire, Faire contre le racisme)* a group whose objective is to “développer, produire,

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<sup>64</sup> Benguigui, interview with Thomas Lemahieu, *Périphéries.net*.

diffuser des outils culturels afin de lutter contre toutes les formes de discriminations et en particulier le racisme,”<sup>65</sup> the project called for screenplays dealing with racism and discrimination from young adults between the ages of 16-26. Among the 500 submissions received, 60 were kept and 12 made into short films. In this collaborative effort, the filmmakers who were asked to produce and direct these screenplays chose the scenario they were to produce, and adapted or rewrote them with the participation of the author. *Pimprenelle* is the result of the collaboration between Sauveur Carlus and Yamina Benguigui. When asked why she was drawn to this particular story, she responds “Ce qui m’a vraiment touchée dans la lecture du scénario “La fée Pimprenelle,” c’est le dénonciation subtile, originale, en filigrane du racisme, qui survient justement là où on l’attend pas[...] C’est cette forme insidieuse du racisme liée au conditionnement de l’éducation et du goût que j’ai souhaité mettre en image.”<sup>66</sup>

*Pimprenelle* is the story of a young twenty-something Maghrebi woman who has been hired to play a fairy at a child’s 7<sup>th</sup> birthday party. Soraya (played by actress Souria Moufakkir) arrives at the party and is greeted by the maid and the mother of the child first with confusion, then with disdain, as they were not expecting *this* fairy. The children, on the contrary, upon seeing her in costume, accept her with the wonderment and innocence that such a sight would inspire in the imaginations of 7-year olds. Soraya’s disguise as Pimprenelle evokes at the same time the literary tradition of the fairy tale in France, as represented by Charles Perrault et al, as well as the modernized and sanitized Disney versions of these fairy tales. Pimprenelle is, after all, the name given to one of the three fairy godmothers in Disney’s version of *Sleeping Beauty*. In the Perrault version, there are 7 young fairies but none are given names. Why Pimprenelle? In both the Perrault version and the Disney version of *Sleeping Beauty*, this particular fairy is the

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<sup>65</sup> <<http://dfcr.free.fr/>>.

<sup>66</sup> <<http://dfcr.free.fr/>>.

last one to offer the princess a gift. Knowing that a potentially mischievous (or outright evil, in the Disney version) fairy is among them, Pimprenelle hides so as to minimize or undo if possible any damage that the evil fairy might cause. When her intuition proves her right and the evil fairy dooms the princess to death in revenge for not being invited to the party, Pimprenelle then changes this death sentence to 100 years of slumber, from which the princess can only be awakened by a kiss from a prince.

Although *Pimprenelle* (the short film) takes place in a modern setting and is not a *mise en scène* of the fairy tale from which it is inspired, it soon becomes evident that it is an allegory for the ways in which certain French have shamefully refused to acknowledge France's colonial past, but more importantly, its present-day discrimination of the descendants of its former colonial subjects. In this case, it is the bourgeoisie who is targeted. In fact, *d.f.c.r* specifically points to the bourgeoisie as a class whose fossilized traditions keep it mired in the past. Defining a healthy tradition as one that is in constant renewal and that can contribute to the formation of a community's identity, they state : "A l'inverse, toute tradition refusant de vivre en osmose avec le monde qui l'entoure-sans y perdre son âme, bien sûr-tôt ou tard se retrouvera dans une impasse. Pour certains, la tradition bourgeoise n'est pas très loin de cet état de fait".<sup>67</sup> This fossilized society as represented by a certain bourgeois class parallels that of the colonized society, equally incapable of renewal and evolution, though the latter had little power to produce change.

The bourgeois mother and the maid in *Pimprenelle* see Soraya, whose history is incarnated in her black frizzy hair and her face, and promptly hides her into a cramped storage closet/bathroom where she is to change into her disguise, an allusion to France's desire to hide

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<sup>67</sup> <<http://dfcr.free.fr/>>.

this reminder of a sordid history from view. When Soraya emerges as the princess, the maid, who has been “guarding” the closet door, inquires (on behalf of the mother) as to whether perhaps Soraya has a “perruque de fée” to cover up her hair. To this Soraya curtly replies “non,” a refusal to hide or deny that which she represents to these women. Their unwillingness or inability to imagine a Maghrebi woman as a fairy points to Fanon’s observation that the Black [the Arab, Indian, etc.] is “sur-déterminé de l’extérieur.”<sup>68</sup> He continues by stating “Cette impossibilité pour l’autre de liquider une fois pour toutes le passé”<sup>69</sup> applies in this instance to a certain class of French who see in the Maghrebi person an embodiment of the past, a past that they would rather hide than honestly and fully confront.

The children, for whom the fairy has no history other than a literary / cinematic one, accept Soraya as the fairy. Upon entrance into the room where the children are eagerly awaiting her, Soraya asks “Savez-vous comment je m’appelle moi?” and the children answer in unison “Pimprenelle.” One little girl even remarks, “Des fois, des fées ont des cheveux gris,” no doubt in reference to the Disney version of *Sleeping Beauty* in which the three fairies are plump and gray-haired. Unlike the mother and the maid, whose image of a fairy excludes the non-“Western” woman, the childrens’ imaginations allow for a space in which the Maghrebi figure can have his / her place, even in an established literary heritage. As the birthday festivities progress, a young boy brings a gift to Eléanore, the birthday honoree. In the story *Sleeping Beauty*, the scene where the fairies offer their gifts to the princess is pivotal, for it is at this point that her fate is determined. The gift for Eléanore turns out to be a music box, and while the music plays, the camera focuses on the face of a saddened Soraya. A few of the children kiss her and touch her face at this point, and again one remarks that it is the kiss in *Sleeping Beauty* that

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<sup>68</sup> Fanon, *Peau noire* 93.

<sup>69</sup> Fanon, *Peau noire* 98.

awakens the princess and thus allows the story to end well. During this same scene, one of the children, while touching the stars that Soraya has affixed to her temples, says very softly “Ça colle plus,” no doubt referring to the stars on Soraya’s face, but also perhaps offering hope that the stigma of history that Soraya represents will “come off” or “no longer stick” in the future.

The ensuing scene shows Soraya applying make-up to the birthday girl’s face. Asking the attendees to guess Eléanore’s identity, they respond “une fée” and “Pimprenelle.” Turning to Eléanore directly, as if complicit, Soraya asks “Tu te maquilles en...” and Eléanore responds with a smile “en toi.” The child is capable of imagining herself as the Other. This utopic parenthesis from history and reality however, is interrupted when the mother enters with the birthday cake. While the children are distracted by the sparklers on the cake, the mother, about to take a picture, motions for Soraya to move out of the space of the photo, once again resigning her to the margins. No one pays any notice as the maid accompanies Soraya out of the room. The short ends with Soraya back in the closet/bathroom, sitting on the floor dejected. The maid shoves some money through the crack of the door, saying “C’est de la part de Madame.” We then hear the children’s voices noting, among other things, that the fairy has forgotten her wand and make-up case and that she did not say good-bye to the children.

*Pimprenelle* concludes, as does *Mémoires d’immigrés*, on a bittersweet note and with no easy resolution. While children, ahistorical in a sense, are capable of overcoming history’s burdens, they are at the same time susceptible to the histories that they inherit from their parents. Therein lies the challenge.

## 2.4 INCH'ALLAH DIMANCHE (2001)

*Inch'Allah dimanche*, Benguigui's first full-length fiction film, is an imagining of the consequences of the 1974 family reunification policy, which allowed the families of immigrant workers to join them in France. By tracing the trajectory of Zouina, an Algerian woman, as she journeys to and settles in France, Benguigui brings to light the difficulties faced by these women and the strategies they employed to survive in their new environment. The impetus to treat this topic stems from the filmmakers's observation that immigrant women are absent or relegated to minor roles in films representing immigration.<sup>70</sup> Yet it was the mothers, she maintains, who determined the fate of immigrant families in France.

Faire rire et pleurer, raconter des fictions et créer des personnages comme Zouina, c'est-à-dire faire de nos mères des héroïnes, était impensable il y a ne serait-ce que dix ans. Après le tournage du volet des mères dans *Mémoires d'immigrés*, il

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Benguigui for *L'Avant Scène du cinéma* 506 (Nov 2001) 136-38. A film that also pays considerable attention to a lead female character and follows a similar narrative arc as *Inch'Allah dimanche* is Bourlem Guerdjou's *Vivre au Paradis* (1998). While the film focuses primarily on the male protagonist, an immigrant laborer named Lakhdar, much attention is given to his wife Nora, who during the course of the film leaves Algeria with her children to join Lakhdar in France. Nora's reaction to her new 'home' in the bidonville mirrors that of Zouina's, as both express distress once their new realities have registered. From this point forward, however, the challenges faced by each woman diverge considerably, and despite the somewhat similar personal experiences of the two women, it is the different historical circumstances that make it thus. Unlike Zouina, who arrives more than a decade after the end of the Algerian war, Nora finds herself in France in the years immediately preceding independence, and the film ends shortly after independence has been declared. While both women desperately seek out a community of which to be part, Nora's community consists of other North African immigrant women confined to the bidonville, whereas Zouina's attempt to connect with other Algerians in Saint-Quentin fails spectacularly, and ultimately she finds friendship in her relationships with French women. And finally, *Vivre au paradis* highlights the role Algerian women played during the struggle for independence, as Nora befriends Aicha, an FLN militant, and assists her in her political activities. Following independence, *Inch'allah dimanche* would appear to suggest, women no longer had a part to play in such affairs. Zouina, courageous and defiant as her actions are, only begins to develop a political consciousness in the film.

était clair pour moi qu'elles étaient des pionnières. Elles ont malgré elles changé la nature de l'immigration, de transit, de travail en immigration de peuplement. Nous sommes devenus une composante de la société française par et grâce à nos mères.<sup>12</sup>

The film's setting and characters are drawn from Benguigui's own personal experiences growing up as well as from the men and women whom she interviewed in *Mémoires d'immigrés*. In the book version of *Mémoires d'immigrés*, Benguigui makes a rare personal intervention and speaks from the first person. In it she recounts her childhood in the north of France, her experience as being the only Algerian family in her neighborhood, and her attempts to offer a gift to her French neighbors during l'Aïd:

Je me revois dans la petite ville du nord de la France où mes parents avaient émigré. Nous étions, à cette époque, la seule famille maghrébine du quartier. [Yamina's mother asks her to take some cakes to the neighbor as is the custom during Aid]. Je me revois, pétrifiée, sonnant à la porte, l'assiette de gâteaux bien droite, pour ne rien renverser, et j'entends encore la voix aigre et peu engageante : « C'est qui, qui sonne ?—C'est moi, Yamina, la fille de votre voisine, ma mère m'a dit de vous apporter des gâteaux de la part de mon oncle Moussah ! --Tu diras à ta mère que je le connais pas, ton oncle ! » avait sèchement riposté la voix de la voisine[...].<sup>71</sup>

The hostile neighbor Benguigui describes perhaps inspired the character of Madame Donze in the film, as well as the interactions that take place between her and the Algerian family.

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<sup>71</sup> Benguigui, *Mémoires*, 182-3. She continues: L'année suivante, j'avais renouvelé la tentative, en frappant à la porte de la voisine en face. Elle avait une maison et un beau jardin empli de roses, mais je n'avais pas eu davantage de succès[...]

*Inch'Allah dimanche* follows the protagonist Zouina as she is forced to leave behind her mother and her home, her reunion with her husband in France, and her attempts-some more successful than others- to adjust to her new surroundings. During the course of three weeks, the period that we see in the film, Zouina gets reacquainted with her husband and meets a number of inhabitants of Saint Quentin, all the while intent on finding the other Algerian family in town, whose existence she discovers shortly after her arrival.

Reception of the film was primarily positive, and it has won several awards at various international film festivals.<sup>72</sup> Reviews of the film lauded the “portrait” of Zouina as well as of France at this historical juncture.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the portrait Benguigui creates of 1970s France in *Inch'Allah dimanche* highlights the historical and economic circumstances so crucial to her understanding of immigrant history and experience. From the abandoned factory bordering Zouina’s house to the nearby cemetery in which Zouina becomes lost, it is evident that the film is not only a story of a family reunion set at a significant moment in the past, but also a commentary on the aftermath of history and the role it played and continues to play in the lives of individuals and nations. Zouina’s arrival coincides precisely with the downturn of the French economy and at a time when French colonialism and its demise were only a decade removed. While the first factor explains in part the hostilities to come in subsequent years and decades, for immigrants of any background are often the scapegoats when economies are weak, it is the second factor that accounts for the ambiguous if not hostile interactions Zouina has with her husband and mother-in-law, as well as with some of the French characters of the film.

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<sup>72</sup> Amiens International Film Festival; Marrakech International Film Festival; Toronto Film Festival; Arcachon Film Festival.

<sup>73</sup> See for example, reviews in *Variety* (4 Jan. 2002); for the FACE Tournées Festival <<http://www.facecouncil.org/tournees/fichesfilms/inchallah.html>>; and for Arte <<http://www.arte.tv/fr/Impression/4982,CmC=344428,CmStyle=265436.html>>.

The film centers on the historical moment of the *regroupement familial*, but it is another historical reality that emerges as the film progresses. Curiously, this detail appears to go largely unnoticed in reviews and studies of the film,<sup>74</sup> even though Benguigui herself makes this point in an interview for *Inch'Allah dimanche*. “La guerre d’Algérie n’est pas si loin en ce début des années soixante-dix. Le rapport dominant-dominé ne change, lui, qu’en plusieurs générations.”<sup>75</sup> Rather, the characters, with the exception of Zouina, are characterized as “xenophobic,” “malicious,” and “mistrustful” in reviews of the film without interrogating the possible reasons for these attributes or behaviors. One reviewer of the film observes: “C’est bien sûr ce qui gêne, tant cette construction tend à stéréotyper les personnages, comme ces voisins intolérants et craintifs.”<sup>76</sup>

While this criticism is not entirely unfounded, as the events in the film confirm, the relationships and behaviors that emerge in the film can be attributed, at least partially, to colonialism and the Algerian war. History structures (but ultimately fails to determine) the relationships between the characters of the film. In this way, *Inch'Allah dimanche* not only speaks to a desire or need to “construct” a history, it is also a commentary on history itself. Behind each of the supposed one-dimensional characters lies a particular personal experience in the colonial past, and these experiences, while having a common source, are as varied as the characters who embody them. The seemingly straightforward narrative and ‘stereotypical’ characters mask a depth to both that only a close reading of the film can reveal. Indeed, Rosello notes in her analysis of the film (and novel of the same name): “il s’agit de fabriquer un type de

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<sup>74</sup> One notable exception is Mireille Rosello’s Derridean reading of the film, in which she characterizes the meeting between Zouina and Madame Manant as an “encontre hantologique.” *France and the Maghreb: Performative Encounters* (Gainesville: UP Florida, 2005).

<sup>75</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview, *Le Web de l’Humanité*, 5 Dec. 2001  
<[http://humanite.presse.fr/popup\\_print.php3?id\\_article=254522](http://humanite.presse.fr/popup_print.php3?id_article=254522)>.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted from site: <[http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/article\\_pop.asp?no=1689&no\\_artiste=>](http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/article_pop.asp?no=1689&no_artiste=>).

récit qui fait travailler une esthétique de la prolifération, de l'entassement, de la multiplicité des couches narratives à des fins bien particulières.”<sup>77</sup> Although her observation references specifically one scene between Zouina and Madame Manant, the multi-layered quality cited by Rosello is typical of other interactions in the narrative, such as those between Madame Donze and the Algerian family, as well as the power dynamics between Ahmed, his mother, and Zouina.

*Mémoires d'immigrés* distinguishes the experiences of immigrant workers, their wives, their children as well as of French officials; similarly, *Inch'Allah dimanche* offers different characters who can be said to represent distinct experiences of colonialism and the Algerian war. Like *Mémoires d'immigrés*, *Inch'Allah dimanche* lacks an overt commentary or critique of any one experience; rather, these experiences are embodied in the language and behavior of the characters and emerge as they come into contact with each other. Naturally, those involved—the colonized indigenous population, the French military, the pied-noir community, the harkis, as well as the French of the ‘métropole’—all lived this history very differently. The historian Benjamin Stora has written extensively on the fractious nature of the war and its consequences on both Algeria and France in the aftermath of decolonization. Despite the “foisonnement d’images et de textes” about the war, he argues, the participants have yet to come to terms with it, thereby reproducing the same hostilities decades after its conclusion. Stora characterizes this phenomenon as “gangrène,” and attributes it to the partisan nature of the texts and films produced.

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<sup>77</sup> Mireille Rosello. *France-Maghreb: Poétique d'une rencontre méditerranéenne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).

Le problème de tous les films qui ont été réalisés depuis la fin de la guerre d'Algérie, c'est qu'ils ont été faits pour des publics qui ne se mélangent jamais. On peut voir des films pour les pieds-noirs, des films pour les Algériens, ou pour les Harkis. Mais il n'y a pas de vision d'ensemble... Cela crée un perpétuel sentiment d'absence, qui vient du fait de la non-rencontre des mémoires. Il n'y pas d'Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie, il n'y a qu'une multitude d'histoires et de trajectoires personnelles.<sup>78</sup>

The divergent experiences of the Algerian war have given rise to equally divergent memories of it, according to Stora, and while any event is likely to be lived differently by those who experience it, the problem lies in the fact that decades after Algerian independence, this war continues to shape relations and discourse. A 2002 article from *Le Nouvel Observateur* titled "Guerre d'Algérie: les derniers secrets" even poses the question: "Mais la guerre d'Algérie est-elle vraiment finie?" The author's conclusion, is in fact, no. He continues:

Pas pour les anciens soldats français, que les cauchemars, les souvenirs atroces, les questions sans réponse continuent de tourmenter. Pas pour les pieds-noirs, qui portent encore le deuil du pays perdu. Pas pour les harkis, que la France a abandonnés; pas pour ceux qui ont réussi à gagner la métropole et n'y ont trouvé qu'un exil à perpétuité. Pas pour la France, qui avait choisi d'oublier les crimes commis en son nom, et qui voit resurgir aujourd'hui les fantômes du passé [...]. Et certainement pas pour l'Algérie...<sup>79</sup>

The preceding citation perhaps points to the reason why the Algerian drama continues to be a preoccupation of contemporary French and Algerian societies. It was, essentially, a civil war.

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<sup>78</sup> Stora, *Institut National de l'Audiovisuel* <[http://www.ina.fr/voir\\_revoir/algérie/itv\\_stora.light.fr.html](http://www.ina.fr/voir_revoir/algérie/itv_stora.light.fr.html)>.

<sup>79</sup> Jean-Paul Mari, *Nouvel Observateur*

As Rousso points out in his study of the Vichy ‘syndrome’, arising from the internal conflicts during the Occupation, civil wars are the most difficult wars to cope with, as the “enemy remains” after the end of the conflict.<sup>80</sup> Post-independence, France found herself host to not only the soldiers who had served her colonial interests, but also the pied-noir community, the harkis, and Algerian immigrants, all stark reminders of the war.

*Inch’Allah dimanche* is one attempt to address the ‘fantômes’ previously cited. Though the Algerian war is never explicitly depicted, the force it exerts on the characters of the film is rather remarkable. The film brings into contact individuals who have experienced colonialism and the war in vastly different and often antagonistic ways. These encounters have varied outcomes and at times produce ambiguous interpretations, and the film unquestionably portrays some characters more harshly than others. For example, the frequent attacks on Zouina by her neighbor, mother-in-law, and husband render it difficult to have sympathy for them, yet the film does not allow us to fully condemn them. Nevertheless, the stories that emerge as a result of these encounters impel the spectator to look beyond a facile reading of the film which would result in simplistic characterizations of the antagonisms between the characters, and therefore reinforce the clichéd representations cited by critics. As we shall see, unresolved pasts will come to bear on these characters and their trajectories. The violent Arab, the evil mother-in-law, the racist French—such a reading ignores a crucial element of the film and contradicts Benguigui’s cinematic project. Ultimately, it is to the past that one must look. However, recognizing the impact of history is but the first step towards resolution, and the film only ambiguously hints at such a reconciliation.

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<sup>80</sup> Rousso, *The Vichy syndrome*.

The individuals whom Zouina encounters represent a microcosm of French society as they traverse socioeconomic, cultural, and gender lines. The host of characters who inhabit the seemingly forgotten neighborhood of Saint Quentin where Zouina now finds herself include Madame Donze, a middle-aged retiree who occupies most of her time tending to her garden; Madame Manant, the widow of a military officer who supposedly died in Algeria during the war or in its immediate chaotic aftermath; and Nicole, a young proletariat divorcée. The cast is rounded out by a kindly busdriver, played by Jalil Lespert; the épicière who provides a bit of regional color to the film; and Malika, the Algerian woman she seeks throughout the film and whom she finally locates at its conclusion.

Additionally, it should be noted that Zouina is not only among strangers in a strange land, but that her newly reunited family is foreign to her as well. In this way, *le regroupement familial* is a misnomer, for her husband Ahmed has been in France for nearly their entire marriage, and the awkwardness that characterizes their interactions testifies to the unfamiliar couplehood in which they now find themselves. Zouina must also contend with Ahmed's mother Aicha, who has accompanied her and her children to France.

As the film progresses, however, it becomes evident that Zouina is but the newest exile in the neighborhood of Saint-Quentin, which itself is bordered by an abandoned factory, a field, and a cemetery, seemingly cutting it off from the rest of the town. The inhabitants of the neighborhood are equally isolated from others, both physically and emotionally: doors, gates and borders abound in the film, and each of the character's personal histories includes a chapter of abandonment, banishment or loss, whether it be due to immigration, divorce, or war. The soundtrack further contributes to the perception of a society mired in the past, as the music that punctuates the film—the Shadows' *Apache* which serves as a motif throughout the film, and

Françoise Hardy's *Le premier bonheur du jour*, for example- were hits in the early 1960s, a full decade earlier than the time period which the film is supposed to represent. In the following pages it will become clear to what extent the colonial past still has a hold on 1974<sup>81</sup> France.

One of Zouina's initial encounters with the colonial past occurs shortly after her arrival in France. While in the courtyard with her children, who are playing ball and asking Zouina about the upcoming celebration of Aid, Madame Donze is in her garden, suspiciously eyeing the activities of her neighbors. Increasingly agitated at what appears to the spectator to be an ordinary, innocuous scene, she begins to rant at the family. "Arrêtez! Ça suffit maintenant! Vous n'avez pas le droit! Il y a des lois ici! On n'a pas le droit de jouer au ballon. Vous voyez pas que c'est un jardin!? Vous savez ce que c'est qu'un jardin!?" During her tirade, Zouina's son Ali accidentally launches the ball over the hedge and into the garden, where it lands in a flowerbed. At the sight of the 'destruction' (2-3 flowers at most), Madame Donze sets down the ceramic rooster that she was protectively cradling and hisses "Assassins! Egorgeurs!" at the family, then proceeds to destroy the ball with both hedgeclippers and then her teeth. This prompts Zouina to lunge over the hedge and at Madame Donze, and the two women end up on the ground with Zouina straddling her neighbor and choking her with her housedress, which she has removed to the horror of her mother-in-law, who is watching from a second story window. Meanwhile, the children are seen and heard crying, and Monsieur Donze has left his wife to call the police. At the conclusion of the scene, Zouina picks up the ceramic rooster and smashes it to pieces, then returns to her space.

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<sup>81</sup> The film opens with the following text: "Au lendemain de la Seconde guerre mondiale, la France manque de main d'oeuvre. Le gouvernement recrute massivement des maghrébins, en particulier des Algériens. La loi ne les autorise pas à faire venir leurs familles. Commence alors une migration d'hommes seuls. En 1974, le gouvernement Chirac veut mettre un terme à toute nouvelle immigration. Les épouses et les enfants sont autorisés à rejoindre les maris et les pères. C'est le regroupement familial."

The altercation, both shocking and comical, is typical of the structure of the film, which alternates between comedy and drama, thus leading Benguigui to refer to *Inch'Allah dimanche* as “une tragicomédie.” However, the attention given to the garden and the exaggerated means with which Madame Donze defends it signals this scene as more than mere comic relief. It would seem that the presence and visibility of the Algerian family has reactivated dormant fears. Prior to *le regroupement familial*, Ahmed was rarely seen by his neighbors. This is established early in the film, as the family is settling into their new home. The Donze couple is at their window, curiously observing them. “Mais d’où sort-il toute cette famille?” Madame Donze inquires, and her husband responds “Mais comment veux-tu que je le sache, ma chérie? On ne le voit jamais.” Further emphasizing the invisibility of immigrants is Zouina’s quest to locate the ‘other’ Algerian family in town, leading to the conclusion that at this time, there were few Algerians living among the French population. We know from Benguigui’s work and that of others that immigrant laborers were segregated from the mainstream population and lived in designated ‘foyers’; when the wives and children arrived they often resided in the ‘bidonvilles’ or ‘cités de transit’, which were also isolated from mainstream society.<sup>82</sup> The segregation persists to this day as the *bidonvilles* have been replaced by the *cités* that are located in the peripheries of urban centers and often cut off from the cities. The film suggests that with ‘le regroupement familial’, immigrants and the French were interacting more frequently, thus setting the stage for reenactments of former conflicts and the perpetuation of colonial mentalities.

Madame Donze’s reaction to Zouina can be explained in part by colonial mythology and ideology, which, as Philip Dine points out, did not die with the end of colonialism and the mass repatriation of some one million pieds-noirs after Algerian independence, but rather continued to

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<sup>82</sup> This is clearly illustrated in *Vivre au paradis*, where the bidonville is not only on the other side of the railroad tracks, but doubly separated by a fence that is erected after the October 17, 1961 Algerian demonstration in Paris.

structure narratives originating from the former settler community in subsequent decades. “The myth of the *petit colon*...would, true to form, survive both the eviction of the European population from Algeria from the land which they had supposedly created, and their relocation in new, and still less plausible, wildernesses; proof, if it were needed, of the durability of the myth systems of *Algérie française*.”<sup>83</sup>

Dine’s analysis of pied-noir mythology in *Images of the Algerian War: French Fiction and Film, 1954-1992* provides an interpretive paradigm which allows for a more extensive understanding of Madame Donze’s actions in the narrative. As previously noted, characterizations of her (and not only her) tend to be limited to superficial designations that explain her behavior as simply xenophobic, paranoid, or hostile. While she indeed exhibits all three of these traits in the film, such descriptions do little justice to the character and fail to illuminate the colonial dynamic that colors the confrontations between her and her new neighbors. Not accounting for the historical factors that shape the relationships in the film thus leads to the conclusion that not only are the French (as represented by Madame Donze) one-dimensional and somewhat delusional, but also returns us to the oft-cited “clash of cultures” or “war of civilizations” that continues to circulate in political discourse today.

Dine’s chapter, titled “The Will to Belong: The Myths of the *Pieds-Noirs*,” traces the genealogy of the mythology that propped up and served to legitimize the French and European presence in Algeria. He traces the development of settler mythology from its inception in the Orientalist writings of the nineteenth-century through its various incarnations to the present era, adapting itself to the trajectory of colonization and the changing political landscapes in Algeria and in France. He is particularly interested in the way these myths survived in the literature of

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<sup>83</sup> Dine 163.

the pied-noir community well beyond decolonization. Some of the recurrent myths identified in this corpus include the notion of dispossession, with an emphasis on the extreme poverty and hardships of the first settlers; the idea that Algeria was a barren, unproductive or underproductive space prior to European settlement; and the figuration of Algeria as a natural southern province of France as well as it being an “espace méditerranéenne” whose lineage could be traced back to the Roman conquerors. The primacy of land; the discourse of rights that accompany it; the barbaric ‘Other’; victimization; and the crisis of identity due to the contradictions within the myth system that went hand in hand with the dissolution of the settler community are particularly relevant in this instance.

As many have pointed out, land occupied a central position in colonial ideology. The European confiscation and settlement of Algeria necessitated a ‘myth’ to rationalize the appropriation of land from the indigenous population. By characterizing Algeria as a “wilderness” and as “virgin territory,” the settlers were able to justify their land grab. Further rationalizing the taking of land was the belief that only the settlers were able to make productive use of it. As Dine notes, “The theme of creation *ex nihilo* is the real essence of the European claim to the land; indeed it constitutes the most obviously self-justificatory aspect of the settlers’ insistence on their development (*mise en valeur*) of the territory.”<sup>84</sup> In his reading of Gabriel Conesa’s *Bab-El-Oued*, an example of pied-noir literature, he concludes “The colonist is thus seen to be the legitimate owner of the land which his forbears created from the pre-colonial chaos, and which he continues to make productive.”<sup>85</sup> With this in mind, the significance of Madame Donze’s garden in *Inch’Allah dimanche* cannot be overstated. The camera focuses on the garden repeatedly throughout the film, and it is in this space where the confrontation between

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<sup>84</sup> Dine 159.

<sup>85</sup> Dine 160.

Madame Donze and Zouina erupts. It is also the object of Madame Donze's obsession, whose ultimate goal is to win the "concours pour le plus beau jardin de la ville." Early in the film, we see from Zouina's perspective her own yard, which is bare and full of trash, contrasted with Madame Donze's yard, a thriving, lush flower garden.

The etymology of "coloniser" invites us to make associations between Algerian colonization and the Madame Donze's garden, as it can signify both the settling of a foreign land by an occupier as well as the cultivation of land in the botanical sense. In this instance, Madame Donze, "colonizes" France and by doing so she attempts to recapture the "garden" that was lost, Algeria, thus setting the stage for renewed conflicts with old enemies. "Coloniser" can also mean "to invade," and this is precisely how Madame Donze views Zouina and her family, as invaders against whom she must protect her land. She explicitly employs the verb "envahir" in reference to her garden when Zouina tells her that she is planting mint. The sight of the formerly colonized in the Hexagon prompts Madame Donze to assume a defensive posture. Earlier in the film, while tending her garden, she leans down and says softly to her flowers "Je vous protège," then looks over at her neighbors with what can only be described as a defiant, distrustful glare. While we can assume that Madame Donze's obsessive preoccupation with her garden existed long before the arrival of Zouina and her children, it is their presence that crystallizes and gives form to anxieties that have yet to be resolved or confronted.

Likewise, Madame Donze's vocabulary indicates personal involvement or intimate knowledge of colonial experience, particularly the violent way in which it ended. Her bellicose language, occasioned by the presence of the Algerian family, strongly suggests a personal stake in both the colonial effort and the subsequent loss of Algeria. The aural violence, coupled with the physical violence, marks this scene and signals more than a mere altercation over property

destruction. By designating Zouina, and by extension her family, as “assassins” and “égorgeurs,” she evokes highly-charged terms that harken back to the Algerian insurrection, as these terms allude to tactics employed by the maquis against the French and those Algerians who were considered traitors to the cause of independence. The image of throat cutting is one that widely circulated during and after the Algerian war. The efforts Madame Donze puts into her land, her garden, and the many instances throughout the film where she asserts her superiority over Zouina are likewise evocative of colonial mythology. According to these myths, the colonist is depicted as hardworking and courageous as well as the ‘hero’ of two world wars; both of these established the settlers’ community ‘right’ to a privileged position in Algeria.<sup>86</sup>

Further reinforcing the suggestion of a new encounter between the colonizer and the colonized is the discourse of rights that emerges at several crucial moments in the film, including the scene presently under study. The most banal actions by the Algerian family, such as making coffee or playing ball in the courtyard, provoke an anxious and angry outburst by Madame Donze. Her repeated attempts to “define” her space-“Ce n’est pas le Casbah ici” (another way of saying “Ici la France”)-belies an anxiety that perhaps questions her own legitimate right to be there. Her repeated exclamation « Vous n’avez pas le droit de faire ça...il y a des lois ici » not only reestablishes her privileged position, it also refigures the power dynamic under colonial rule, which denied Algerians the same rights as the French. The illogicality of this system is underscored by the “rights” that Madame Donze attempts to deny Zouina and her family: preparing coffee in the courtyard and playing ball outside.

Without equating the two situations-the Algerian war and the fight between Zouina and Madame Donze-the latter nevertheless evokes the former. In what appears to be a moment of

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<sup>86</sup> Dine 146.

bad faith, Madame Donze assumes the role of victim, when in fact she has been the aggressor from the beginning and Zouina's violent attack was a reaction to Donze's repeated provocations. Through her language, she fashions Zouina as violent and barbaric, and therefore less than civilized, reasoning common to colonial ideology. In a parallel fashion, it is France who invaded Algeria in 1830 on a superficial pretext, then proceeded to colonize the people and the land.

A final noteworthy element of this sequence concerns the ceramic rooster that Madame Donze instinctively guards when she sees the family next door and which Zouina destroys at the end of the scene. The rooster, for better or worse, has throughout history symbolized the French nation and the people. "While the rooster is not an official symbol of the Republic, it still stands for a certain idea of France. In the collective imagination... it remains the best illustration of the nation."<sup>87</sup> By destroying the rooster, perhaps Zouina is signaling the end of "une certaine idée de la France," which is linked to its former glorious era of empire.

War, as it were, has been declared. In a later scene, Madame Donze imagines that the 'war' has been won. While rehearsing her thank you speech as winner of the garden contest, a contest we do not know if she truly wins or not in the film, she again returns to this language reminiscent of the Algerian war. "Mes chers amis, je vous remercie. Mes chers amis, je suis fière de voir enfin tous mes efforts récompensés. Je remercie la société Au bon grain, qui m'a aidé à donner à mes fleurs tout leur éclat. On a gagné quoi, voilà. On a gagné, malgré les embûches. Et croyez-moi, il y en avait, des embûches." Her husband finds her talking to herself, and asks "Ben, Lucienne ma petite fleur, mais à qui tu parles?" to which Madame Donze begins to cry, signaling a fracture in this narrative she has created for herself. Again, one wonders whether Madame Donze is referring to the garden contest or whether, in fact, she is

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<sup>87</sup> < [http://www.archives.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/villepin/en/acteurs/symbols\\_of\\_the\\_republic\\_185/the\\_gallic\\_rooster\\_50226.html](http://www.archives.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/villepin/en/acteurs/symbols_of_the_republic_185/the_gallic_rooster_50226.html)>.

alluding to something altogether different. The unexpected choice of the word “embûches ” renders ambiguous the object of such attacks, for this term is typically employed in military or war contexts. The feelings of abandonment experienced by the partisans of an Algérie française also reverberates in Donze’s speech, as she sees her efforts “enfin récompensés”, despite the numerous ambushes against them. The pride and glory of the nation, attributed in large part to its colonial empire but in question for some as a result of France’s failure and / or unwillingness to continue the fight, has been recovered. The ambiguous “on” in “on a gagné,” operates on two levels; one wonders whether she is alluding to herself, France, or perhaps both. The inachievable victory of the previous decade, which had culminated in France’s extraction from Algeria, has finally been realized.

Considered one of the great traumas in modern French history, the Algerian war of independence, which ended approximately 130 years of French colonial rule, has in recent decades attracted the attention of historians, scholars and journalists alike. During and immediately following the war, whose duration is generally believed to have lasted from 1954 to 1962, the armed conflict was not even referred to as a war by the French government, but alluded to through a series of euphemisms, the most notable being “a police operation to maintain and restore order.” It was only in 1999 that France officially recognized it as a war.<sup>88</sup> How could the French government admit to a war that was in their view a war with France itself? Algeria, from a constitutional standpoint, was neither a colony nor a protectorate; it constituted three departments of metropolitan France and was thus an integral part of the nation, despite the inconvenient fact that the indigenous Arabo-Berber population had little to no rights in their own country. Even today, discussions about Algeria and France’s colonial past tend to elicit

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<sup>88</sup> Alexander, Evans, Keiger 3.

controversy; take for example the February 23, 2005 law which aimed to include the “positive role” of colonization in school curricula<sup>89</sup>, a law that was later repealed, as well as the outrage provoked by the state of emergency instituted during the urban riots of November 2005, which evoked the 1955 law that sought to quell the disorder in the early stages of the Algerian war.

The acrimony that accompanies current discussions about Algeria can be traced back to the war and postwar period. Eager to turn the page on the debacle that was decolonization and ultimately the demise of the French empire, the French, led by Charles de Gaulle, sought to redefine their place on the world stage by focusing instead on their role in a European context. The desire to forget this period, however, was complicated by the presence in France of the some 1 million repatriated *pieds-noirs*, those Europeans who had colonized Algeria, the demobilized military, and the ever-growing community of Algerian immigrants who now found themselves exiled for political or economic reasons. During the war and in the decades immediately following Algerian independence, work on the war, at least on the French side, remained the near exclusive domain of those who had directly participated in it. There were individuals engaged in a critical assessment of the war, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, but generally, severe censureship ensured that such debate would indeed be limited. The 1980s and 1990s saw a renewed interest in revisiting this period, and an effort to approach it without the partisan bitterness that flavored earlier texts and films treating the war.

Madame Donze is only the first individual in the film who will dredge up the ghosts of the colonial past. Another character whom Zouina encounters in the film is a French woman

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<sup>89</sup> Article 4 was particularly controversial: Les programmes de recherche universitaire accordent à l’histoire de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, la place qu’elle mérite. Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l’histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l’armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit. <[www.legifrance.gouv.fr](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr)>.

named Madame Manant. Over the course of the film we slowly come to know that she is the widow of a French military officer who died in Algeria some 11 years prior to the time period depicted in the film, which is circa 1974. Monsieur Manant was apparently the victim of an ambush in the Kabylie mountains, known during the war as a haven for the Algerian rebels, and his body was never recovered. Zouina's initial encounter with Madame Manant is in a military cemetery, and our first vision of her is that of a typical widow, dressed entirely in black. The viewer soon discovers, however, that Madame Manant, by all appearances a woman "en deuil," has not, in fact, "fait son deuil."

Her name, "Manant," evokes multiple significations, the most obvious being the name itself. Historically, the term 'manant' has referred to a "paysan ou habitant d'un village dans la France d'Ancien Régime" as well as "un homme grossier; rustre"<sup>90</sup> The name in this instance is designed to produce humor, as Madame Manant's refined demeanor and bourgeois mannerisms are the exact opposite of what her name implies. However, 'manant' also brings to mind similar words, including the French substantive "manie" and the latin "mânes,"<sup>91</sup> meaning the souls or shadows of the dead. Zouina and Madame Manant's initial encounter in a cemetery signals what is to transpire between the two women, for "cimetière" from the Greek "koimêtêrion," may signify a place of rest, or sleeping chambers, the equivalent of "dortoir" in French, as well as a place where the dead are buried.<sup>92</sup> In effect, the cemetery in which Zouina finds herself turns out to be a burial ground for the dead whose histories are about to be reawakened by her chance encounter with Madame Manant.

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<sup>90</sup> "Manant," *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, ed. Alain Rey, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Le Robert, 2001) 1114,

<sup>91</sup> *Nouveau dictionnaire étymologique et historique* (1964-69) 441.

<sup>92</sup> *Trésor de la langue française: Dictionnaire de la langue du XIX et du XX siècle* (1977) 811; *Le Grand Robert de la langue française* (2001) 146.

As Zouina recounts her plight to Madame Manant, indicating that she is lost and is seeking the Bouira family from Algeria, the mention of “Algérie” appears to reawaken a whole host of memories and emotions, for rather than respond to Zouina’s request, Madame Manant begins to tell Zouina of her husband’s death. Yet as she relates her story to Zouina, we are left with some troubling questions. What exactly is she doing at the cemetery, since her husband is not buried there? Why is she still grieving after 11 years? And what exactly was her husband doing in Algeria, and more specifically in Kabylie circa 1962-1963? The post-war period was a moment of transition and therefore continued violence and some degree of chaos was to be expected, but the war was effectively over and Algeria had been returned to the Algerians. Henri’s unexplained presence in an insurgent stronghold after Algerian independence raises questions about his role, and the army’s role in general during the war.

The question of the military’s role during the war and especially towards the end of it when it was all but a foregone conclusion that De Gaulle was going to negotiate with the FLN to hand over Algeria to the Algerians is one troubling aspect that is evoked in Madame Manant’s conversation with Zouina. Their reluctance to cede Algeria translated into a variety of violent acts: the assassinations of those deemed to be traitors to the cause of l’Algérie française, multiple assassination attempts against De Gaulle himself, many acts of terrorism against the rebels and civilians, and the seizing, albeit short-lived, of control of Algiers. Already an ambiguous war, it became, with the formation of the OAS (Organisation de l’armée secrète) in essence, a civil war pitting French against French. The resistance to Algerian independence was motivated by many reasons, including the fact that many of the higher-ranking officers at the time had experienced the defeat in Indochina and were not about to have a repeat in Algeria. Support for their actions was mostly limited to the pied-noir community, and the metropolitan

French largely condemned their actions. The Manifesto of the 121, which called for, among other things, the refusal to take up arms against Algerians, the right of Algerians to independence, and aid to those fighting for independence, appeared in October 1960 and was signed by 121 French intellectuals, writers and filmmakers which counted Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot, and Alain Resnais, among others. The manifesto singles out and explicitly condemns the military for the war in Algeria.<sup>93</sup>

C'est aujourd'hui, principalement la volonté de l'armée qui entretient ce combat criminel et absurde, et cette armée, par le rôle politique que plusieurs de ses hauts représentants lui font jouer, agissant parfois ouvertement et violemment en dehors de toute légalité, trahissent les fins que l'ensemble du pays lui confie, compromettent et risquent de pervertir la nation même, en forçant les citoyens sous ses ordres à se faire les complices d'une action factieuse et avilissante.<sup>94</sup>

Adding to this the fact that the French public, still fatigued from the horrors of World War II, was already resigned to the loss of Algeria and public opinion was largely in favor of granting independence to Algeria.<sup>95</sup>

Once the war was over, however, those repatriated to France were left to remember the war alone, as the rest of the country had decided to move on. There were no parades on the Champs Elysées to welcome back the war heroes this time, no commemoration of the battles fought. In Madame Manant's case, the absence of a body to bury prevents her from effectively mourning her husband. There would be no vigil to remember the dead, no absolution for past

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<sup>93</sup> Read James D. Le Sueur's *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria* for a more nuanced discussion of intellectual debates and the role of intellectuals regarding Algerian independence.

<sup>94</sup> For the full text of the manifesto, see the 2000 archive at *Le Monde diplomatique* <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2000/09/A/14199>>.

<sup>95</sup> On January 8, 1961, the French voted 75% in favor of Algerian independence in a referendum. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/8/newsid\\_4464000/4464264.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/8/newsid_4464000/4464264.stm)>.

sins, no final resting place for her husband. And for the exiled European community of Algeria and the military, there would be no welcome wagon awaiting them upon reaching the shores of France. The neighborhood of Saint-Quentin where Zouina now finds herself is in fact a refuge for exiles, both Algerian and French, many of them as a direct result of the Algerian war. As the historian Serge Bernstein observes “Pour une période prolongée, les pieds-noirs rapatriés d’Algérie, les cadres de l’armée, les hommes politiques ou les intellectuels, qui ont participé à la défense de l’Algérie française se sentent des émigrés de l’intérieur dans la V<sup>e</sup> République.”<sup>96</sup>

Madame Manant’s exile is both physical and temporal, for a careful look at her words reveals an inability to separate the past from the present, and her failed mourning is the result of an inability or unwillingness to release the past. Her use of euphemistic literary language such as “verser de larmes” for “pleurer” (“to spill tears” rather than “to cry”) and “les défunts” instead of “les morts” points to a deferral of reality, similar to the ways in which certain parties attempted to deny that there was a war raging by instead referring to it as “les événements.”

A look at the temporal markers in this brief conversation further demonstrates an inability to accept reality. She refers to herself and the army in the past tense: “Ça fait onze ans que j’ai perdu ce cher Henri... On n’a jamais retrouvé son corps.” Her husband, although dead, is spoken of in the present tense: “Il est quelque-part là-bas en Algérie,” and “C’est là! C’est là qu’il doit reposer, coûte que coûte!” She speaks as if she is the one no longer living, not Henri. Without his body, Manant cannot properly mourn his death, and the rituals for the living that accompany burial of the dead cannot be performed. The absence of ritual in this case prevents Madame Manant from moving beyond her loss. Moreover, her vocabulary manifests doubts about the war

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<sup>96</sup> Serge Bernstein, “La peau de chagrin de l’Algérie française,” *La guerre d’Algérie et les Français*,. Ed. Jean-Pierre Rioux (Paris: Fayard, 1990) 217.

itself; the questions of cost “ce cher Henri” and sacrifice “coûte que coûte” evoked in her outbursts perhaps reveals a commentary on war; not only were the objectives of the war ill-defined for the French, Henri’s death occurred for no reason; he died for nothing since France was ultimately forced to abandon Algeria. Those who survived the conflict felt no less sacrificed. As some scholars have noted:

Veterans of Algeria felt they belonged to a ‘sacrificed generation.’ They discovered, on demobilization, that their country intended only to forget what they had gone through and sink into a collective amnesia. This was encouraged from the highest levels of the Fifth Republic...<sup>97</sup>

Although Henri himself is not there to have such feelings, those left in the war’s wake, such as Madame Manant, were. The questioning of Henri’s death translates into a questioning of the war itself, which for many French was unjustified and whose objectives remained ambiguous. In the Manifesto of the 121 previously cited, the signatories emphasize the ambiguity of the nature of this particular war:

Pour les Algériens, la lutte, poursuivie, soit par des moyens militaires, soit par des moyens diplomatiques, ne comporte aucune équivoque. C’est une guerre d’indépendance nationale. Mais pour les Français, quelle en est la nature? Ce n’est pas une guerre étrangère...Il ne suffirait même pas de dire qu’il s’agit d’une guerre de conquête, guerre impérialiste, accompagnée par surcroît de racisme. Il y a de cela dans toute guerre, et l’équivoque persiste.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Martin S. Alexander, Martin Evans, and J.F.V Keiger, “The ‘War without a name,’ the French Army and the Algerians; Recovering Experiences, Images, and Testimonies,” *The Algerian War and the French Army 1954-1962, Experiences, Images, Testimonies* (New York: Macmillan, 2002) 16.

<sup>98</sup> “Manifeste des 121,” *Le Monde diplomatique* 2000 <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2000/09/A/14199>>.

Although Madame Manant tells her story to Zouina in the film, she is not fully heard or understood by her. This is true of the other victims of the Algerian war as well, whose stories are revealed in the film but whose interlocutors fail to understand them. This suggests the difficulty if not impossibility of arriving at a consensus about the war or understanding the other's colonial experience. Madame Manant's relationship with Zouina, in fact, begins with a misunderstanding. Misinterpreting the cause of Zouina's distress in the cemetery, Madame Manant assumes that Zouina is there purposefully to grieve a loved one. Like Madame Manant, who has lost her husband but who herself has been lost to history, Zouina is not at the cemetery to grieve the dead but instead finds herself lost, both in a physical sense and in a larger sense as she is a stranger in a strange land. The two women, separated by history, nevertheless share this "perte de repères." Unhearing and incapable of understanding what Zouina is requesting exactly, Madame Manant only hears "Algeria" and thus begins to relate her experience with this country so passionately fought over by French and Algerians alike. Ever mindful of not being forgotten herself, one of her first questions at her next encounter with Zouina is "Vous vous souvenez de moi?" and we can only make sense of this by pointing to her history, since clearly Zouina would be unable to forget an event that placed her in such peril. Her encounter with Madame Manant in the cemetery had ended with the latter's dog being killed by a military convoy passing through. Upon hearing the news, Madame Manant was taken to the hospital, and the military convoy accompanied Zouina and the dog's carcass back to her home, where thankfully her husband and mother-in-law had not yet returned. Later that night she buried the dog in the yard while the family slept.

It would seem that this narrative about family reunification is also a story about national reconciliation, and that the real addressee of these stories are the spectators of the film. Madame

Manant thus becomes an allegory for the way in which France did not or could not properly grieve this war, and like Madame Manant, is suffering the consequences to this day. Sensing perhaps that a contemporary audience would be more receptive to such a depiction and that reconciliation was now possible, *Inch'Allah dimanche* responds to what Benjamin Stora has characterized as “la gangrène,” a gangrene afflicting French society stemming from a lack of “une vision d’ensemble” or consensus of the Algerian war. By bringing into contact the multiple experiences of the war without fully condemning nor condoning any position, Benguigui opens the door to a different way of approaching this painful era of French history. Benguigui’s film, while depicting the past, has its eye on the future, hence the title of the film *Inch'Allah dimanche*, “Inch’Allah” the arabic equivalent for “God Willing” and used in reference to a future event. Only we, the informed audience that is four decades removed from this period and in a moment deemed by Benguigui opportune for such a dialogue, can hear and understand these stories.

“Mais la guerre continue. Et nous aurons à panser des années encore les plaies multiples et quelquefois indélébiles faites à nos peuples par le déferlement colonialiste.”<sup>99</sup> These prescient observations would bear out in the years, indeed decades, to come. Yet Frantz Fanon, as a psychiatrist in Algeria during the war of independence, had already noted that “La vérité est que la colonisation, dans son essence, se présentait déjà comme une grande pourvoyeuse des hôpitaux psychiatriques.”<sup>100</sup> In fact, both Fanon and Albert Memmi theorized the colonial condition in psychiatric, or psychological terms, for they knew that the psychological consequences of oppression and violence would far outlast the physical scars left by the brutality

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<sup>99</sup> Fanon *Les damnés* 299.

<sup>100</sup> Fanon 299.

of the colonial system and war. In the character of Aïcha, Zouina's mother-in-law, these consequences take the form of cyclical violence.

The colonized personality par excellence, Aïcha perpetuates the violence she endured under her colonial master against her daughter-in-law, through the surrogate of her son, who is equally weak and powerless beyond the confines of the domestic space. The persistence of this particular historical experience is especially catastrophic as it is transmitted through generations, as evidenced by Ahmed and Malika, the Algerian woman Zouina seeks throughout the film. Believing that she has found a community with which she can celebrate Aid, her eventual meeting with Malika ends in disillusionment for Zouina, for Malika turns out to be a younger version of Aïcha. In the book, this occurs quite literally: "Zouina balaie l'air devant ses yeux pour tenter de chasser une vision insoutenable: l'image d'Aïcha vient de se superposer à celle de Malika."<sup>101</sup> The film seems to suggest that this sort of transgenerational trauma stemming from the colonial experience is less of a factor on the French side, for we see a clear generational break between the generation represented by Madame Manant and Madame Donze and that of Nicole and the busdriver (played by Jalil Lespert). Nicole's friendship with Zouina does not appear to be burdened by historical baggage although there is the suggestion that divergent women's experiences will be a factor in this relationship.

The film informs us of Aïcha's history by way of a visit from Madame Manant. After the incident in the cemetery during which Madame Manant's dog Simca is run over by a military convoy, Madame Manant turns up at Zouina's home to thank her for burying the dog's carcass, a dignity denied her husband, and to offer her a gift, which happens to be a book on Algeria. Like Madame Manant, for whom the utterance of "Algérie" prompted the telling of her own personal

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<sup>101</sup> Benguigui, *Inch'Allah dimanche* 148

history, Aïcha hears “Algérie” and begins to recount the abuse she suffered by a “colon”: “D’où elle connaît l’Algérie, celle-là? L’Algérie, la pauvre, je l’ai laissée derrière moi. Toute ma vie, j’ai travaillé dur. J’ai souffert, j’ai travaillé chez les colons. Elle me frappait avec la canne. Je n’ai pas eu de chance. Mais Dieu est grand.”

Speaking of this cruelty while leafing through “un beau livre sur l’Algérie” underscores the disparate experiences of Algeria that the characters of the film epitomize. The gulf that separates historical experience is mirrored by the barrier that language poses in this scene. Madame Manant does not hear Aïcha’s story. Speaking in her native language, Aïcha’s story never reaches Manant, leaving only Zouina and the viewer (via subtitles for non-Arabic speakers) able to hear of this experience. We can thus conclude that Aïcha’s story is primarily addressed to a contemporary audience, who, according to Benguigui, would ideally be both French and Maghrébin. While Aïcha is hardly a likeable or redeemable character in the film, this scene serves to attenuate her hostile and violent tendencies towards Zouina, perhaps in an attempt to elicit compassion from the viewer or as an explanation of her conduct.

The caricatural depiction of the evil mother-in-law as portrayed by Aïcha clearly plays into the comic element of the film. Yet like the other characters who display periodic outrageous behavior, there is more to the story than mere comedy. This scene underscores the violence that is inflicted on Zouina throughout the film, for Aïcha has not left Algeria behind her, but instead continues the legacy of brutality left by colonial oppression. Having had no power as a colonized subject and finding herself equally powerless in a postcolonial France, she uses her authority in the home and her influence on her son to perpetuate the beatings that she endured by the colonizer. In fact, in each of the instances where Zouina is beaten by her husband, it is Aïcha who provokes and exacerbates the violence.

Zouina's first beating occurs after her fight with Madame Donze. Ahmed arrives home from work to find the police waiting at his doorstep. Initially thinking that it is a matter of legal papers, he never seemingly is able to figure out why the police are there. Not helping the situation are Aïcha, who tells her son about his wife lifting up her skirt during the fight and the policeman, himself unable to identify the crime but citing a destroyed rooster and flowers. Contrary to the viewer's expectations, the physical altercation between Zouina and Madame Donze is never mentioned as the reason for the police's presence. In the end, it is the fact that Zouina has brought the police to the home and thus exposed the family to outside scrutiny, that provokes the beating. Fear of the authorities is the primary motivation for the punishment she receives.

In subsequent beatings, Zouina is once again punished, but not for the supposed crimes that she has committed. In one instance, a salesman knocks on the door and offers his customary sales pitch. Confused and having very little contact with outsiders except for the game show *le Jeu de Mille francs* that she listens to on the radio, Zouina is led to believe that she has won a prize for answering a riddle correctly, and she signs for a vacuum cleaner. When the salesman later returns to collect payment for the "prize," she attempts to explain to Ahmed what the salesman told her, but to no avail. He beats her not for the payments for which he is now obliged, but for knowing how to sign her name.

In yet another scene, Aïcha reveals to Ahmed the gifts (make-up and the book on Algeria) that Zouina has received from her friend Nicole and Madame Manant. Upon seeing the book on Algeria, Ahmed flies into a rage and screams at Zouina "Tu sais lire, toi?" then proceeds to hit her. In both episodes it becomes clear that the violence is not provoked by some tangible crime or offense that Zouina has committed, but rather Ahmed's own sense of inferiority.

Earlier in the film we discover that Ahmed is learning how to read and write; the fact that his wife is able to do both heightens his sense of powerlessness, and consequently threatens his authority in the home, the only power he has.

In his diagnosis of the colonial situation, Memmi discusses the role of the family in a colonized society.

Sooner or later then, the potential rebel falls back on the traditional values. This explains the astonishing survival of the colonized's family. The colonial superstructure has real value as a refuge. It saves the colonized from the despair of total defeat and, in return, it finds confirmation in a constant inflow of new blood. The young man will marry, will become a devoted father, reliable brother, responsible uncle and, until he takes his father's place, a respectful son. Everything has gone back into the order of things. Revolt and conflict have ended in a victory for the parents and tradition. But it is a pyrrhic victory. Colonized society has not even taken a half-step forward; for the young man, it is an internal catastrophe. He will remain glued to that family which offers him warmth and tenderness but which simultaneously absorbs, clutches and emasculates him.[...]With good grace now, he submits, as do the others, to his father's authority and prepares to replace him. The model is a weak one. His universe is that of the vanquished. But what other way out is there? By a curious paradox, his father is simultaneously weak and possessive. The young man is ready to assume his role of the colonized adult—that is, to accept being an oppressed creature.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Memmi, 99-100

In *Inch'Allah dimanche*, the father is absent (presumably dead) and it is Aïcha who assumes the role of authority figure in the family. Sensing her son's inability to assume this authority, she transfers her power to him by encouraging the violence he perpetuates on Zouina, at times even inventing pretexts for such violence.

However, the violence engendered by colonization is not the sole target of criticism in the scenes in which this sickly dynamic is on display. The film also takes aim at some of the more conservative and oppressive aspects within the Algerian community, including a calcified patriarchal family structure which subordinates women, particularly daughters, to their husbands, as well as the notions of shame and honor that have resulted in so called honor killings. While the film does not take aim at the latter explicitly, it should be noted that being killed for a perceived transgression is a subtext throughout the film. Both Zouina and Malika express their fear (Malika quite hysterically) of being killed by their husbands, Zouina for leaving the house, a forbidden act, and Malika for associating with Zouina, whom she suspects of being 'contaminated' by France.

Both Ahmed and Aïcha reflect the resignation that often characterizes first-generation immigrants; both have accepted their lot. This may be a consequence of being colonized, for as Memmi observed, "The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community."<sup>103</sup> He or she, no longer a subject in history, thus makes no attempt to effect change in society and instead retreats into the family. Certain interpretations of Islam also insist upon one's submission to fate. Aïcha's use of fatalistic expressions ("je n'ai pas eu de chance") underscores her resignation. Yet Halim Barakat insists that the fatalism that characterizes Islamic societies does not necessarily translate into passive acceptance of one's lot,

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<sup>103</sup> Memmi 91.

“for many Muslims, fate is understood to mean having to struggle to change reality.”<sup>104</sup> This more positive interpretation of fate is exemplified by Zouina, who takes risks and challenges the validity of certain boundaries set up within her own culture as well as in the host society.

We do not know what will become of Zouina or the others in the film, like Benguigui’s other films, *Inch’Allah dimanche* ends on both a melancholic and hopeful note. *Inch’Allah dimanche* is as much a commentary on what was and what is to come as it is about this particular moment in history, a moment where immigrants from France’s former colonies are beginning to settle permanently in France, reminding those who were involved in the colonial effort of their losses. A moment which sees “les trentes glorieuses” coming to an end, setting up a climate of economic insecurity for the decades to come, and for which the figure of the immigrant will be posited as the primary scapegoat. Unable or unwilling to come to terms with these losses, the characters of *Inch’Allah dimanche*, of which Madame Donze and Madame Manant are prime examples, engage in endless repetitions and reenactments of what is no longer. Yet the title *Inch’Allah dimanche* suggests that, while treating the past, the film has its eye on the future, a future that is mindful but not imprisoned by the past.

The films discussed in this chapter demonstrate that the past does not die easily. Today’s racism and discrimination against individuals of Maghrebi and African descent were born in yesterday’s colonial project. When an open and public reckoning with the past is required but does not occur, it will emerge in other ways, through other forms, such as art. In the case of France, Maghrebi immigrants and immigration cannot be fully acknowledged without also

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<sup>104</sup> Barakat 193.

recognizing that they belong to a larger colonial history that concluded painfully for everyone concerned. Benguigui's cinema, then, by addressing these questions, can be read as one step in this reckoning, one movement towards a new historical consciousness.

### 3.0 GENRE

Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.<sup>105</sup> –Walter Benjamin

J'ai voulu aller aux origines de cette histoire [immigration]. Je me suis préparée à ce voyage : il n'était pas question d'aborder l'immigration sans tenir compte de mon propre parcours. Au fur et à mesure de cette aventure, je me suis installée, calée, insérée dans la société, alors que ce n'est jamais clair pour personne. Je crois savoir maintenant ce qu'est être citoyen !<sup>106</sup> –Yamina Benguigui

The ideas expressed in the preceding quotes by Benjamin and Benguigui reflect the potential of cinema for both the artist and those for whom the work of art is destined. For Benjamin, the advent of photography and film in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was not only capable of revolutionizing Western conceptions of art, it could also fundamentally transform the relationship between the artist, the work of art, and the people. No longer would the work of art be concerned with questions of origins and authenticity, the “prerequisite to the concept of authority”<sup>107</sup>; with new technologies came the severing of the “work of art from its parasitical

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<sup>105</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, 236.

<sup>106</sup>Yamina Benguigui, interview with Olivier Barlat, *harmattan.fr*, Sept. 1997. 11 Apr. 2005  
<<http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/>>.

<sup>107</sup> Benjamin, 220.

dependence on ritual”<sup>108</sup> whereby the very function of art would be transformed. “But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.”<sup>109</sup> As a result of these new technologies, larger audiences are able to access and engage with artistic productions. Benguigui does not abdicate her authorial position as filmmaker, but she does allow for the possibility of shared authorship, particularly in her documentary films, which not only reflect her positions on the issues she addresses, but also those of the subjects she films and the viewer who enters into dialogue with the films. Both Benjamin and Benguigui compare film (in the first instance, cinema in general; in the second, to a specific film and cinematic project) to an adventure, a journey and link it to a larger political project with transformational potentiality.

It is therefore not surprising that Yamina Benguigui would turn to film a half-century later, considering her preoccupation with the political and social exigencies of contemporary France, especially in regards to Maghrebi immigration, her belief in the possibilities of cinema, and her desire to speak to as wide a public as possible. Her subject matter would come from her personal experiences as well as her training as assistant to Jean-Daniel Pollet, a filmmaker associated with the New Wave who was considered a “ciné-poet”<sup>110</sup> for the “strikingly beautiful and strangely alien”<sup>111</sup> quality of his films. “Pour moi, c’est [*Inch’Allah dimanche*] un film qui fonctionne sur de petits détails: la chaussure trop grande de Zouina, les mots qu’elle entend dans la bouche des autres...etc. Je suis de l’école de Jean-Daniel Pollet, et je crois à la valeur

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<sup>108</sup> Benjamin 224.

<sup>109</sup> Benjamin 224.

<sup>110</sup> Ronald Bergan, “Jean-Daniel Pollet: French director who explored the pleasures of ordinary people,” *The Guardian* 17 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>>.

<sup>111</sup> Chris Darke, “Films of Ruin and Rapture: In search of Jean-Daniel Pollet,” *Film Comment* May/June 2007 <<http://filmline.net/fcm/mj07/jeandanielpollet.htm>>.

universelle des petites particularités.”<sup>112</sup> A more in-depth discussion of this relationship will be discussed later in this study. Her preferred genres thus far, the documentary and the tragicomedy, lend themselves particularly well to her project. In the first instance, the documentary, a genre concerned with the real world and questions of truth, bears a certain level of seriousness and legitimacy. Immigration, the primary subject of her films, has been the center of debates in France for several decades now and therefore any interventions into such debates through film require commensurate authority. As Benguigui is also attempting to integrate immigrants’ histories into a French national History, in a sense offer a new history lesson for the nation, the long didactic tradition of the documentary is well-suited to her aims. Her privileging of the documentary genre invites us to ask in what ways this genre lends itself to her artistic expression and objectives and at the same time demands an interrogation of the genre’s limitations and possibilities.

Tragicomedy, on the other hand, is a popular genre that permits Benguigui to not only tap into a wider audience but also to draw attention to very serious matters, often depicted in a comedic fashion. Arguably, questions of racism, oppression, even death cast in a comedic light could deflect serious reflection of these issues; paradoxically, however, by provoking laughter in such dire situations, we are obliged to ask ourselves at what are we really laughing?

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<sup>112</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Yves Alion, *L’avant-scène du cinéma*. Nov. 2001: 136-8.

### 3.1 DOCUMENTARY

Benguigui's renown is primarily due to her documentary films, particularly the phenomenal success of *Mémoires d'immigrés*. As a female filmmaker of Algerian descent, it is not surprising that Benguigui's initial solo ventures into filmmaking would be via the medium of documentary. As Patricia White points out, the documentary has been the genre of choice for emerging minority filmmakers:

Although generally under-represented in academic criticism, the mode of filmmaking in which women's intervention has been most extensive and influential, which feminists first entered, and which remains most accessible to emerging artists, including women and people of colour, is documentary.<sup>113</sup>

Documentary's accessibility is tied to questions of economics since it can be produced at the fraction of the cost of a feature-length fiction film, but White proposes another explanation of this phenomenon that underscores the very heart of Benguigui's cinematic project. Paralleling the marginalization of documentary within the scope of academic cinema studies, White alludes to the historical marginalization of women in cinema and history. Documentary, then, opens a space for women and minorities to reclaim their voice and place.

Cinema vérité and 'talking heads', interview-based formats allowed women to speak for themselves and to narrate history-exemplifying the feminist slogan 'the personal is the political.' Such films were meant to raise consciousness and to effect social change, addressing viewers in an accessible style and encouraging

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<sup>113</sup> Patricia White, "Feminism and Film," *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 125.

active response. Hence the form is particularly effective in constructing a community.<sup>114</sup>

What kind of community films have the potential to create is indeed at the heart of the issue. Viewing a film in public creates a temporary cinematic community which may have reverberations in society at large. This is indeed the case for Benguigui, who in her films aims to render visible a segment of the French community and a history that has for decades been marginalized or denied. The filmmaker's preoccupation with history has already been demonstrated in the previous chapter, and it is perhaps not coincidental that both documentary and historiography share the same central feature, as Philip Rosen observes: both concern a selection and sequencing of real events and reality to create a meaningful narrative.<sup>115</sup> Michael Renov, in the same collection of essays on documentary cinema, defines the documentary as "the more or less artful shaping of the historical world."<sup>116</sup> The immigrants featured in Benguigui's celebrated documentary *Mémoires d'immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin* speak for themselves and of themselves, a phenomenon perceived to be novel within representations of the immigrant community, particularly those of the immigrants themselves (the so-called first generation, considered by Benguigui and others to be a "silent" generation).

Or do they? Who is speaking in the film, and for whom? In their analysis of *Mémoires d'immigrés*, Ingram and Martin state the following:

Although issues involving immigration receive considerable attention in the French media, seldom are the "immigrants" themselves heard. The documentary

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<sup>114</sup> White 126-7.

<sup>115</sup> Philip Rosen, "Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts," *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>116</sup> Michael Renov, "Introduction: the Truth about Non-Fiction," *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993).

film *Mémoires d'immigrés* breaks this silence by giving a voice to Maghrebi immigrants and their children.<sup>117</sup>

Is “giving a voice” the same as speaking for oneself? Benguigui herself addresses, though does not resolve, this question. “Je m’étais dit que j’irais au plus près de cette parole, de ces gens, de cette mémoire.”<sup>118</sup> Benguigui, as filmmaker, is cognizant of her role as mediator of her subjects’ testimonies, but this should not necessarily diminish their effectiveness and forcefulness, for one could argue that all cinematic productions are mediated to some extent.

Other postcolonial documentary filmmakers, like Trinh T. Minh-ha, echo Benguigui’s apprehension about capturing others’ voices, but unlike Benguigui, Minh-ha problematizes the very category of documentary and illustrates the difficulty if not impossibility of capturing ‘truth’ in documentary.

Truth, even when “caught on the run,” does not yield itself either in names or in filmic frames; and meaning should be prevented from coming to closure at either what is said or what is shown. Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning.<sup>119</sup>

One film that challenges documentary’s claims to truth and representation of the real (even the representation of one’s self) is *Surname Viêt, Given name Nam*, which poses as a series of interviews with five Vietnamese refugee women. Initially, the composition of the film—interviews, archival footage, still photographs—may invite comparisons to Benguigui’s own

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<sup>117</sup> Mark Ingram and Florence Martin, “Voices unveiled: *Mémoires d'immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin*,” *Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities*, ed. Eva Rueschmann (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 2003) 105.

<sup>118</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Thomas Lemahieu, *Périphéries.net* 1998  
<<http://www.peripheries.net/article201.html>>.

<sup>119</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Documentary is / Not a name,” *October* 52 (Spring 1990) 75.

documentary practice, for she employs these devices in her films as well. As Gracki points out in her analysis of the film, though, in Minh-ha's film, the very devices aimed to authenticate these women's experiences are in fact ruses, designed to highlight the very difficulty of capturing experience. The women, as it turns out, are not Vietnamese refugees but rather women reenacting the testimonies in Mai Thu Van's *Việtnam: un peuple, des voix*. As the film progresses, Gracki observes, the artificiality of the production becomes increasingly evident, and even more interestingly, as the women are invited to represent their real selves on camera, they become in a sense more fictional. They do not dress in their usual clothes and ask to be filmed in contrived spaces; in other words, they choose not to be filmed as they are in everyday life. Gracki concludes from this anecdote that the fictionality that manifests itself in the documentary is not tantamount to a lie, however, and paradoxically may reveal more truth about these women than a supposedly more authentic representation would.

This example illustrates quite well how fictionalization need not be associated with fraud, duplicity and lies, for it is ultimately able to draw out a greater truth than the mere attempt to mirror "reality" and everyday life. This Vietnamese woman's personal dream speaks volumes about what her lived experience as a working class woman is really like, even as it engages in flights of fancy.<sup>120</sup>

Benguigui does not appear concerned with the same preoccupations as Minh-ha, and her films play out in a seemingly more straightforward, conventional fashion. This construction too, though not as provocative as Minh-ha's film, employs a variety of fictive techniques, such as extra-diegetic music, the effacement of the interviewer from the audio track and cinematic frame, and the different angles and distances used to capture the immigrants' testimony and that of the

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<sup>120</sup> Katherine Gracki, "True Lies: Staging the Ethnographic Interview in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989)," *Pacific Coast Philology* 36 (2001) 52.

bureaucrats who participated in the film. Further elaboration of these techniques will be discussed in the following pages.

*Mémoires d'immigrés* succeeded in interpellating the desired audience, as attested to by the response that the film received in public viewings. In an interview with *Le Monde*, Benguigui shares the following anecdote about one such viewing:

Aujourd'hui, je sens que la société est prête à écouter, et moi à donner. On a montré le documentaire la semaine dernière à Saint-Etienne. C'était bourré. Les mamas maghrébines ont raconté leur histoire, une Portugaise a parlé une demi-heure en portugais, les Français disaient qu'ils ne savaient pas qu'on était là depuis longtemps...Les jeunes sont venus en masse le soir, quelque chose les a beaucoup interpellés [...].<sup>121</sup>

The universal reach of the documentary, as attested to by the ethnically and generationally diverse audience that attended the screening, is remarkable considering the subject treated, a subject that seemed to interest very few when Benguigui first proposed it.<sup>122</sup> In this case, the space that was opened within the documentary for the testimonies and experiences of immigrants extends beyond the screen to include the spectators, thereby creating an identification that is at the heart of cinematic production. Benjamin speaks of a related consequence of mechanically reproduced art, a sort of democratization of the arts that occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries due to the emergence of forms that could be reproduced in mass quantities, such as print forms (the newspaper), photography, and film. By using the analogy of print in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (readership multiplied exponentially due to expansion of the press), he claims that this availability and exposure led many readers to become writers, thus blurring the

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<sup>121</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Catherine Humblot, *lemonde.fr*. 25 May 1997 <lemonde.fr>.

<sup>122</sup> The obstacles Benguigui faced in getting the film made will be discussed later in the chapter.

distinction between “the author and public.” “The reader,” consequently, “gains access to authorship.”<sup>123</sup> Film formats can create a similar relationship: “Similarly, the newsreel offers everyone the opportunity to rise from passer-by to movie extra. In this way any man might even find himself part of a work of art [...] Any man today can lay claim to being filmed.<sup>124</sup> In the case of this particular sharing of *Mémoires d’immigrés*, the spectators continue the work of the film by offering their own testimonies after the viewing, thus becoming themselves part of the narrative that Benguigui has begun but that is only fully actualized upon viewing the film. What is inherent to documentary and other reality-based mediums that allow for and create identification and dialogue? A brief history of the development of documentary may reveal some insights on its various uses and forms as well as why and how viewers respond to it.

John Grierson (1898-1972), the Scotsman often credited for founding the British documentary film movement<sup>125</sup> and instrumental in theorizing the genre, notes that the term “documentaire” was initially used by the French to signify a “travelogue.”<sup>126</sup> Both Benjamin and Benguigui characterize film (production and reception) as an adventure, or voyage, through time, space, self, and community. For both filmmaker and spectator, the documentary often presents itself as a process of discovery of unknown or poorly known realities. In his study of the evolution of the documentary, the historian Erik Barnouw describes the various positions that a documentary filmmaker has assumed throughout its history.<sup>127</sup> Among others, the documentary filmmaker was / is explorer, poet, observer, advocate, discoverer, chronicler, and guerilla. Benguigui’s documentaries, constructed from historical documents and personal

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<sup>123</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 232.

<sup>124</sup> Benjamin 231.

<sup>125</sup> “John Grierson,” *Britannica.com* <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/246036/John-Grierson>>.

<sup>126</sup> Forsyth Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (Berkeley: U California P, 1966)

<sup>127</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983)

testimonies, can be characterized as an exploration through time and memory. In *Mémoires d'immigrés*, she discovered her own story and allowed the public to also discover a reality, both historical and experiential, that was largely foreign to them. By documenting these stories and this history, Benguigui assumes the role of chronicler, and finally, her advocacy on behalf of those portrayed in her films is but one piece of a larger political project.<sup>128</sup>

The birth of documentary as a cinematic genre coincides with the birth of cinema itself, both of which happened to have taken place in France. As Louis Menand of the *New Yorker* notes, “The term [documentary] is as old as the cinema. *Documentaire* was one of the names that early filmmakers, back when many of the prominent ones were French, gave to movies of ordinary life, exotic places, and current events.”<sup>129</sup> In fact, the first documentaries were made by the inventors of cinema, the Lumière brothers, at the turn of the century. Yet, according to Susan Hayward, we would have to wait until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to see the documentary achieve a certain level of success and prestige, perhaps even legitimacy. This phenomenon came about due to renewed interest in the documentary and attention to formal training in cinema, both of which produced movements that would define the late 1950s and 1960s: the French New Wave and *cinéma vérité*. Hayward states that *cinéma vérité*, can be considered as the “first identifiable documentary movement” in France whose aim was to “obtain the closest possible relationship to objective realism.” The desire to represent reality as objectively as possible would wane in the late 1960s and during the 1970s, a period that witnessed the rise of militant and politically-motivated documentaries that correlated to the ideological shifts that culminated in the protests in France and elsewhere in the late 1960s. The documentary form, Hayward

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<sup>128</sup> Benguigui’s various political interventions will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>129</sup> Louis Menand, “Nanook and Me: Fahrenheit 9/11 and the documentary tradition,” *The New Yorker* 9 Aug. 2004 <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/08/09/040809crat\\_atlarge](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/08/09/040809crat_atlarge)>.

continues, “becomes a radical politics of representation” and begins to aggressively question what had been to that point given as truth. “Contemporary history was no longer the safe mythology of heroes.”<sup>130</sup> It was during this period of documentary filmmaking that women and minorities were able to give voice to concerns that had been for the most part ignored, and it is from this tradition that Benguigui’s work, giving voice to those who have been silenced, is made possible. The appeal of documentary for Benguigui and others documentarians may lie in the genre’s perceived relationship to truth (certainly not an unproblematic one) and its tradition of challenging hegemonic representations. Much of the “truth” of *Mémoires d’immigrés* stems from the accumulation of testimonies by both immigrants and administrators, as well as documented proof of these testimonies in the form of photographs, archival footage, and written documents.

Despite the long tradition of documentary filmmaking in France, it would be in the aftermath of the Second World War and the decades following it that the most well-known documentaries were made, namely *Nuit et brouillard* (1955) by Alain Resnais, Marcel Ophüls *Le chagrin et la pitié* (1969) and Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). These films examined and at times challenged the myths and representations of the Occupation, the Resistance, and the Holocaust that had circulated in France after the war.

More recently, the documentary has enjoyed immense popularity in France due to the successes of such filmmakers as Nicolas Philibert and Agnès Varda. Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la*

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<sup>130</sup> Susan Hayward, “Documentaries,” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture*, eds. Alex Hughes and Keith Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 159-60.

*glaneuse* (2000) was a critical and popular success<sup>131</sup> and Philibert's *Etre et avoir* (2002) is the most successful French documentary to date,<sup>132</sup> both in France and beyond its borders.

Daring in its simplicity, Philibert's seeming sleeper has found phenomenal success all over the world, breaking records for documentaries in France, where a million-plus have viewed it, with 300 prints in circulation.<sup>133</sup>

Giving voice to an issue or to a marginalized population is also of primary concern to documentary filmmakers. Two of Philibert's earlier documentaries, *Le pays des sourdes* (1992) and *La moindre des choses* (1996) feature marginalized groups: the deaf and the mentally ill. For Benguigui, the marginalized group of choice is the Maghrebi immigrant in France. If *Mémoires d'immigrés* is credited for having "libéré la parole" on the question of immigration, then what has happened in the ten years or so since the documentary was first aired on television and in movie theaters? Have others continued the work begun by Benguigui? According to her, the film has been a starting point for other projects and discussions on immigration. "Alors, quand on n'a rien partagé pendant 40 ans, comment on fait à présent? A Lyon, des gens viennent d'organiser un colloque sur la vieillesse et l'immigration à partir de *Mémoires d'immigrés*. Le relais, là, a été pris."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> See, for example, various press reviews at <[http://www.allocine.fr/film/revuedepresse\\_gen\\_cfilm=25251.html](http://www.allocine.fr/film/revuedepresse_gen_cfilm=25251.html)>; Scott's review in the *New York Times* <<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C01E0DA173DF933A0575AC0A9669C8B63>>; Zacharek's review at <<http://archive.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2001/03/08/gleaners/index.html>>; and Schwarzbaum's review for Entertainment Weekly at <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,102576,00.html>>.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Falcon, "A big hit in France, *Etre et Avoir* is a documentary that rewards our patience," *Sight and Sound* 7 (July 2003) 28-29.

<sup>133</sup> Erica Abeel, "Teacher of the Year: A French Schoolhouse Offers Universal Lessons," *Film Journal International* 106 (September 2003) 20-21.

<sup>134</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Thomas Lemahieu, *Périphéries.net* <[http://peripheries.net/article201.html?var\\_recherche=yamina+benguigui](http://peripheries.net/article201.html?var_recherche=yamina+benguigui)>.

More recently, the airing of the documentary *Vu à la télé: La saga des immigrés*<sup>135</sup> over two weeks on France 5 in February of 2007 would appear to substantiate Benguigui's claims. France 5 is known for its educational programs and specializes in documentaries, along the same lines as the History or Discovery channels in the United States. The two-part documentary was produced by documentary filmmaker Edouard Mills-Affif, author of *Filmer les immigrés: les représentations audiovisuelles de l'immigration à la télévision française 1960-1986* (2004), and professor of media production at the Université de Paris I. Mills-Affif collaborated with Anne Reigel, a film editor, to compile archival footage taken from the *Institut national audiovisuel* (INA) which was designed to trace the evolution of the immigration debate as it played out on television from the 1960s to the early 1990s. As its premise, the documentary addresses the question "How did immigration, originally a question of economic need, come to be viewed as a "problem" in and of itself?" It attempts to do this by means of footage from news reports, *magazines d'information*, and panel-based television shows that focused on the issues of the day. The filmmakers make use of a narrator, actress Christine Gagnieux, to comment on and interpret the footage on the screen. Unlike *Mémoires d'immigrés*, there is no contemporary footage woven into the archival footage in *La saga des immigrés*, although the latter recycles some archival footage that was used in *Mémoires*, particularly of Giscard d'Estaing's visit to a bidonville and segments from *Les Ouvriers Noirs* about the recruitment and the adjustment process of Africans who have come to work in a French factory.

Although *La saga des immigrés* was aired ten years after *Mémoires d'immigrés*, it shows that there has existed a certain level of consciousness about immigration and immigrants in France since at least the 1960s, and that immigrants were not as invisible as some have

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<sup>135</sup> *Vu à la télé: la saga des immigrés*, Edouard Mills Affif and Anne Reigel, DVD, INA, 2007.

suggested. Although French television faced interventions and regulations by the government over the decades, and was used to legitimize or make arguments for governmental policies regarding immigration, some managed to expose and denounce the deplorable conditions faced by immigrants both at work and at home. In fact, *La saga des immigrés* opens with archival footage of the 1970 asphyxiation of five African immigrant laborers in one of the infamous *foyers* that were provided as housing to workers, claiming that this incident, which provoked a media frenzy, was “l’origine du premier grand débat national sur l’immigration.”<sup>136</sup>

Added as a bonus feature to the DVD of *La saga des immigrés*, Coline Serreau’s *Grand-mères de l’Islam*<sup>137</sup> features two Algerian women living in Gardanne in the 1970s. The similarities to Benguigui’s documentaries are striking, and one wonders whether Benguigui may have viewed Serreau’s film. *Grand-mères de l’Islam* aired on TF1 on August 11, 1980. Serreau does not use a narrator, and we only hear the female interviewer (Serreau?) a few times throughout the 36-minute film. The film is mostly comprised of the two women talking about their personal experiences: their arranged marriages, their voyage to France, having children, their interactions with the French, divorce, and in the case of the second woman, her attempts to gain some level of personal freedom. At times the camera turns to the first woman’s husband and children, who offer up commentary to the questions being discussed. The rest of the documentary consists of footage in the cinéma vérité tradition: shots of daily life at the market, preparing meals, doing household chores, singing the traditional Algerian chant, and dancing.

In many ways, Serreau’s documentary appears to be a precursor to *Mémoires d’immigrés*, and they share some of the same cinematographic tendencies, such as using the interview format, the largely invisible interviewer, using zoom to capture the immigrants’ emotions and to assure

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<sup>136</sup> *La saga des immigrés*, DVD insert

<sup>137</sup> *Grand-mères de l’Islam*, Coline Serreau, DVD, 1980.

that their images and words take up the space of the cinematographic frame. *Mémoires d'immigrés* also incorporates daily life shots into its narrative. One of the principal differences is that Serreau does not employ any extra-diegetic sound to supplement the visual aspect of the film, whereas Benguigui will often add music to reinforce or to accompany what is being viewed on the screen.

*La saga des immigrés* also includes footage from an earlier documentary *La Mal vie* by Daniel Karlin and Tahar Ben Jelloun. This film about Algerian workers was broadcast on Antenne 2 (now France 2) on November 26, 1978. This leads to an interesting question: if a considerable stock of images and footage of immigrants has existed since the 1960s, why is *Mémoires d'immigrés* considered such a landmark documentary on immigration? Both Serreau's and Karlin's documentaries pre-date *Mémoires d'immigrés* by almost twenty years, so what is distinctive about Benguigui's documentary? It is not exceptionally innovative in terms of cinematography, and the subject, as we have seen, is not an original one. In fact, the success of *Mémoires d'immigrés* has created a public for earlier films such as *La saga des immigrés* and *Grand-mères de l'Islam*. Benguigui's documentary and *La saga des immigrés* may also be symptomatic of a larger shift or evolution in perceptions of and discussions about immigrants. However, the very existence of Benguigui's and Mills-Affif documentaries in the last decade and the imperative to create new representations of immigrants may also signal that the parameters of the debate have not truly shifted all that much and that more work needs to be done in this area.

In addition to creating a space for immigrants and their experiences within French national history, the potential of cinema as a vehicle for citizenship is also very much present in Benguigui's work.

Je voulais qu'il [*Mémoires*] parle aux Maghrébins et aux Français de souche. Qu'ensemble nous ouvrons le débat sur les conditions de vie de nos parents et le fait qu'ils ne nous aient pas enracinés. Or nous devons prendre conscience que nous sommes des citoyens français, que voter est important, mais pour ça, il nous fait connaître notre histoire.<sup>138</sup>

The linkage between documentary and an informed citizenry is not new; in fact it dates back to the very creation of documentary film as a cinematic genre in its own right. John Grierson was very much concerned with issues of citizenship and social responsibility; issues that he believed were not adequately addressed in his day through the traditional means of transmission, namely education. In one of his interventions on the subject, he poses the rhetorical question: "Does education dramatize to the citizen the real ends of citizenship?" According to Grierson, society had become so complicated that knowing everything (or in the very least, being well-informed), one of the preconditions for authentic and effective citizenship, had become impossible, therefore new strategies were required for the task. His solution was film, particularly the documentary film. "In film, however, we have an instrument much more suited to the specific purposes of education than any other for the arts [...] It really can serve an interpretive function." The documentary filmmaker, ideally an informed and enlightened individual, would thus serve as interpreter for the pressing social and political concerns of the time.<sup>139</sup> This is the role Benguigui adopts when she attempts to fill in the void of French historiography on North African immigration. Underlying this task is the belief that a community with a more complete and accurate knowledge of its own origins and history will shift the dynamic that has structured French society since the colonial era.

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<sup>138</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Catherine Humblot, *lemonde.fr* 25 May 1997 <[www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr)>.

<sup>139</sup> Forsyth Hardy, ed. *Grierson on Documentary* (Berkeley: UC Berkeley P, 1966) 194.

Such an undertaking is not without its risks, however. Some have pointed out the affinity of Grierson's conception of documentary with propaganda, and Grierson's involvement with the Empire Marketing Board (he was responsible for the EMB film unit from 1928-1934<sup>140</sup>) raises legitimate questions about this relationship. The EMB was "Established to bring 'the Empire alive' [and] The EMB sought to tie new, commercial, scientific, and cultural bonds between the UK and its increasingly independent-minded colonies."<sup>141</sup> However, as the previous example demonstrates, propaganda is very much tied to power or to states. Benguigui and the subjects she films cannot claim this type of authority; in fact they attempt to challenge the hegemonic representations of immigrants that have circulated since the post-war era. Interestingly though, she incorporates archival footage in her film that appears to once have had propagandistic aims. In Part 1 of *Mémoires d'immigrés*, there is footage of immigrant workers in a classroom learning to read and write, then later one individual (who was featured in the previous segment) talks about the "upgrades" to his housing. At one time, arguably, the objective of this footage was to convince or assure the viewer (likely French) that French employers were taking care of their workers. Situated in the context of Benguigui's film, however, this footage assumes an ironic cast. An incongruity between perception and experience becomes apparent when the aforementioned footage is examined in contrast with other archival footage included in the film, depicting the unsanitary and cramped conditions of these workers' living spaces. This is true of the foyers for the workers but also, and especially, of the bidonvilles that developed when the wives and children of these immigrants arrived. Although some efforts were made to improve living conditions for the workers and their families, they fell dramatically short in their outcome.

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<sup>140</sup> "John Grierson," *National Film Board* <[http://www3.nfb.ca/portraits/john\\_grierson/en/](http://www3.nfb.ca/portraits/john_grierson/en/)>.

<sup>141</sup> "The Empire Marketing Board," *screenonline.org* <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/513720/>>.

Furthermore, Barnouw attempts to rehabilitate, or redefine the notion of propaganda in regards to documentary, which has taken on a decidedly perjorative cast in recent decades.

But of course a propagandistic role is involved. One can hardly imagine a documentary, or a film, or any other kind of work that is not propaganda-in the sense of trying to convey some view of the world, narrow or broad, in a way that will get an audience to share it.”<sup>142</sup>

Even if a discernable and overtly biased point of view is evident in a documentary, which is frequently the case, Barnouw argues that this format does not easily lend itself to the aims of propaganda: “...documentary should be seen as a very difficult medium for propaganda, precisely because it confronts its subject matter openly. It announces its topic. It alerts our critical facilities.”<sup>143</sup>

The use of documentary as an educational tool appears to be a natural progression of the evolution of the term “documentaire,” derived from the latin *documentum* meaning “exemple,” “leçon,” and “enseignement” among other things, itself originating from the verb *docere* meaning “faire apprendre” and “enseigner.”<sup>144</sup> The usage of documentary in the cinematic sense appeared in the French context in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, designating “un film sans fiction”<sup>145</sup> and according to Grierson, “all films made from natural material.”<sup>146</sup> The opposition of truth to fiction as well as that of nature to artifice perhaps points to the appeal and reinforces

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<sup>142</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 313.

<sup>143</sup> Barnouw 314.

<sup>144</sup> “Documentaire,” *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, dir. Alain Rey (Paris : Dictionnaire le Robert, 1998) 1113.

<sup>145</sup> *Dictionnaire* 1114.

<sup>146</sup> Hardy 145.

the legitimacy of the documentary in its main tendencies, according to Renov: to record, reveal, and preserve; persuade and promote; to analyze or interrogate; and to express.<sup>147</sup>

What is it about documentary that makes it, as is often claimed, so effective in the ways previously outlined? “Its plausibility, its authority, is the special quality of the documentary...”<sup>148</sup> Nevertheless, Renov warns against the assumptions made about documentary’s authenticity and authority, emphasizing that although documentary claims to (re)present the real, the “referent,” it is also subject to many of the same interventions as a work of fiction. “Indeed, nonfiction contains any number of “fictive” elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention.”<sup>149</sup> Citing language, narration, soundtrack, as well as technical issues such as lighting, camera angles, selection and sequencing, the reality that documentary is assumed to present is constantly mediated by these interventions. Benguigui points out that she initially had 600 hours of film for *Mémoires d’immigrés*, which was reduced to approximately 3 hours for the final document,<sup>150</sup> leading one to speculate about the choices made in the editing of this film.

Benguigui is very conscious of the questions of authority and legitimacy, and in her discourses surrounding the film she frequently alludes to her own authoritative status on the subjects she chooses to film. Her foremost authoritative stance is that of the daughter of an Algerian immigrant (although not that of an immigrant laborer): “Comme je suis issue de cette histoire, le fait d’avoir fait ce film me donne à leurs yeux une légitimité. C’est un lien. J’ai un rôle de grande sœur [...] Je continue à avoir ce rôle dans le cinéma.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Renov 21.

<sup>148</sup> Barnouw 315.

<sup>149</sup> Renov 2.

<sup>150</sup> Benguigui interview, *lemonde.fr*

<sup>151</sup> Benguigui interview, *péripheries.net*.

When asked whether a French filmmaker could have made such a film, she responds : “...je pense que non. Pas de cette manière, en tout cas. Si je n’avais pas eu les codes culturels pour rentrer dedans, ça aurait été un autre film.” Not only does being an ‘insider’ legitimize her documentary, she also appeals to her status as woman as further legitimizing the authenticity of her work: “En tout cas, je suis sûre qu’un homme maghrébin n’aurait pas pu faire ce film. Il n’aurait jamais eu cette approche, cette façon de capter les parents. Par pudeur, à cause du poids des non-dits.”<sup>152</sup> She suggests that a less “genuine” film would have resulted if a male filmmaker had made a film on this topic.

Un tel film ne pouvait venir d’un garçon. Les mères ne se seraient pas exprimées ainsi. Et les frères ont intégré le message des pères : ils ont toujours la gêne et le complexe de « pleurer » devant un Français, c’est à dire de se livrer tels qu’on est.<sup>153</sup>

Interestingly, it was the break with her family that led Benguigui to cinema, and it was cinema which reconciled her with her history. Her discovery of and training in cinema may shed some light on her aesthetic and topical choices. Her cinematic trajectory can be summarized as follows: the discovery of cinema during adolescence, her cinematic education with Jean-Daniel Pollet, collaborations with Rachid Bouchareb in the 1980s, and finally solo ventures beginning in the 1990s.

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<sup>152</sup> Benguigui interview, *péripheries.net*.

<sup>153</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Olivier Barlet, *harmattan.fr* Sept. 1997, 11 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/>>.

Mais c'est au ciné-club, avec *America, America*, d'Elia Kazan, que sa vocation se révèle: elle sera cinéaste. A sa majorité, bac en poche, elle pousse un étudiant algérien à l'épouser pour quitter sa famille puis, aussi sec, plaque mari et père.<sup>154</sup>

Inspired by Kazan's saga on immigration, the fascination with immigrants, particularly North African immigrants, is clearly evident throughout Benguigui's corpus. After Benguigui's break from both family and husband, she attends film school for a while, then becomes an assistant to Jean-Daniel Pollet, described as "one of the most wayward and least known sons of the New Wave."<sup>155</sup> "Dans le cinéma, c'est le singulier réalisateur Jean-Daniel Pollet qui tient ce rôle [de père] en lui apprenant le métier."<sup>156</sup> Pollet made many films and expressed his vision through different genres—the comedy, the documentary, the essay—although classifying him and his films has been deemed by critics to be difficult if not impossible.

Cinéaste majeur de sa génération, Pollet est certainement l'un des plus méconnus. Cadet de la Nouvelle Vague, selon sa propre expression, il occuperait aux dires des dictionnaires du cinéma une place à part, il serait inclassable donc marginal.<sup>157</sup>

Although some of Pollet's work has been critically lauded, especially by his peers at *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Tel Quel*, he never achieved commercial and popular success, and viewings of his films today, as Darke notes, are by and large attended by cinéphiles.<sup>158</sup> Although Benguigui has been lauded for her work on immigration and *Mémoires d'immigrés* seems to

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<sup>154</sup> Raphael Garrigos and Isabelle Roberts, "Portrait de Yamina Benguigui." *Liberation.fr* 9 Feb. 1999. <<http://www.liberation.fr/portrait/0101272877-yamina-benguigui-41-ans-la-realisateurice-de-memoires-d-immigres-est-devenue-la-presentatrice-alibi-de-place-de-la-republique-algerie-de-me-voir-si-belle>>.

<sup>155</sup> Chris Darke, "Films of Ruin and Rapture: In search of Jean-Daniel Pollet," *Film Comment* May/June 2007 <<http://filmlinc.net/fcm/mj07/jeandanielpollet.htm>>.

<sup>156</sup> Garrigos and Roberts, *Libération*.

<sup>157</sup> Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Jean-Louis Leutrat, *Tours d'horizon : Jean-Daniel Pollet* (Montreuil : Œil, 2005) 8.

<sup>158</sup> Darke, *Film Comment*.

have enjoyed much more commercial success than Pollet's films, she, like Pollet is rarely mentioned in anthologies or encyclopedias of cinema or documentary filmmakers. Both, in some respects, appear to remain on the margins of cinematic inquiry. Neither is mentioned, for instance, in one of the few comprehensive studies of French documentary, *Un siècle de documentaires français: Des tourneurs de manivelle aux voltigeurs du multimédia* by Guy Gauthier (2004).<sup>159</sup>

According to Benguigui, she began working as Pollet's assistant after obtaining the baccalauréat and going briefly to film school.<sup>160</sup> This situates her apprenticeship in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was during this time that Pollet made two films that would appear to have echoes in Benguigui's later documentaries: *Pour mémoire*, which came out in 1979, and *Afrique 80*, which Pollet worked on from 1978-1982.<sup>161</sup> The former, inspired by a visit to a foundry, is one of his indefinable films on the "dignité de ce travail quand il s'effectue dignement."<sup>162</sup> Benguigui's attempt to rehabilitate the immigrant workers and their work in *Mémoires d'immigrés* may have found, in addition to *America, America*, another source in *Pour Mémoire*, whose title is certainly evocative of her film.

The other film that Pollet worked on in this time period, and which has likely and unfortunately been lost,<sup>163</sup> is *Afrique 80*. As Benguigui would do in her documentaries, Pollet used archival images from INA in this project on so-called postcolonial African independence.

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<sup>159</sup> Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), Tavernier's *La Guerre sans nom* (1991), and Philibert's *Etre et avoir* are among the documentaries under consideration in this study. Guy Gauthier, *Un siècle de documentaires français : Des tourneurs de manivelle aux voltigeurs du multimédia*. (Paris : Armand Colin, 2004).

<sup>160</sup> Joan Dupont, "Seeking an Identity in 'the Immigrant's Silence,'" *International Herald Tribune* 31 Mar. 1998 <<http://www.iht.com/articles/1998/03/31/yam.t.php>>.

<sup>161</sup> Liandrat-Guigues and Leutrat 210.

<sup>162</sup> Liandrat-Guigues and Leutrat 13.

<sup>163</sup> According to Liandrat-Guigues and Leutrat, "Il [*le film Afrique 80*] est considéré par JDP comme perdu, ou égaré," 211.

Since the film has been lost, we can only surmise as to the position taken by Pollet through his own words in 1981:

En réalité, il n'y a pas d'indépendance. Le colonialisme se poursuit, repris en main par les élites noirs. C'est un pays où tout se perd : les langues, les coutumes, les croyances. Tout se désagrège à une vitesse terrifiante. Et ce n'est remplacé par rien : l'Occident n'apporte que des objets, il crée du vide. [...] Je voudrais que ce film soit en quelque sorte le *Nuit et Brouillard* de l'Afrique ; que l'on comprenne comment et pourquoi un continent perd son âme dans un immense désastre économique et culturel.<sup>164</sup>

One cannot help but remark that Benguigui would take up similar themes, albeit in a very different setting, in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, notably in the section devoted to the immigrant workers and immigration / work policies of the 1950s through the early 1970s in France.

Likewise, Liandrat-Guigues and Leutrat note that despite the different subjects Pollet treats and the various genres he employs, certain recurring thematic tendencies seem to link all his work together, including his use of music and images. Images in some films are evoked in others, and he would recycle images from what is considered his chef d'oeuvre, *Méditerranée* (1964) in his later films. The same can be said about Benguigui's work, which thus far has treated the question of immigration in various ways and through the genres of documentary and tragicomedy. The soundtracks to her films tend to use the same singers and artists, and certain images, such as the ship sailing across the Mediterranean, recur regularly in both her fiction and non-fiction films. Benguigui's films are thus interrelated thematically and stylistically. When asked whether she was concerned about being referred to "Madame immigration," Benguigui

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<sup>164</sup> Liandrat-Guigues and Leutrat 211.

responded “Woody Allen a pu réaliser 65 films sur Manhattan et, a chaque fois, il a réussi à raconter quelque chose de différent.”<sup>165</sup>

However, these similarities between master and assistant appear to be finite. While Pollet’s work is without question experimental, often defying categorization and at times interpretation, Benguigui leaves little ambiguity as to the message she wants to communicate in her documentaries. “Le cinéma de Yamina Benguigui se distingue tout de suite par des sujets consacrés à la mémoire et à la question de l’immigration.”<sup>166</sup> While style and substance are not mutually exclusive of one other, Benguigui’s films foreground her desire to rehabilitate the representation of the immigrant community and to establish a history that does not exclude them, both for the subjects that are featured in her films and for France in general. It is in this respect that Benguigui’s documentaries should be considered through the perspective of a social cinema.

Over a half-decade earlier, it was another French director, Jean Vigo, who would map out the parameters of a social cinema and speak to such a cinema’s implications for society. Avoiding an overly theoretical pronouncement on what defines a social cinema, Vigo instead describes what it can do.

I’m not concerned with making any revelations about a social cinema, no more than I am in strangling it with a formula; rather, I’m trying to excite your latent need to see good films (filmmakers, please excuse me for the pleonasm) dealing with society and its relationships with individuals and things more often [...] To

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<sup>165</sup> Fadwa Miadi, “Yamina Benguigui, cineaste franco-algérienne,” *Jeuneafrique.com* 29 Jan. 2006 <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com>>.

<sup>166</sup> “Yamina Benguigui,” *tele7.fr* <<http://www.tele7.fr/tv/personnalite-tele/yamina-benguigui>>.

aim at a social cinema would simply be to agree to say something and to stimulate echoes....<sup>167</sup>

He continues by discussing social documentary, of which an essential feature is the position of the filmmaker. “A social documentary is distinguished from an ordinary documentary and from weekly newsreels by the viewpoint clearly supported in it by its author. This kind of social documentary demands that one take a position because it dots the i’s.”<sup>168</sup>

A social cinema is not defined by any particular stylistic features or cinematic techniques; it is a cinema that says something about society and its individuals, that “stimulates echoes” beyond the movie theater. In this sense, Benguigui has been a practitioner of a social cinema since her debut as a filmmaker. Her preoccupation with the social concerns of her time, particularly the debates that have been raging around the question of immigration since it became a political question in the 1970s, may have originated in her coming to cinema but were more fully realized in the mid-1980s and early 1990s when she began collaborating with Rachid Bouchareb on such films as *Baton Rouge* (1985) and *Cheb* (1991). Both address questions of identity, immigration, and expulsion, topics that Benguigui would explore further in her documentaries and films.

Given the resurgence of the French documentary in the last decade, highlighted by the successes of Philibert’s *Etre et avoir* and Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (both of which are frequently addressed in critical fashion in studies on the documentary form), it is rather surprising that Benguigui’s documentary *Mémoires d’immigrés* has by and large been ignored by scholars as a documentary worthy of study, beyond its importance as a document on immigration. One possible explanation for the lack of critical attention is that Benguigui has

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<sup>167</sup> Jean Vigo, “Toward a Social Cinema,” *Millenium Film Journal* 1 (1977) 21-24.

<sup>168</sup> Vigo 22.

thus far produced all of her documentaries for and with funding from television. Cinema, being the ‘septième art’ has been valued from an artistic perspective much more than television productions, which are often viewed in a negative light based on assumptions about the commercial viability of the product and the autonomy of the filmmaker, among other reasons; however, France’s film industry is funded heavily by television.

Television may be the ideal format for the type of social commitment and advocacy that Benguigui represents. She has stated that through her films she wants to reach as many people, both Maghrebi and French, as possible; airing her documentaries on television achieves this objective, although Benguigui does note that *Mémoires d’immigrés* was aired on Canal Plus, a pay channel, which limited to a certain extent the audience that she could reach. Explaining that several television channels had refused her documentary, she adds “Alors que tout le courriel que je reçois me demande pourquoi le film [*Mémoires d’immigrés*] ne passe pas sur une chaîne publique!”<sup>169</sup>

In fact, for Benguigui’s project, television may truly be the only avenue available to reach the Maghrebi population and a large segment of the French population. During an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* in 2003, she and several other Algerian and Franco-Algerian filmmakers were asked about Maghrebi cinema attendance. Specifically, “Si la profession s’ouvre peu à peu, qu’en est-il du public d’origine maghrébine en France ? Est-il de plus en plus cinéphile?”<sup>170</sup> Benguigui replies “Le public maghrébin n’a pas encore été touché par le cinéma. La personne qui va réussir à faire venir les cinq à sept millions de Maghrébins de France n’est pas encore

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<sup>169</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Olivier Barlet, *harmattan.fr* Sept. 1997, 11 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/>>.

<sup>170</sup> Elisabeth Lequeret and Charles Tesson, “Cinq cineastes,” *Cahiers du cinéma* (Feb. 2003) 48, 50.

arrivée.”<sup>171</sup> She cites the success of the film *Omar Gatlato* (1976) by Merzak Allouache in Algeria, but notes that from an economic standpoint, immigrants in France did not have the means to go to the movies. Christophe Ruggia, the director of *Le gone du Chaâba* (1998), adds,

Si *Le gone du Chaâba* a bien marché à long terme, c’est uniquement parce que les enfants ont été obligés d’aller le voir avec leur école, et qu’ensuite ils ont emmené leurs parents ; sinon, en général, ils ne vont guère au cinéma. Cela ne fait ni partie de la culture, ni de l’économie...<sup>172</sup>

Unwillingness or inaccessibility to cinema is not limited to the Maghrebi population however. Susan Hayward, in her study *French National Cinema* (1993, 2005), debunks the myth that the French are avid *cinéphiles*, noting that only approximately 200 million people on average go to the cinema each year, barely half of the attendance needed to sustain the industry.<sup>173</sup> Additionally, she notes that the working class has “all but abandoned” the cinema, primarily for economic reasons and the fact that movie theaters tend to be located in the city centers, far from the suburbs where many working class reside.<sup>174</sup> Furthermore, the accessibility and affordability of television has supplanted cinema as the primary form of entertainment for the French in general.

The rise of television as the preferred form of entertainment has raised the shackles and suspicions of many filmmakers. Filmmakers, such as Philibert, have expressed disdain, even distrust of television and its practices. Philibert goes so far as to distinguish cinematic practice from television altogether:

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<sup>171</sup> Lequeret and Tesson 50.

<sup>172</sup> Lequeret and Tesson 50.

<sup>173</sup> Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2005) 55.

<sup>174</sup> Hayward 58.

My culture is cinema. I detest television. Television is obscene in its transparency—it's a place where people lay bare their lives for very little return. Cinema isn't transparent—it uses elements like the grain, the depth of the shot, the play of light and shadow. Cinema is the art of ellipsis: the language is metaphorical and every film has its secrets and mysteries.<sup>175</sup>

Despite his simplistic and overly generalist definitions of cinema and television (as there are quality productions made for television as well as commercial and popular cinema that is aimed primarily at entertainment), there are elements of truth in Philibert's observations, and his comments cannot help but bring to mind the glut of reality television that has permeated the small screen in the last fifteen years or so.

However, the clear distinction that he attempts to construct between the two forums is problematic for several reasons, the first being that he groups all television production together, regardless of style or substance. Benguigui, for example, is very conscious of the ways she films her subjects, and makes use of cinematic techniques in her television productions. When asked about her own 'absence' in *Mémoires d'immigrés* and her documentary filmmaking methods in general, she explains:

Oui, c'est ma façon de réaliser mes documentaires. Je crois qu'ainsi, la personne est avec vous : il n'y pas quelqu'un au milieu, pas d'intermédiaire ! De la même façon, il n'y a pas de commentaires. Quand Canal + a su qu'il allait durer trois heures sans commentaires, ils ont poussé de hauts cris ! Je leur ai expliqué que

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<sup>175</sup> Falcon, *Sight and Sound*.

j'avais un regard plus cinématographique que reportage. J'ai été à l'école de Jean-Daniel Pollet. On y rentre comme dans un film.<sup>176</sup>

The symbiotic relationship that has existed between television and cinema in France for decades also raises questions about the independence of one from the other. As Hayward points out, one of the major sources (if not the major source) of funding for the movie industry in France is television, and that television stations are more often than not involved in the production and financing of French films. Most of Benguigui's documentaries have been co-produced by a television station: *Femmes d'Islam* (1994) was co-produced by France 2; *Mémoires d'immigrés* (1997) by Canal Plus, and France 5 contributed to *Le Plafond de verre* (2004). And despite Philibert's misgivings about the trappings of television, both Canal Plus and Arte were involved in the production of *Etre et avoir*. It must be said, however, that neither station is a public television station and therefore they may have more latitude in terms of what kinds of productions that they produce and air. The dependency of cinema on television is unquestionable; in fact, Hayward goes one step further and argues that without television's financial support, the French film industry may not even exist at all. "In the post-deregulation era [1980s], therefore, cinema has become increasingly financially dependent on television for its survival rather than its enrichment."<sup>177</sup>

Although necessary from a financial standpoint, the "mariage forcé"<sup>178</sup> between television and the movie industry raises questions about cinema's ability to make films that do not conform to television's expectations and standards. Hayward notes that television stations are most concerned with viewership, advertisement revenue, and the bottom line; therefore

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<sup>176</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Olivier Barlet, *harmattan.fr* Sept. 1997, 11 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/>>.

<sup>177</sup> Hayward 66.

<sup>178</sup> Hayward 68.

concerns about the quality and the types of productions funded by television are not unjustified. Benguigui encountered several obstacles when she pitched her idea for *Mémoires d'immigrés* to several television stations.

Je me suis battue pour faire ce film : la 2, la 3, Arte me l'ont refusé. Alors que sur Arte, on aurait pu faire un débat après le film avec des gens ordinaires, pas des sociologues ou des spécialistes. Trois heures sur les Maghrébins : qui cela allait-il intéresser ?<sup>179</sup>

Several scholars have pointed to *Mémoires d'immigrés* as a groundbreaking intervention into debates on immigration as well as the representation of immigrants up to that point.<sup>180</sup> However they also suggest, albeit indirectly, that the film's success may be due to its exclusion of incendiary topics such as the problems in the *banlieues*, certain Islamic practices such as the wearing of the veil, polygamy, arranged marriages, etc. While it is true that Benguigui is not overtly aggressive on these topics in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, she does address them in the film and in her other films. Unexpectedly, it is the mothers featured in *Mémoires d'immigrés* who, with few exceptions, are opposed to the wearing of the veil and arranged marriages for their daughters. Furthermore, she also addresses the question of delinquency :

Pour ce qui est de la délinquance, je l'ai abordée dans *Mémoires d'immigrés*, mais pas de façon frontale. Je l'ai abordée par la figure de Mounsi, Derrière sa belle casquette, il a fait 15 ans de taule. Ce n'était pas un petit délinquant. Il a été un

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<sup>179</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Olivier Barlet, *harmattan.fr* Sept. 1997, 11 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/>>.

<sup>180</sup> See Tarr and Rollet's *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s*, 2001 and Sylvie Durmelat's article in Freedman and Tarr's *Women, Immigration and Identities in France*, 2000.

grand délinquant, mais on comprend aussi d'où il vient, comment il a réussi à passer ce cap.<sup>181</sup>

For *Mémoires d'immigrés*, her objectives were very specific. While not completely ignoring hot button issues, after all a scathing critique of official immigration policy does emerge from the documentary, she is primarily concerned with recording and disseminating immigrant histories and memories.

Pour *Mémoires d'immigrés*, j'ai voulu raconter une histoire qui était celle de la mémoire. Ces vieux vont partir sans rien nous laisser. Est-ce que moi, je leur vole la parole ? Non. Pour nous, nos enfants et nos petits enfants. Immigrés et enfants d'immigrés, nous étions sans mémoire. On avait un blanc. C'était mon axe. Pendant trois ans, j'ai fait ce film avec mes tripes, je l'ai fait pour mes enfants. Rien n'a été réfléchi sur la suite ; je voulais juste inscrire nos parents dans l'Histoire.<sup>182</sup>

This does not signal a refusal or reluctance to treat more contemporary and controversial issues however. In 2008, Benguigui produced a film for television about Seine-Saint-Denis, a suburb of Paris that was one of the sites of rioting in 2005, and is often evoked when questions of delinquency and crime are at issue. The film, called *9/3, mémoire d'un territoire* (and also co-produced by Canal Plus), is an attempt to understand the history of this infamous *banlieue* and how it evolved through time to become what it is today. A more elaborate discussion of the documentary appears in the third chapter of this study.

Another of Benguigui's more recent productions, *Le plafond de verre* (2004) raises awareness about the often masked discriminatory policies and practices that serve as obstacles to

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<sup>181</sup> Yamina Benguigui, *Périphéries.net* <[http://peripheries.net/article201.html?var\\_recherche=yamina+benguigui](http://peripheries.net/article201.html?var_recherche=yamina+benguigui)>.

<sup>182</sup> Benguigui, *Périphéries*.

young people trying to find employment in France. One such practice is the outright rejection by French employers of any CV that has an Arab or African sounding name on it. *Le plafond de verre* makes a point of showing to what extent these “Arabs” and “Africans” are in fact, French. The interviewees in the documentary have all gone above and beyond in terms of education and effort, yet they find themselves unable to secure employment.

*9/3, mémoire d'un territoire* and *Le plafond de verre* are, admittedly, more recent productions, but her first solo venture into documentary, *Femmes d'Islam*, was in fact focused entirely on questions of exclusionary and often violent practices against women in the name of religion in France and in other Islamic countries. A three-part series that was aired on France 2 during three weeks in June of 1994, the first part is centered on different generations of Maghrebi and African women, who, for various reasons, find themselves in France. Part one addresses a range of questions, including the arrival of a generation of North African women who came to join their spouses in France in the 1960s and 1970s (a theme later to be explored more thoroughly in *Mémoires d'immigrés* and *Inch'Allah dimanche*), the ways in which Islamic practice and a laic society coexist and clash, Maghrebi and African womens' rights, and domestic violence and isolation. Part two takes the spectator beyond France to countries such as Algeria and Iran. Again, the documentary looks at how Islam is lived and experienced via the veil, through marriage customs and practice, and in public life. Mali, Yemen, and Indonesia are the focus of the final part of the trilogy, and here the film again evokes the question of excision and the rights of women.

Throughout all three parts of the documentary, Benguigui makes an effort to include different and differing viewpoints on the diverse subjects she treats. The interviewees include first-hand testimonials of the lived experiences of women in Islamic societies as well as

professionals and experts in the domains of education, sociology, law, and politics. Some interviewees, such as Soraya Nini, find themselves at the crossroads between lived experience and expertise on the subject. Author of *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* (1993) which was later adapted into the film *Samia* (2000, director Philippe Faucon), Nini recounts growing up in a family where she and her sisters were confined to the home and expected to serve and obey the men, particularly her father and oldest brother. Nini, like the character of her novel (and like Benguigui), eventually broke from her family and it is because of this rupture that perhaps both Nini and Benguigui were able to pursue careers in literature and cinema.

One of the questions Nini poses, and which the documentary asks as well, is how can these girls—who grow up on the one hand within a family that has clearly defined gender roles and places restrictions on the women, and on the other hand, go through a laic school system that does not always conform to familial traditions—possibly mediate the opposing systems of practices and beliefs? In concluding, she observes in a somewhat resigned fashion that nothing has really changed for girls in similar situations in the fifteen years since she left her family, that these girls have to wage a constant battle just to survive, and observes “Il est peut-être plus difficile d’être libre que d’être soumis.”<sup>183</sup>

On the other hand, a young woman named Atisse is interviewed and speaks of her estrangement to both France and Algeria, instead finding her identity in Islam. In her reading of Islam, men and women are equal and it is one’s duty to educate oneself. For her, if one accepts the precepts of one’s religion then there are no conflicts to be resolved. According to her, “Les femmes musulmanes n’ont pas de problèmes.”<sup>184</sup> However, in a rare and somewhat heated intervention by the narrator, Atisse is pressed about the question of violence against women. Up

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<sup>183</sup> *Femmes d’Islam*, dir. Yamina Benguigui, DVD, 1994.

<sup>184</sup> *Femmes d’Islam*

until this point, the spectator has accepted that Atisse has successfully found a space for herself. At first Atisse denies that such violence exists, then, when challenged on this point, asks why everyone is always talking about violence against Muslim women. Her credibility weakens as she attempts to deflect the initial question by casting blame on the women themselves for this violence, and it becomes clear that the peace she has found in her religion has come at the cost of denial of certain realities and a rejection of French society at large.

Unlike Benguigui's subsequent documentaries, the spectator is guided through *Femmes d'Islam* by the narrator whom we hear but never see. The female narrator serves several functions throughout the documentary; at times she provides the spectator with information or context for what we are about to hear and see and serves as segue between the topics in the film. After the opening shots of the film, which offer the viewer a panoramic view of Marseille, some people strolling near the water, and a ship coming into port, the narrator informs the spectator that Muslim women in Islamic lands are beginning to question certain interpretations of the Koran, of which the brunt is borne by women. She then turns to the question of immigrant women in France and asks how their daughters and granddaughters are to find their place in a laic nation when Islamic traditions and interdictions are passed from mother to daughter. The interviews that follow these interventions function as a partial response to the questions posed by the narrator, but because of the different answers that are provided, the film does not arrive at solutions to the problems evoked; it instead provokes more questions.

In contrast to Philibert's documentary style, relying largely on the invisibility of the filmmaker and crew and thus creating the illusion that one is watching a fiction and not a documentary, and Varda's very personal and subjective documentaries in which she herself is often the subject, Benguigui's documentaries fall within a more conventional style of

documentary filmmaking. Although Benguigui is largely absent from her documentaries, the audience is very conscious that it is viewing a documentary. In Plantinga's taxonomy of documentary styles and characteristics, he describes five overarching categories of documentary film work that coincidentally coincide with its evolution as a genre.<sup>185</sup> He cautions however that rarely does any film fit neatly into one of the categories; most are a hybrid of two or more styles.

The first documentaries are what he calls expository, or "Voice of God" documentaries. The primary objective of these documentaries was to teach or educate the people. It is this type of documentary that was advocated by Grierson and which is still rather popular, particularly to shed light on natural and historical subject matters.

The 1950s saw the advent of direct cinema, or in France *cinéma vérité*. This was a cinema of observation and very little intervention by the filmmaker. Nicolas Philibert's *Etre et avoir* is characterized by this type of filmmaking. Although he admits to instigating some scenes, such as the scene where Georges Lopez recounts parts of his life, most of what he caught on camera was by pure chance.<sup>186</sup>

The third type of documentary, what Plantinga calls the interactive mode of documentary filmmaking, involves interviews and interactions between the subjects and the filmmaker and crew. Benguigui's work falls primarily into this category, even though the spectator does not see these interactions, we know from interviews with Benguigui that they occurred. The film could not have happened otherwise.

Je ne me suis jamais positionnée en tant que réalisatrice: j'ai dit ce que j'allais faire, mais sous la forme d'une conversation et non de questions et de réponses.

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<sup>185</sup> Carl R. Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 101-3.

<sup>186</sup> Abeel, *Film Journal International*.

J'ai toujours été sincère en racontant quelque chose de ma vie, et sachant que c'était la méthode [...] Je relançais toujours par le début d'une autre histoire."<sup>187</sup>

The fourth and fifth types of documentaries are self-reflexive and poetic documentaries which are more experimental and whose primary concern is the aesthetic. The documentaries of Agnès Varda and Chris Marker, for example, are different manifestations of this type of documentary .

Narration is a central feature of many documentaries, yet Benguigui rarely makes use of it. With the exception of *Femmes d'Islam*, there is an absence of narration in her documentaries providing commentary of the images being viewed, and even in *Femmes d'Islam*, the intervention by the narrator is minimal. The context, albeit limited, provided by the narrator's interventions in *Femmes d'Islam* will be replaced by written visual documents and reinforced by interviews in her subsequent documentaries, and one might speculate as to whether this was a conscious choice by Benguigui. Concerned as it is with interrogating official accounts (or officially sanctioned lacunae) of history, was the absence of a narrator in *Mémoires d'immigrés* a device meant to question the very notion of historical authorship? According to Plantinga, voice-over narration endows the narrator with the authority to control the interpretation of the images being presented.<sup>188</sup> Since Benguigui is attempting to give voice and authority to her speaking subjects, a narrator might possibly weaken the testimonies presented and / or subjugate them to its authority. In this respect, the strength of the documentary and of the stories it tells comes from the multiplicity of voices that are allowed to be heard.

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<sup>187</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Olivier Barlet, *harmattan.fr* Sept. 1997, 11 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.harmattan.fr/articles/>>.

<sup>188</sup> Plantinga 159.

The quasi-absence of a narrator is one characteristic of Benguigui's documentaries; the use of archival documents is another feature of her style. Some of the archival footage that Benguigui incorporates into her documentaries, particularly of the Algerian war, was originally shot by René Vautier (1928-). Criticized by some for not focusing more on the war, Benguigui defends her choices:

Lors d'un débat, un dur-on sentait le mec, avec un discours construit, qui arrivait tout frais d'Algérie-m'a demandé pourquoi, dans le film, je n'avais pas fait trois heures sur la guerre d'Algérie. Mais je ne faisais pas un film sur la guerre d'Algérie. Je ne pouvais pas traiter la guerre d'Algérie en vingt minutes. Les images de René Vautier que j'ai mises dans *Mémoires d'immigrés* parlent d'elles-mêmes.<sup>189</sup>

The inclusion of Vautier's images may indeed speak for themselves. Known as a militant filmmaker, Vautier has produced many subversive films on topics ranging from the abuses of colonialism in Africa, womens' rights, and the Algerian war. His militancy began with his participation in the Resistance during World War II and has since continued to express itself through his films and political activities. His film *Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès* depicts the crisis of conscience that a young Breton undergoes when sent to fight the war in Algeria. Confronted with the atrocities of the war, he deserts and takes with him an FLN member who is being held prisoner by the French army. *Afrique 50* (1950) is described by allociné.fr as the "Premier film anticolonialiste français consacré aux conditions de vie dans les villages des colonies françaises d'Afrique occidentale."<sup>190</sup> Vautier's films have led to censorship and his imprisonment.

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<sup>189</sup> Benguigui, *Périphéries.net*.

<sup>190</sup> "René Vautier," *allocine.fr* <[http://www.allocine.fr/personne/fichepersonne\\_gen\\_cpersonne=476.html](http://www.allocine.fr/personne/fichepersonne_gen_cpersonne=476.html)>.

Speaking for oneself is indeed one of the central identifiable features of a Benguigui documentary. The personal testimonies are the driving force of the films and the affective quality of Benguigui's documentaries is largely derived from the personal testimonies of the immigrants and the use of the camera to capture these narratives, not only communicated through the voice but also through the image. The framing techniques employed in the film vary from panoramic shots to close-ups, and it is the latter that is frequently used for the interviews with the immigrants. By framing them in this way, they are allowed to occupy the entire space of the frame, thus forcing the viewer to see and to hear what is being communicated, namely the individual, the subjectivity, the human. The immigrants and their children are interviewed in a variety of spaces—the abandoned factory, the home, the school, and exterior spaces—all serving as a backdrop to the different generational (and gendered) personal experiences of the interviewees. It is noteworthy that the administrators and officials interviewed are rarely shot in this way, even those who appear sympathetic to the immigrants' experiences. They are always kept at a distance from the viewer, primarily framed in bureaucratic settings (i.e. offices), thereby limiting an affective response and shifting our attention to what is being said rather than how it is being communicated. As a result, the viewer focuses on the function rather than the individual.

For Benguigui, the image of the immigrant allows for the possibility of a sort of psychic shift on the part of the audience. "Certaines personnes ont découvert l'humain dans l'immigré; si j'ai réussi ça, c'est qu'il y a peut-être encore un espoir aujourd'hui."<sup>191</sup> The notion that an image can *do* something to the viewer is not new; Barthes theorized the effect / affect of the photographic image in *Camera Lucida* (1981). He classifies two types of reactions to a

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<sup>191</sup> Benguigui, *Périphéries*

photograph: the *studium* (a general interest in a photograph or series of photographs) and the *punctum*, a detail in a photograph that triggers a psychic disturbance.

A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading: it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer “anything whatsoever.” This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*,<sup>192</sup> the passage of a void (it is of no importance that the referent is insignificant).<sup>193</sup>

Although he is speaking specifically of photography, he acknowledges the kinship between photography and film. For Barthes, cinema does something different, but it is the fiction film to which he refers in his study. The documentary, sharing characteristics of both photography (one should note that Benguigui also makes use of photographs in her films) and fiction film, may also elicit analogous responses.

The power of photography to authenticate, or provide evidence of something is also discussed at length by Barthes. “Every photograph is a certificate of presence.”<sup>194</sup> Given Benguigui’s intention to record personal histories as a means to inscribe them in History, the use of the documentary form and photography to achieve this attests to her desire to confer authority, authenticity to the images and words on the screen.

Julia Kristeva also theorizes the affect of the image, in this case the immigrant’s face, on those who encounter him in *Strangers to Ourselves*, an examination of the “stranger,” as it has been conceived throughout history and literature. While not speaking of cinema per se, but rather the face-to-face encounter, we are nonetheless confronted with the immigrant’s face in much of

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<sup>192</sup> Satori is spiritual enlightenment in Buddhism, <<http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=satori>>.

<sup>193</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York : Hill and Wang, 1981) 49.

<sup>194</sup> Barthes 87.

Benguigui's documentary. Like some photographs for Barthes, the immigrant's face provokes a reaction in the viewer:

At first, one is struck by his peculiarity-those eyes, those lips, those cheek bones, that skin unlike others, all that distinguishes him and reminds one that there is *someone* there. The difference in that face reveals in paroxystic fashion what any face should reveal to a careful glance: the nonexistence of banality in human beings. [...] But this grasping the foreigner's features, one that captivates us, beckons and rejects at the same time. [...] From heart pangs to first jabs, the foreigner's face forces us to display the secret manner in which we face the world, stare into all our faces, even in the most familial, the most tightly knit communities.<sup>195</sup>

The affective element of the film is also generated by the music that accompanies *Mémoires d'immigrés*. Primarily extra-diagetic, the musical choices serve to reinforce the memories being evoked on the screen. Kabyle and Algerian music from such artists as Slimane Azem, Dahmane El Harachi and Enrico Macias, as well as from more contemporary singers as Rachid Taha and Cheb Mami are featured her films. As she notes, "la musique incarne la mémoire."<sup>196</sup> One of the mothers interviewed in part two, while recounting her experience of coming to France and her homesickness, speaks specifically of a song in which the singer sings about "les filles de mon pays." Not quite knowing who the singer is (she asks someone who is not in the frame), it is clear that the song evokes past memories, perhaps forgotten memories that can now be transmitted to her children and to others via the film.

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<sup>195</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 3-4.

<sup>196</sup> Benguigui, *harmattan.fr*

Symbolism also has a part to play in her films. Some of the themes that are recurrent in her films include shots of the sea, particularly the Mediterranean, as well as boats leaving or arriving in harbor. These shots represent the real journey that immigrants took to come to France, but also highlight the reality that many of them never really came ashore, but rather have lived in a sort of limbo between two countries.

The interviews with the younger generation are often interspersed by shots of trains passing or bridges are visible in the background. Again, for many of those interviewed, these were part of the landscapes of their everyday lives. For instance, one of the young men interviewed in *Mémoires d'immigrés* talks about growing up in a bidonville and points to the bridge near which the bidonville used to be located. The symbolic currency behind the use of these images cannot be ignored, however. The children's interviews speak to the inability to truly become part of society, either due to discrimination or outright racism on the part of the French or to their parents' reluctance or refusal to admit that they were to settle in France (*le mythe du retour*). The train may very well represent this unending passage and the bridge may either represent the children, who are the links between the parents and France, or the obstacles they face in their attempts to integrate fully into society.

Benguigui's documentaries, besides being primarily interactive in nature, make use of different narrative structures and voice. In *Mémoires d'immigrés*, *Femmes d'Islam*, and *Le plafond de verre* she employs a chronological structure that may be historical and or generational. For example, *Mémoires d'immigrés* is divided into three parts: les pères, les mères, and les enfants. This reflects both a historical chronology, for the fathers were the first to arrive in France, then the mothers and children, as well as a generational chronology. *Femmes d'Islam* and *Le plafond de verre* are less concerned with historical chronologies to structure the narrative,

but the question of generations is still very much present in both. *Femmes d'Islam*, for example, demonstrates that oppression and violence are often transmitted from one generation to the next; interviews with elementary-aged school children reveal to what extent the interdictions and cultural customs supported and encouraged by certain interpretations of Islam have been passed onto younger generations as they reproduce the same discourses for the interviewer.

The rhetorical structure as defined by Plantinga<sup>197</sup> is also one of the defining characteristics of Benguigui's documentaries. This type of structure aims to convince the viewer through reason and argument, which Benguigui presents through the interviews and archives that make up her documentaries. The argument she constructs arises from primarily two strategies: the first is to reinforce, in a sense to prove the truthfulness of the immigrants' testimonies by accompanying them with other documents; the second is to juxtapose the official's testimony with documents (archival footage, photographs, etc.), but this time the result is an undermining of the 'official' story, so to speak. The result is a transfer of narrative control from those that represent authority, i.e. the administrators, to the immigrants themselves, and thus ownership of their own histories.

### 3.2 TRAGICOMEDY

Après *Mémoires d'immigrés*, je savais qu'il fallait que je passe à la fiction. J'avais envie d'avoir une héroïne. [...] Or, j'avais interrogé beaucoup de femmes pour *Mémoires d'immigrés*. Elles avaient toutes les souvenirs très noirs de leur arrivée en France. Pour moi, seule la fiction pouvait rendre compte de cela. Je pense à *Une journée particulière*. Grâce à Sophia Loren, on est tout de suite dans le bain, pas besoin de long discours. On s'accroche au personnage parce que

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<sup>197</sup> Plantinga 105.

l'actrice est magnifique, et qu'elle porte son personnage très haut.<sup>198</sup> –Yamina Benguigui

While documentary has proven to be an ideal format for Benguigui, she would turn to fiction in 2001 with her first feature-length film, *Inch'allah dimanche*. As in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, she would again take up the question of family reunion as the subject of her film. This time, she would fictionalize the testimonies of the Maghrebi women she had interviewed into a narrative starring Fejria Deliba as Zouina, the protagonist of the film. The hardships faced by the women who left their families and countries to join their husbands in a foreign land merited a heroic rendering of their experiences. Released in 2001, the film received generally positive reviews. According to Benguigui's official website,<sup>199</sup> the film has won more than twenty-seven international prizes. At the time of writing, Benguigui is working on a second fiction film titled *Le Paradis, c'est complet!*, starring Isabelle Adjani. Benguigui spoke of her new project to *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in which she describes it as “un scénario traité en mode de tragi-comédie politique”:

Le film raconte l'histoire d'une jeune Maghrébine-Isabelle Adjani-presentie pour être Premier ministre alors qu'elle se trouve au même moment confrontée à ce casse-tête : comment enterrer son père selon le rite musulman. Hélas, il n'y pas de carré pour accueillir les musulmans, et elle ne peut renvoyer le corps en Algérie. Imaginez son angoisse ! Autre problème pour mon héroïne: comment éviter que les médias se saisissent de cette histoire? Commence alors, pour elle, un parcours de combattant. Comment va-t-elle s'en sortir ? Elle s'affole, ne trouve pas de solution, or le temps presse : elle doit en même temps dire si elle

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<sup>198</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Yves Alion, *l'Avant-scène du cinéma* 506 (Nov. 2001) 138.

<sup>199</sup> Official website of Yamina Benguigui, <<http://www.yaminabenguigui.fr>>.

accepte le poste de Premier ministre qu'on lui propose. Son angoisse est d'autant plus grande que chez les musulmans, les morts doivent être enterrés dans les 24 heures ! C'est « 24 Heures chrono » qu'elle vit !<sup>200</sup>

The question of burial for Muslims in France is one that can be traced throughout Benguigui's cinematic itinerary. *Mémoires d'immigrés* ends by posing this question, and *Inch'Allah dimanche* again evokes the issue in the famous cemetery scene where Zouina first meets Madame Manant. While *Le paradis? C'est complet* has not yet been released, one wonders whether the film will continue the larger narrative that Benguigui is constructing through her films; one can imagine that the female politician at the center of the film, an "integrated" Beur, could be Amina, Zouina's daughter from *Inch'allah dimanche*.

Benguigui has also spoken about the problem; for her it is not simply a logistical problem but rather a problem that is intimately linked to the notion of integration:

Pour nous, les enfants, le fait de réclamer des carrés musulmans dans les cimetières est le signe tangible de l'intégration et de l'enracinement. Enterrer nos parents en France, c'est inimaginable il y a quinze ans. C'était le système du rapatriement des corps. A partir du moment où j'enterre ma mere ici-je touche du bois-je m'attache à cette terre définitivement.<sup>201</sup>

Burial may assume even more significance in the context of Franco-Algerian history, as well as colonial history in general. In predominantly Christian societies, it is not uncommon to hold a public viewing of the deceased's body before burial. This rite allows mourners to join with others to express sorrow and to say farewell to the dead. It is part of a cathartic process that eases the grief of those left behind. In Muslim societies, it is customary for the family to wash

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<sup>200</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Alain Chouffan, *nouvelobs.com* 21 Feb. 2008 <<http://hebdo.nouvelobs.com>>.

<sup>201</sup> Benguigui, *Périphéries.net*.

the deceased's body repeatedly before burial, and then to observe three days of mourning. The preoccupation with burial in Benguigui's films can be extended to a larger concern with putting the past, history, to rest. As was demonstrated in chapter one, the colonial past continues to haunt contemporary French society, especially those that had first-hand experience in it, but also their descendants who have been affected by its enduring legacy. Through cinema, Benguigui is effecting a public viewing of history and of relationships between peoples that may bring them together in the hopes of producing a communal catharsis. In similar fashion, her films may also aim to attend to this history to allow for proper mourning to occur.

In this way, her latest film, *Le paradis, c'est complet* is yet another piece of the larger project that Benguigui started with *Femmes d'Islam* in 1994. Each of her subsequent films has reintroduced a theme addressed in a prior film or films. Both of her fiction films deal with rather somber topics—exile, violence, xenophobia, death, politics—and one could imagine the treatment these subjects would have received in a drama. Yet Benguigui chose to present them through the lens of tragicomedy, which begs the question, why tragicomedy?

It may be useful to begin with a definition of tragicomedy, although there does seem to be some difficulty and contention in this regard. For Foster, situating the parameters for tragicomedy as a well-defined genre is an “impossible” task.<sup>202</sup> At the most fundamental level, a tragicomedy is a play or a film that includes both tragic and comic elements. *Inch'Allah dimanche* alternates between the two modes throughout the film, never fully becoming either one or the other. In fact, there is always present an intimation of tragedy in the comic scenes of the film, and what could have been a tragic end for Zouina in the final scene of the film is averted by an injection of comedy.

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<sup>202</sup> Verna A. Foster, *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004) 33.

Despite “la difficulté d’une détermination fixe du genre,”<sup>203</sup> Hélène Baby, in her study of theatrical tragicomedy *La tragi-comédie de Corneille à Quinault*, nevertheless identifies some of the recurrent characteristics found throughout the tragicomic corpus. Whether she does this intentionally or not, there are echoes of this tradition of tragicomedy in Benguigui’s fiction film. First and foremost, the tragicomedy in the French classical tradition relies upon a singular plotline: that of a couple whose love is threatened by familial or outside forces. “Les amoureux de toutes les tragi-comédies font tous et toujours la même chose: ils luttent pour leur amour et retrouvent finalement l’objet aimé.”<sup>204</sup> A tragicomedy therefore dramatizes a couple’s attempts to reunite in the face of obstacles and powers that threaten to separate them.

*Inch’Allah dimanche* does in fact adopt this traditional storyline, albeit under a much different guise. While the film portrays a real reunion, that of an immigrant worker and his wife, this is the not couple, at least initially, that is the focus of the film. Throughout much of the film Zouina and Ahmed are estranged; they barely glance at each other let alone talk to each other, and much of the physical contact between the two is in the form of violence. Instead, the film is structured around Zouina’s attempts to locate and reunite with the other Algerian family in town. Unlike the traditional lovers in a classic tragicomedy, the “couple” in *Inch’Allah dimanche* has not yet been constituted; in fact, the other party in the couple, Malika, is completely unaware of the fact that Zouina is searching for her. In this way, Zouina is seeking something that does not exist. Having been forced to leave her country and family and finding herself more or less isolated in France, however, Zouina is desperate to find some semblance of her former life. As she is forbidden to leave the house except to go to the neighborhood grocery, her Sunday outings during the absences of her husband and mother-in-law represent a transgression whose

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<sup>203</sup> Hélène Baby, *La tragi-comédie de Corneille à Quinault* (Paris : C. Klincksieck et Cie., 2001) 8.

<sup>204</sup> Baby 108.

consequences include at the very least beatings by her husband, and at worst death. Yet, despite the possible repercussions of her multiple escapades, Zouina continues to disobey her husband. Violence and death, in fact, haunt Zouina throughout the film. When she is offered gifts of perfume and make-up by her new neighbor and friend Nicole, she is at first pleased, but then says to Nicole “Si elle le voit, elle va me tuer.” Referring to Aïcha, her mother-in-law, who browbeats Zouina incessantly and has already threatened to introduce a second wife into the family, these words are not to be interpreted as a mere figure of speech.

Later in the film, when Zouina has finally found Malika, the matriarch of the Algerian family that she has been seeking, the peril of death once again looms. When she first arrives at the Algerian’s home, Malika hurriedly ushers Zouina and her children into the home while worriedly looking around outside to make sure that no one has witnessed this. Once inside, Zouina’s and Malika’s warm reunion quickly goes awry. After repeated questions by Malika concerning the whereabouts of Zouina’s husband (a question that Zouina, in turn, repeatedly ignores), Zouina finally responds and asks angrily “Pourquoi toujours tu parles du mari? Il sait rien le mari. Tu caches pas ? Tu caches pas au mari?” Malika responds in Arabic “Mais elle est vraiment folle! Comme si je n’avais pas assez de problèmes. Tu veux ma mort ?” then proceeds to expel Zouina and her children from her home.

In classic tragicomedy, the hero or heroine finds him/herself in a position of subordination, primarily vis-à-vis the father and / or the king. “Les amoureux se trouvent toujours soumis à une instance qui leur est supérieure, situation de dépendance qui permet aux dramaturges la multiplication des obstacles, en particulier paternels et royaux.”<sup>205</sup> In the context of 1974 France, the husband (and by extension mother-in-law) and the French are substitutes for

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<sup>205</sup> Baby 109.

the father and the king. Zouina has no power within the family structure or within the society she now finds herself in. She is quite literally at the mercy of nearly everyone around her, and unfortunately for her, nearly everyone around her seeks to control her.

Two notable exceptions are Nicole and Madame Manant. Although their relationships to Zouina are not unproblematic, the two women resemble a stock character in classical theater: the confidant. Nicole quickly befriends Zouina, offering her empathy after Zouina's multiple confrontations with Madame Donze, gifts, and simply talking to her. At one point in the film, Zouina tells Nicole "Tu es comme une soeur."

Madame Manant, likewise, acts as confidant to Zouina in a more classical sense. She also assumes the role of matchmaker. Like Dorine in *Tartuffe*, who tries to devise a plan to reunite Mariane and Valère, Madame Manant is key to Zouina's reunion with the Algerian family. It is she who knows the street where the Bouira live and arranges for Zouina to go to their home. She even physically transports Zouina to the home and waits for her during her visit.

In addition to the confidant, who is typically secondary to the action, one can identify other conventional tragicomic characters in *Inch'Allah dimanche*: the noble hero, in this case heroine: Zouina. While Zouina does not enjoy the material or social advantages associated with nobility, she is portrayed as someone who is noble in character. Her dignity is expressed through her quiet demeanor and brave actions. Her few angry outbursts are an expression of self-defense and a reaction to others' provocations. Baby speaks of a "courage inalterable"<sup>206</sup> that is exemplified in the hero of a tragicomedy; Zouina "escapes" three times in order to find her *objet aimé*, fully conscious of the possible consequences. Yet in a surprising twist, the couple that is reunited at the end of the film is not Zouina and Malika, but rather the marital couple. Ahmed,

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<sup>206</sup> Baby 120.

who has represented the paternal authority throughout the film, is reintegrated into the couple at the conclusion of the film.

One of the obstacles in tragicomedy is paternal authority. According to Baby, the reasons for the parental obstruction are primarily economic or social in nature. “...les raisons de l’opposition parentale sont plus variées. Héritées de la comédie, les motivations les plus fréquentes ressortissent aux exigences sociales ou économiques, selon que le père retient le critère de la fortune, ou celui du rang social.”<sup>207</sup>

The familial authority in the film is represented by Ahmed, the husband, as well as his mother Aïcha. Even though neither of them is aware of Zouina’s desire to find the Algerian family, much less of her evasions, both endeavor to control Zouina and to keep her within the boundaries of their interpretations of acceptable behavior. For Ahmed, who wishes to remain as invisible as possible to his neighbors and society at large, acceptable behavior means drawing as little attention as possible to the family, thus confining the women to the home. His fear of visibility and expulsion (i.e., loss of economic and social status) is most apparent in the scene where the police come to take reports of Zouina’s and Madame Donze’s physical altercation. As he returns home from work, he sees the policemen at the door of the house and immediately begins to take out his documents. He later beats Zouina, not for her fight with Madame Donze, but rather for being the cause of the police’s visit. This is to be the first of several beatings that take place in the film.

Aïcha, on the other hand, is more concerned with traditional social customs. In her mind, Zouina exists to serve her husband and her mother-in-law, and any other undertaking unrelated to these two functions is unacceptable.

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<sup>207</sup> Baby 111.

In *The Name and Nature of Tragicomedy* (2004), Verna Foster underscores the receptive component of tragicomedy:

Tragicomedy, Renaissance and modern, evokes mixed tragic and comic responses in its audience that are both stimulating and provocative. By tragic responses I mean intense emotional involvement and a painful awareness of the ironic discrepancy between what is and what might have been: such feelings as the Aristotelian pity and fear, the Renaissance awe and astonishment, the more modern sense of horror and despair. Among comic responses I include laughter, both critical and sympathetic, a wry appreciation of incongruity, some degree of detachment, including the ability to observe one's own responses and the dramatic means by which they are created.[...] The audience for tragicomedy is thus called upon to be unusually active in its reception.<sup>208</sup>

Benguigui uses a variety of comic devices to attenuate the serious subject matters she treats in the film. Much of the comedy is incarnated in the character of Madame Donze, the garden-obsessed neighbor who scrutinizes the family's every move. The viewer's initial indication of the farcical aspect of this character appears in the very first scene in which she appears; she and her husband are at the window of their apartment looking out into the street at the newcomers. After wondering where "all these people came from," Madame Donze retreats from the window and goes to grab a newspaper clipping that she has framed, a clipping about the upcoming garden competition, one that her and her husband are predicted to win. Her reading of the clipping (with a magnifying glass no less) is accompanied by extra-diagetic music that resembles cartoon music.

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<sup>208</sup> Foster 14.

Later that evening, while her husband (and the neighborhood) sleeps, we see Donze at her bedroom window, looking out over her garden. So worried is she about the perceived threat that the Algerian family poses to her garden that she falls asleep at the window, falling over in the process. In an analogous scene, we see her again at the window a few nights later. She is awakened by strange noises coming from outside and goes to the window to examine the situation. She is horrified to see Zouina appearing to dig in the yard in the dead of night. She makes the sign of the cross and falls to her knees to pray. The viewer initially believes that Madame Donze sees what they are seeing: Zouina digging a hole and placing what resembles a body in it. We the viewers know that Zouina is actually burying Madame Manant's dog which had been killed by a convoy of army jeeps in the cemetery earlier in the day. However, we find out in a subsequent scene that Madame Donze's panicked (over-)reaction is provoked, once again, by her concern for her garden. The next day, while Zouina is outside in the courtyard, Madame Donze pops up from behind the hedges and asks her: "Qu'est-ce que vous faites? Je vous ai vue creuser la nuit. Vous allez faire le concours?" to which Zouina very cleverly replies "C'est la menthe, je vais planter la menthe."

No less comical is her hapless husband. Throughout the film he appears to be dominated by his larger-than-life wife, clueless and powerless in virtually every situation. When Zouina and Madame Donze brawl as a result of the children's ball landing in one of Donze's flowerbeds, rather than trying to break up the fight, he tells his wife that he is going to call the police, then runs into the house to do just that. As the film progresses, Madame Donze becomes less comical and more pitiful, and her husband is largely incapable of understanding her, much less helping her.

In addition to the physical comedy embodied in Madame Donze, the film's humor is derived from the use of irony. By capitalizing on Aïcha's cultural and linguistic ignorance, an otherwise formidable character is often reduced to ridicule. As Zouina, her children, and Aïcha enter the house for the first time, we (including Zouina) see the shabbiness and untidiness of the apartment; in fact the camera pans around the main living area precisely to make that point. Yet Aïcha remarks in all seriousness "C'est un vrai château." The use of irony through the character of Aïcha emerges at several moments throughout the film, particularly when she is berating Zouina. By referring to Zouina as a "visage de malheur" and by insisting that "Je lui ai rien fait, moi" when asked by Zouina's oldest son why she is always yelling at his mother, Aïcha points to the incongruity between what she says and what the viewer knows to be the truth. While these ironic moments contribute to the comedic aspect of the film, they also serve as a tool for criticism of Aïcha's unwarranted treatment of Zouina (and therefore the treatment of women in many Muslim families), as well as France's treatment of its immigrants, particularly regarding the housing situation that awaited them and their families.

The incongruity between what the viewer expects and what actually plays out in the film is responsible to a great extent for the tragicomic tension. One would expect Zouina's primary act of disobedience, i.e. her escapes from the home, to be discovered and subsequently punished. In fact, the scenes following her escapades would lead us to that conclusion. For example, after her first outing, which resulted in her meeting with Madame Manant and the death of Manant's dog, Madame Manant comes to Zouina's house in order to thank her for what she did for her dog. Zouina has just barely managed to get away with this transgression when Manant arrives. The pretext for the visit is humorous, not only because it is Zouina, or rather her children, who are ultimately responsible for the dog's death, but also because Madame Manant believes that

Zouina has given Simca “une vraie sépulture.” She is completely unaware that Simca has been buried in a hole in the backyard. However, the scene sets up the viewer to expect a more tragic conclusion, for Aïcha is present during Manant’s visit. Once again, Aïcha’s ignorance of the language manages to save Zouina from being discovered, for she introduces Manant as “la dame de l’épicerie” and Aïcha accepts this explanation.

These near tragedies render the violence against Zouina all the more striking as well as absurd, for she is never punished for her escapades; in fact Ahmed and Aïcha remain unaware of them until the very end of the film, and even then she is not punished for them. Instead, we see Zouina being punished for much lesser transgressions, such as unintentionally provoking a visit by the police, which ironically does not result in any kind of trouble for Ahmed (the policeman is portrayed rather sympathetically, in fact), and being able to read and sign her name. In keeping with the tragicomic conventions, the violence does not result in tragedy, as difficult as it is to watch for the spectator.

In addition to privileging the tragicomic genre, Benguigui has identified another model or source for her brand of film: Italian comedy, particularly that of the *commedia all’italiana* tradition. Specifically, she has stated that her films are more in line with Italian comedies than with Algerian cinema.

On range le plus souvent mes films dans la catégorie “cinema maghrébin,” mais je me sens infiniment plus proche de la comédie italienne que de Lakdhar Hamina, par exemple. Parce que les films de Risi ou de Scola nous font pleurer et rire sur les choses les plus graves. Parce qu’ils savent regarder la société italienne par le petit bout de la lorgnette. *Affreux, sales et méchants*, *Une journée particulière*, *L’Argent de la vieille* sont des chefs d’œuvre qui m’ont imprégnée durablement.

C'est leur exemple que j'ai voulu suivre avec *Inch'Allah dimanche*. [...] Le cinéma italien, encore lui, a su à une certaine époque incarner des valeurs universelles. [...] J'aime ce mélange de comédie et de gravité, cette émotion en un mot.<sup>209</sup>

Peter Bondanella (*Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, 1983), describes Italian comedy in the following terms:

...the Italian comic film traditionally united laughter with a sense of desperation, employing a cynical sense of humor which reflects a need to survive in the face of overwhelming obstacles. It is a film genre [...] might be more accurately described as tragicomedy bordering on the grotesque [...] the *commedia all'italiana* lays bare an undercurrent of social malaise and the painful contradictions of a culture in rapid transformation.<sup>210</sup>

Bondanella also suggests a reciprocity between cinema and the larger social context; not only did Italy's pressing social and economic problems in the 1970s bear on the production of Italian comedies of that period, but that comedy may have been the most effective mode of representing these problems on the screen.

The impact of rapid social and political changes during the past decade has had an effect upon the Italian cinema's most commercial product, the *commedia all'italiana*. Mario Monicelli, Dino Risi, and Luigi Comencini have produced a number of films within this tradition, and while most of them are aimed at the

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<sup>209</sup> Yamina Benguigui, *L'Avant-scène du cinéma*.

<sup>210</sup> Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983) 145.

middle-brow audiences who have always taken to the genre, several are remarkable barometers of Italian problems.<sup>211</sup>

The 1970s France portrayed in *Inch'Allah dimanche* was also the victim of economic and social upheaval. After decades of growth and prosperity, France was suffering from high unemployment rates, a growing awareness of a largely unassimilated immigrant population, and the political aftermath of 1968. These issues are hinted at indirectly throughout the film, from shots of abandoned and dilapidated factories, to Ahmed's repeated "on n'est pas chez nous" and his insistence on remaining inconspicuous, and Nicole's nascent and yet to be articulated feminism based on a text whose title she doesn't recall and whose author she doesn't know (the viewer knows that she is referring to Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*, published in 1949).

While Benguigui cites Italian comedy as a model for her tragicomic films, they nevertheless tap into certain tendencies and trends in French cinema, particularly in the cinematic genre of comedy. Comedy is a popular if not the most popular cinematic genre in France and is likely a key factor in sustaining French cinema as a viable industry.

...comedy has therefore played a central role in the success of mainstream French cinema of the 1990s and 2000s. In the 12 years between 1990 and 2002, 16 French films attracted audiences of over 5 million, of which eight--including: *Les Visiteurs* (13.78m spectators; *Le Dîner des cons* (Veber 1998) (9.22m) and *Le Placard* (2001) (5.29 million)-could be classed as out-and-out comedies.<sup>212</sup>

The release of *Inch'Allah dimanche* in 2001 was thus ideal in terms of timing and audience reception. This period may have also been an opportune moment for a discussion of

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<sup>211</sup> Bondanella 326.

<sup>212</sup> Hayward 304.

the topics she addresses in the film. After a perceived invisibility in the 1970s, and the violence and contentions of the 1980s (which resulted in one instance in the 1984 Marche des Beurs), the 1990s and 2000s were characterized by more willingness to discuss France's colonial past, of which immigration is a part. Given the current economic and political climate, it will be interesting to see in what ways Benguigui's current work-in-progress, *Le paradis c'est complet!*, conforms to or contests the conventions of her preferred generic modes. Cultural products often reflect the times in which they are produced; cinema is no exception. Case in point: in a recent AP article on American comedy, the author notes "With the economy in tatters and the last decade's prosperity appearing a sham, some of the most influential tastemakers in comedy are turning to black humor and delusional characters to match the disaffected times."<sup>213</sup>

As previously noted, the success and affect of the tragicomic mode relies heavily on the manipulation of the comic and tragic reactions in the viewer. This manipulation of the audience is necessary to create viewer empathy with the protagonist(s) and to become emotionally invested in the story and its outcome. Similarly, for comedy to be effective and affective, conformity to certain generic conventions is essential.

Genres both do things and reveal things. They perpetuate what is there and respond to expectations. For instance, comedy responds to the desire to feel superior as one laughs at the foibles in/of others. In that laughter, a certain recognition takes place (otherwise it would not succeed as comedy) and so one laughs at one's own weaknesses (albeit indirectly). The comic genre perpetuates

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<sup>213</sup> Jake Coyle, "Comedy darkens, matching leaner times, outrage," *yahoo.com* 14 Apr. 2009 <<http://news.yahoo.com>>.

the idea that we all have weak points and colludes in our desire to see ourselves as funny, ridiculous even (but not risible).<sup>214</sup>

In the case of *Inch'Allah dimanche*, the comic element resides primarily in the character of Madame Donze, as already noted. She is funny precisely because she is a caricature of the provincial, close-minded petit bourgeois. Her linguistic and physical antics throughout the film provoke laughter; her misplaced paranoia and exaggerated reactions to Zouina and her family are outrageous and ridiculous. If Hayward's observation is correct, if we laugh because a level of self-recognition is taking place, then it is this character that crystallizes the critical vein that runs throughout the film. Through Madame Donze, Benguigui is addressing the anti-immigrant, xenophobic and racist strain of national political discourse that has characterized discussions of immigration for almost thirty years.

The character of Aicha, albeit to a lesser extent, has a similar function; however in this case, Benguigui is interpellating another audience. If the film is critical of a particular French mindset that is represented by Madame Donze, then it is equally condemning of the excesses of Algerian customs that would relegate women, primarily daughters, to domestic slaves. Both Benguigui's personal narrative and cinematic oeuvre offer critical counterpoints to these traditions. Yet by using caricatured, farcical representations as vehicles for critique, the serious commentaries on particular French and Maghrebi compartments risk being sanitized or even lost.

French comedies of the 1990s and 2000s are thus able to address social issues that rarely appear elsewhere in mainstream genre cinema [...]. However, in these comedies any potentially transgressive or taboo subjects are largely contained—

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<sup>214</sup> Hayward 99.

distanced from reality—via three key strategies: stereotyping, the exaggerated nature of comic performance and utopian or conservative narrative resolution.<sup>215</sup>

*Inch'Allah dimanche*, as we have seen, employs the first two strategies, but what can be said about the final scenes of the film? Zouina finally locates the Bouira family, with the aid of Madame Manant. At first, she and her children are welcomed (although somewhat fearfully) into the Bouira home. However, as Zouina explains to Malika how she came to be there (and mentions that “la dame française” helped her), the visit becomes increasingly strained and eventually concludes with Malika expelling Zouina from the house. After several minutes of begging Malika to let her back in, the scene culminates in Zouina punching her fist through a window of the home, wounding her hand. She then turns to a waiting Madame Manant, who has hired a car to transport them, but rather than accepting her help, Zouina bypasses her and the car and gets on the bus that has just stopped nearby.

Thus begins Zouina’s journey home, where in true theatrical fashion all the main players of the film are there waiting for her, though no explanation is given for their presence, particularly of the Donze couple who has consistently kept its distance from the family. We expect Aicha and Ahmed to be enraged, and Aicha indeed conforms to our expectations. Yet Ahmed, rather than beating Zouina, his usual reaction to her transgressions, instead turns to his mother and tells her to shut up and leave Zouina alone. Once again, Benguigui diffuses our expectations of a violent confrontation by instead having Ahmed turn on his mother (for which she becomes hysterical). Furthermore, comedy is infused into the tense situation by the attempted escape of the sheep that had been brought home for Aïd, resulting in all the adult characters (except Zouina, Ahmed, and Madame Manant) comically attempting to force the

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<sup>215</sup> Hayward 304-5.

sheep back into the house. Ahmed and Zouina then look at each other for a few long seconds, and the film ends with Zouina looking at her husband but saying to her daughter, whom she has wrapped her arm around, “Demain, moi je vous emmène à l’école.”

Like the sheep, Zouina returns home after her multiple escapades, but the conclusion to the film suggests that she will no longer be the sacrificial lamb for her culture’s patriarchal excesses or France’s reluctance to come to terms with itself. One senses a power shift, albeit a slight one, within the family but also within the larger community. She has defended herself against Madame Donze, eschewed Madame Manant’s help, and refused Nicole’s interpretation of women’s rights. She has asserted her place within her family and neighborhood. The ending, while seemingly improbable, nevertheless corresponds to our expectations of a tragicomedy, in which a fortunate person/circumstance appears and prevents the tragedy from playing out. In the case of *Inch’Allah dimanche*, we do not know why exactly the tragedy was averted, and no explanation of Ahmed’s change of heart is given. The film does suggest that the familial and social dynamic that structured the relationships between the characters throughout much of the film is untenable, that change is necessary. In the very last scene of the film, Zouina and Ahmed truly look at each other for the first time, they *see* each other. Benguigui’s films attempt to make us look at, to in effect *see* the immigrant.

The documentary and tragicomic forms have been successful formulas for the narratives that Benguigui has told thus far; the former provides her with legitimacy and authority on a topic that never ceases to provoke new discussions, new controversies. Tragicomedy allows her to draw from the conventions and expectations of the genre all the while changing the rules of the game and allowing for unanticipated possibilities. While still relying on cinema to convey her message, it is to the practice of politics that she would turn to next.

## 4.0 POLITICS

Charles Tilly writes in the foreword to the English edition of *The French Melting Pot*,<sup>216</sup> “Any discussion of immigration’s history has political overtones” (vii). According to the Brookings Institute, “...the issue [immigration in France] has nonetheless been more highly politicized, and for a longer time, than elsewhere in Europe.”<sup>217</sup> A more recent article suggests that this will not change any time soon. “Sur l’immigration, l’Elysée dispose d’études d’opinion qui montrent que cette question reste un thème “*clivant*” qui “*parle*” à l’électorat populaire.”<sup>218</sup> Some precisions need to be made, however. Although France has been welcoming immigrants for over a hundred years, it has only been in the last forty to fifty years that immigration is perceived to have become a political concern. Earlier waves of immigrants, primarily from European countries—Italy, Poland, Spain, and Russia, among others—faced xenophobia, poor housing conditions, as well as restrictive legislation<sup>219</sup>, but their presence on French soil is not considered to have been as polarizing a social issue as has the presence of later waves of immigrants from the Maghreb, Africa, and to a lesser extent Asia. This understanding of immigration history in France is

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<sup>216</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot; Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*. (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1996) vii.

<sup>217</sup> Virginie Guiraudon, “Immigration Policy in France.” 1 July 2002, 19 May 2009. <[http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2002/0101france\\_guiraudon.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2002/0101france_guiraudon.aspx)>.

<sup>218</sup> Sophie Landrin and Arnaud Leparmentier, “Immigration et sécurité, thèmes gagnants pour l’UMP à deux semaines de scrutin.” *Lemonde.fr*, 23 May 2009, 25 May 2009. 5/23/09. <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

<sup>219</sup> See, for example, Patrick Weil’s *La République et sa diversité: Immigration, intégration, discriminations* in which he talks about the policies enacted during the 1930s depression, such as quotas, forced repatriation of immigrant workers, primarily from Poland (p. 15), as well as Noiriel’s *The French Melting Pot* which includes numerous examples of the negative experiences of European immigrant workers in France.

misleading, according to Gérard Noiriel, and results from the use of selective national memory. As an historian of immigration, he has identified three major periods of massive immigration to France—the late nineteenth-century, the 1920s, and the 1950s-1960s—each corresponding either to an intense period of industrialization or post-war reconstruction of France. Each of these periods of massive immigration was followed by an economic decline, and thus competition in the labor market, resulting in hostility, if not xenophobia, towards foreign workers. Each time, Noiriel maintains, immigration became a political problem. “La concurrence sur le marché du travail intensifie l’hostilité des Français pour les étrangers; cette xénophobie se répercute au niveau politique. La question de l’immigration devient alors un problème national.”<sup>220</sup> In fact, immigration has been a point of contention between the right and the left since the 1880s.<sup>221</sup>

Massive immigration and the subsequent economic downturns have been politicized in the past, but the most recent large-scale wave of immigration that took place in the 1950s and 60s continues to remain a much debated political issue a half-century later. Unlike the first two substantial immigration moments, the more recent waves of immigration from Africa and Asia were a consequence of France’s colonial relationships with, or rather domination of, these countries. France’s labor needs during the post-World War II reconstruction era could not be met by the French themselves, so they turned to the colonies and former colonies, primarily the Maghreb, to address their needs. Employers recruited heavily in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia until the economic downturn in the early 1970s. Again, attempts were made to restrict immigration as had been done during the 1930s and immigrants became the target of hostilities and the scapegoats for society’s ills. Previous immigrant laborers had likewise faced unsanitary housing conditions and hostility on the part of some French, but the more recent immigrants

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<sup>220</sup> Gérard Noiriel, “Français et étrangers,” *Les lieux de mémoire*. III. Ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) 283.

<sup>221</sup> Noiriel 286.

were not European and brought with them a colonial history that was about to explode with the successive dismantling of the French colonial machine in the 1950s and 1960s. The colonial history and cultural differences of these immigrants have provided some with the argument that they cannot be integrated into French society.

Once more, a certain level of selective memory is operating; those who argue that these latest immigrants cannot be integrated into the French social fabric as have previous European immigrants cite cultural reasons for this impossibility, but Noiriel again debunks this logic. “Reportons-nous à présent un siècle en arrière [1880s]. Déjà les commentateurs évoquent la “nouveau-té” de la situation migratoire, et déjà celle-ci est expliquée par l’argument de l’afflux brutal des étrangers mettant en péril « identité nationale » et par celui de la « distance culturelle » qui sépare les nouveaux venus des Français « de souche ».”<sup>222</sup> Yet the “distance culturelle” that supposedly prevents non-European immigrants from integrating into French society continues to have traction in debates surrounding immigration, which begs the question: why are we still debating the immigration and integration of these immigrants a half-century later?

On the one hand, those who immigrated to France after the Second World War did so at the same time as France was losing its colonial possessions. As part one of *Mémoires d’immigrés* establishes, this confluence of events did not curtail immigration from these countries as French employers continued to recruit heavily from the Maghreb despite the violent war of decolonization that was unfolding in North Africa, most visibly in Algeria. The violence extended to France as well, evidenced by the bombings that took place and the massacre of Algerian protesters on October 17, 1961. Adding to this paradox is the fact that many of the immigrants, even after independence, remained in France for economic and political reasons and

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<sup>222</sup> Noiriel 290.

have since raised several generations of French citizens. Benguigui's parents are an example of this incongruous situation. Despite her father's political activities on behalf of the MNA ( for which he was imprisoned in France) and the persistence of the 'mythe du retour',<sup>223</sup> that permeated her family life (like so many of her generation), he was never able to return to Algeria, primarily for political reasons. Yet French immigration policies and discussions in the last forty years or so have continued to treat it as a transitory phenomenon that could be dealt with by such measures as 'l'aide au retour' (late 1970s) and threat of expulsion (1980s-present) from France.

While immigration may have indeed been understood and conceived of as transitory in the beginning by both the French and immigrants, during the last few decades questions of immigration refer as much to the large presence of French nationals of North African origin who are not immigrants as to actual immigrants. As Noiriel observes, "Aujourd'hui, pour la première fois dans l'histoire de la République française, tout le débat sur l'immigration se focalise sur la deuxième génération, soit sur des individus citoyens français, mais stigmatisés à cause de leur origine "ethnique."<sup>224</sup> He attributes this to several factors, including the rise of youth as a separate social category that blurs in many ways the traditional social classes, the increased visibility of these immigrants and their descendants as a result of intensive urban development and the subsequent media attention given to the urban zones that are densely populated with ethnic minorities. The negative media attention focused on Seine-Saint-Denis, for example, is what prompted Benguigui to make her film *9/3, Mémoire d'un territoire*. While the "who" of

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<sup>223</sup> The children of North African immigrants in France often refer to 'le mythe du retour'; the parents could not admit that they would remain in France and thus they would not "settle" into their new homes. In *Inch'Allah dimanche* this is represented by the suitcases and boxes that remain unpacked or visible in the home of Malika, who has been in France for fifteen years already.

<sup>224</sup> Noiriel 310.

immigration may have changed, the rhetoric surrounding immigration has not evolved to account for this development and some continue to promote reactionary and repressive legislative measures such as controls, restrictions, and expulsion. This is particularly evident on the right of the political spectrum and especially the far right, but as some have noted, the left has not varied much when it comes to immigration policy.<sup>225</sup> What is paradoxical about this logic is that many of those designated under the blanket term of ‘immigré’ are not, in fact, immigrants and did not immigrate. Second- and third-generation “immigrants” do not exist either; one has either immigrated, and is thus an immigrant, or not. The children and grandchildren of those who immigrated to France are French citizens, though largely disaffected ones. They were born and raised in France and their only link to immigration is their parents and or grandparents who were immigrants proper. Some immigration policies and public perceptions have made no distinctions between the generations, however.

Ainsi quand les gouvernements successifs furent confrontés, à partir de 1974, à la perspective d’une installation durable sur le territoire métropolitain d’une immigration venue d’Asie mais surtout d’Afrique, leur premier réflexe fut d’oublier l’égalité et les leçons de l’expérience au point de vouloir organiser le rapatriement forcé de ces immigrés. Quand leur droit de rester sur le territoire fut acquis en 1984, on tenta d’empêcher leurs enfants de devenir français dans les mêmes conditions que les enfants d’immigrés d’hier, avant de rétablir presque à l’identique les règles d’antan.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> In *We, the people of Europe? Reflections on transnational citizenship* Balibar writes “Alternations between “left” and “right” governments have no notable effect on the content of these [immigration] policies, whose essence remains unchanged and even becomes the object of a sort of competition around the themes of combating insecurity and defending the national interest.” (34)

<sup>226</sup> Weil 8.

Weil is referring to the attempts to reform the nationality laws in the mid-1980s, which would have revoked the automatic *jus solis* and abolished the right to dual nationality status for many children of Algerian immigrants. Instead, they would have been required to ask for French nationality, much like their parents had to do under French colonial rule. They were in essence being treated like colonial subjects within the Hexagone.

A droite, on a demandé aux enfants d'Algériens de manifester leur volonté d'être français. Cela pouvait paraître légitime dans un débat strictement métropolitain. Pour les descendants des musulmans d'Algérie, cependant, cela les ramenait symboliquement à un statut inférieur, celui que leurs parents avaient subi en Algérie. Ceux-ci en effet ne pouvaient devenir pleinement français sans l'avoir demandé.<sup>227</sup>

Although these debates were raging in the 1980s, the same attitudes persist today; otherwise French politicians would not consistently turn to immigration as a dependable means to garner votes.

En avril 2006, alors ministre de l'intérieur de Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, distancé dans les sondages par Ségolène Royal, avait brutalement durci son discours pour parler à l'oreille des électeurs du Front national. *“S'il y en a que cela gêne d'être en France, qu'ils ne se gênent pas pour quitter un pays qu'ils n'aiment pas. (...) On a plus qu'assez d'avoir le sentiment d'être obligé de s'excuser d'être français”*, avait-t-il déclaré.<sup>228</sup>

Sarkozy's rhetoric clearly highlights and at the same time obscures several issues. First, it intentionally ignores a reality that has arisen as a result of France's actions, both past and

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<sup>227</sup> Weil 62.

<sup>228</sup> Landrin and Leparmentier, “Immigration et sécurité...” *Le Monde.fr*, 23 May 2009. <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

present: the ‘immigrés’ are there because France at one time needed their labor, either in the colonies or in France. This is an historical economic fact and Benguigui insists on this point repeatedly in part one of *Mémoires d’immigrés* and elsewhere. It was France’s desire to expand its global economic power and prestige that led to the colonization of much of Africa and some of Asia, and it was a lack of domestic labor that required the importation of cheap labor, first from poorer European countries and then from countries with whom France had a colonial relationship. Secondly, by positing “them” in opposition to the French, Sarkozy is essentially denying a segment of the population their status as legal French nationals. By claiming that “they” can leave if they do not like it in France, he is implying that they are not really French. As Philippe Bernard wrote in *Le Monde* during the 2005 urban riots in France, “...les jeunes des quartiers populaires...ne sont pas des indigènes égarés en métropole... Il faut en prendre conscience : ce sont pour la plupart des citoyens qui cassent pour se faire entendre.”<sup>229</sup> Sarkozy’s rhetoric echoes that of certain circles in the United States regarding African-Americans; those who suggested and perhaps continue to suggest that Blacks “go back to Africa” if they do not like it in the United States ignore a brutal history of slavery, segregation, and the practices of discrimination and racism. Treated as though they are not French and targets of restrictive immigration policies that frequently evoke a painful colonial heritage, it is not surprising that “they” would not like France.

Benguigui’s documentaries demonstrate, however, that many of the descendants of immigrants, the majority of whom are French, do not, in fact, desire to leave France. For her, the riots that periodically flare up in areas heavily populated by ethnic minorities are not an expression of hatred for France but rather evidence that these young people, these “casseurs,” in

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<sup>229</sup> Philippe Bernard, “Banlieues: la provocation coloniale,” *Le Monde.fr* 18 Nov. 2005, 18 Nov. 2005. <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

fact, hope. “Dans les pays où il n’y a ni justice ni espoir, on part ou on se soumet. Lorsque que l’on se révolte, c’est que l’on espère encore.”<sup>230</sup> Furthermore, the majority of real *immigrants* that she interviews in her films have opted to remain in France. It is their home, and despite the hardships described in their testimonies and the difficulties they continue to face on a daily basis, they have managed to succeed or continue to try to make a space for themselves in French society. Yet there is an all too prevalent perception that these ‘immigrants’, these *Muslim* ‘immigrants’, cannot be integrated into mainstream French society. But what does it mean to be “integrated”?

Benguigui addresses this question as well as related questions in her 2004 documentary *Le plafond de verre*, an indictment of the rampant discriminatory practices against individuals of Maghrebi and African origin in the French employment sector. The documentary first aired on France 5 in October 2004, then was shown in movie theaters in 2006. Deemed “un remarquable travail d’enquête”<sup>231</sup> by *Le Monde*, the documentary is constructed similarly to her earlier productions: interviews with young minorities who have confronted discrimination first-hand as well as various experts in the fields of sociology, employment, and political science, interspersed with archival and contemporary footage, photographs, and documents.

“Plafond de verre” is a translation of the English term “glass ceiling,” coined by the *Wall Street Journal* in the mid-1980s.<sup>232</sup> The term initially referred to the difficulty encountered by women to attain positions of power in the top echelons of corporations. The barriers that prevent

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<sup>230</sup> Yamina Benguigui, “Appel des mères à la responsabilité,” *Lemonde.fr*. 10 Nov. 2005. <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

<sup>231</sup> Isabelle Regnier, “Le Plafond de verre: enquête sur les diplômés issus de l’immigration” Rev. of *Le plafond de verre*, dir. Yamina Benguigui. *Le Monde.fr* 10 Jan 06 <[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article\\_interactif/2008/12/16/les-premiers-pas-de-la-discrimination-positive-en-france\\_1131879\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article_interactif/2008/12/16/les-premiers-pas-de-la-discrimination-positive-en-france_1131879_3224.html)>.

<sup>232</sup> “Women in business.” *The Economist*. 21 July 2005. <[http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=4197626](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=4197626)>.

women from these positions are not enshrined in company policy; rather, they develop from unspoken and invisible practices, making them difficult to address. The term's use has now expanded to include minorities as well, who often fall victim to the same practices as women. In the case of minorities in France, and in the specific context of Benguigui's film, the term seems to refer to the often unfulfilled promise of the Republican ideal, which in principle makes no distinction based on race, religion, or gender. In practice, however, employers frequently discriminate on these bases. In the case of France, those who would advocate for anti-discriminatory measures find their hands bound; Daniel Sabbagh, researcher for the Centre d'études et de recherches internationales (CERI) notes that the French Constitution prohibits any discrimination, negative or positive, based on ethnic origins. Consequently, any proposals favoring assistance to or promotion of ethnic and racial minorities are going to be met with fierce resistance from those who cite the Constitution. What becomes evident throughout the film, though, is that the Constitution cannot in and of itself protect individuals from discrimination, and that further action is required.

In the United States, the civil rights movement that took place from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s resulted in a series of legislative measures prohibiting segregation in schools and other public spaces based on racial criteria. These reforms also led to affirmative action policies which aimed to increase the numbers of women and minorities in the workplace and in universities. These measures have not been enforced without some level of controversy, but Americans have more or less accepted them. In France, the idea of affirmative action, although quite polemical for constitutional reasons, has been gaining some traction, though it is phrased in different terms: 'la discrimination positive.' One wonders whether the semantic connotations of "discrimination" do more to hinder such efforts rather than confront negative discriminatory practices; regardless,

some in France have been implementing measures to effect a more representative distribution of individuals in educational and employment milieux.<sup>233</sup> However, these measures do not directly take into account an individual's race or ethnicity; instead, the socially and geographically disadvantaged are targeted. In this way, these policies can benefit minorities while not excluding others, as ethnic and racial minorities too often find themselves in socio-economically disadvantaged categories, and as will be discussed later in this chapter, geographically isolated. *Le plafond de verre* does not invest much direct attention to the question of positive discrimination, but some of the interviewees do appear to support such policies. The absence of a critique of positive discrimination in the film leads the viewer to speculate that it is a measure supported by the filmmaker. At the very least, it is evoked in the film to encourage further reflection and discussion of possible solutions to discrimination.

The introductory segment of the documentary alternates between shots of anonymous people going to work, and work spaces and brief commentary by a few of the young people who are interviewed more extensively in the film. This structure creates two effects: on the visual level, it creates associations between work and productivity and the young minority faces on the screen, thus working on a psychological level to alter perceptions of these individuals, too often excluded from positive or even neutral representations, or portrayed negatively, particularly by the media. When the audio is added in, however, the effect changes; the introductory remarks by the interviewees highlight to what extent they have been left out in this regard. The interviewees' initial remarks are consistent in that none of them, as students, had entertained the

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<sup>233</sup> *Le Monde* cites several institutions that have implemented "positive discrimination" measures in various forms: Sciences Po, some of the *grandes écoles*, Henri IV high school.  
<[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article\\_interactif/2008/12/16/les-premiers-pas-de-la-discrimination-positive-en-france\\_1131879\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article_interactif/2008/12/16/les-premiers-pas-de-la-discrimination-positive-en-france_1131879_3224.html)>.

possibility that they would be denied opportunities because of their origins. Yet once they attempted to enter the workforce, they encountered an unexpected obstacle: systemic and repeated discrimination. At times the discrimination remains unspoken: CVs are discarded because of the names on them, potential candidates are never called back for a second interview once employers have seen them; in other instances it is quite apparent. One male interviewee in the opening segment of the film recounts a job interview during which the interviewer said to him “J’espère que vous savez écrire, parce qu’on avait un Rachid, il y a pas longtemps, qui lui avait des problèmes d’orthographe.” The question of discrimination based on names and appearances will be discussed more fully later in this chapter; what is important to note here is that the prejudice exhibited by the job interviewer in the preceding quote clearly originates from stereotypical misconceptions about certain individuals rather than this particular candidate’s qualifications for the job. By individualizing the interviewees of the documentary and underscoring their academic achievements and qualifications, the film aims to displace or neutralize the misconceptions that have pervaded the employment sector as well as society in general.

This introductory sequence, made up of contemporary footage, is followed immediately by archival footage of a French report of the 1963 civil rights march in Washington D.C., that culminated in the famous speech by Martin Luther King in which he states “I have a dream, that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream...” *Le Monde*, in its review of *Le plafond de verre*, took issue with this construction, stating that the analogy created by the inclusion of this footage exhibited a “manque de rigueur.” “Procédant par amalgames douteux entre la situation des anciens esclaves noirs aux Etats-Unis à la veille du Civil Rights

Act et celle, contemporaine, des Français issus de l'immigration, Yamina Benguigui s'improvise sociologue et théoricienne politique."<sup>234</sup> The preceding quote itself creates a false analogy in contrasting slavery in the United States and the situation of present-day descendants of immigrants, as it omits French historical realities, as well as Benguigui's long-documented work in reestablishing immigrant history within a larger colonial and postcolonial history. Her films do not suggest that contemporary social issues regarding immigrants and their descendants emerged from a vacuum; on the contrary, they demonstrate that these questions were and are inherited from inequalities and injustices that were enshrined in colonial mentalities, practices, and legislation. The civil rights movement in the United States and the contemporary situation of minorities of African descent in France did indeed emerge from two distinct historical events: slavery and colonialism, and the processes and institutions that supported each of them cannot be conflated. Benguigui, a seasoned filmmaker who thoroughly and methodically plans and executes her films, is not likely equating these two phenomena. Cinema employs images to create affects and effects in the spectator. Symbolically, the image of Martin Luther King is very powerful on an audiovisual level; his person evokes questions of racism, injustice, and a moment of major historical and societal transformation. These questions are relevant in contemporary France. The enduring racial and ethnic discrimination in both countries as a consequence of these experiences qualifies the inclusion of this footage in the documentary. It should be noted, furthermore, that this cinematic document of American history is mediated through French commentary in Benguigui's film, pointing to France's awareness of such

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<sup>234</sup>Isabelle Regnier, "Le Plafond de verre: enquête sur les diplômés issus de l'immigration" Rev. of *Le plafond de verre*, dir. Yamina Benguigui. *Le Monde.fr* 10 Jan 06  
<[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article\\_interactif/2008/12/16/les-premiers-pas-de-la-discrimination-positive-en-france\\_1131879\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article_interactif/2008/12/16/les-premiers-pas-de-la-discrimination-positive-en-france_1131879_3224.html)>.

struggles in the United States but perhaps blind to the injustices breeding within its own society. The civil rights movement in the United States resulted in legislative action, and the thesis that emerges from *Le plafond de verre* is that policies must be enacted to combat discrimination. The example of the 1964 Civil Rights Act is cited in the documentary, but measures passed in England in 1977 that sanction employers who deny interviews to qualified candidates are also mentioned by one of the interviewees, Khalid Hamdani, a member of the Haut Conseil à l'Intégration. Canada is also given as an example, although the specific details of the Canadian law or laws are not discussed in the film.

These analogies are somewhat problematic, however. The United States, Canada, and England are countries that have embraced the idea of multiculturalism; the United States especially has fostered the idea of ethnic pride and the idea of a nation born of many cultures. Its immigrant heritage is often praised, although recent polemics surrounding immigration to the United States from poorer Hispanic countries, particularly Mexico, have resulted in associating the terms 'immigrant' and 'immigration' to crime, unemployment, and other negative matters. In reality, France is also a multicultural society and a country of immigration, but cultural differences are not celebrated to the same extent as they are in the United States. Whether affirmative action policies similar to those enacted in the United States and elsewhere can be successful in France remains to be seen, given the different cultural and historical perspectives.

*Le plafond de verre* not only incorporates footage of the 1963 civil rights march into its narrative, it also makes use of other archival footage to promote the idea that legislative action can lead to societal change. A sort of history of this momentous period is inserted into the film: the 1963 march is followed by footage of President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act, African-American laborers, a shot of a "Colored only" hotel, a march against desegregation, the

Alabama riots which show men in uniform using dogs and waterhoses against Blacks, and then a peaceful desegregated classroom. This montage of footage suggests that the difficulties inherent in the long process toward a more equal and just society are inevitable, but that a first step must be taken. The last shot of the desegregated classroom is rather misleading; it suggests that the civil rights movement and the ensuing measures resolved the question of racial discrimination. The example of the United States illustrates the complexity of the problem and to what extent prejudice and discrimination are entrenched in society; fifty years after the Civil Rights Act, minorities and women are still enduring prevalent discrimination and inequalities in the workplace, although progress has been made.

The documentary also alternates between archival footage of French immigrant laborers and the contemporary situation of minority job candidates. This serves to highlight the similarities as well as the differences between the two generations. On the one hand, the attitudes that many French employers (and French society in general) held regarding their immigrant laborers has not changed in any profound way; the children and grandchildren of immigrants are often treated like immigrants although they are by and large French nationals and citizens. This will be elaborated further in this chapter. On the other hand, the archival footage shows the immigrants at work. Although they were exploited by French companies and endured deplorable living conditions, they, at least, had jobs. They were productive and had a function in society. Their children, however, despite the advantages they have benefited from, such as an education in the French school system, find themselves without employment, leading a young woman in the film to state “Nous, on n’a pas notre place.” Philippe Bataille, former president of a group who studied the question of discrimination, points out the enormous investment the French state has made educating these individuals, only to see them unable to find employment.

In fact, he argues that it is these individuals, those that have succeeded academically against all odds, that find themselves the victims of discrimination.

C'est ceux qui se sont intégrés qui sont les plus victimes de discrimination et de racisme. C'est ceux qui ont cru aux idéaux de la République [...] qui étaient là où il fallait, au moment où il fallait, en particulier dans l'école et en particulier dans les diplômes. Ils sont les plus discriminés parce que ce qu'on leur reproche, ce n'est pas de ne pas s'être intégrés, c'est de s'être intégrés. C'est d'avoir conquis la position qui n'est plus la position de leurs parents, d'avoir rattrapé le handicap culturel [...]. Ils ont remonté la pente. Ils sont en haut, ils sont au sommet. C'est cela qui pose problème.<sup>235</sup>

Benguigui herself could be the subject of this description; she has surmounted a variety of obstacles to become a successful and renowned artist. Art, though, is a less restrictive and less exclusive field, perhaps allowing for much more diversity and latitude than other more 'traditional' means of employment. Those interviewed in *Le Plafond de verre*, for example, have attempted to find work in education, marketing, and engineering, among others, and as the film illustrates, many of these types of positions require contacts and networks that are unavailable to these candidates. This adds yet another dimension to Benguigui's diverse subject positions and further calls into question her ability to speak on behalf of others. The distance that lies between her experiences and those featured in her films may be reconciled cinematically by effacing herself from the films and letting her interviewees speak for themselves. In this way, she is not representing others per se but rather acting as a mediator for these subjects and testimonies to emerge.

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<sup>235</sup> *Le plafond de verre*.

#### 4.1 LA MÉSENTENTE: INTEGRATION

Quand j'ai compris la loi, j'ai compris ma défaite  
Intégrez-vous disait-elle, c'était chose faite.  
--Lyrics from "Le bruit et l'odeur," Zebda (1995)

*Intégration* : facile à dire. Impossible à conceptualiser.  
Donc difficile à théoriser. A chacun de trouver ses marques.

*Intégration en France* : comment monter dans un  
train en marche sans tomber... Problème mal posé.  
Ce n'est pas ce qu'on vous demande ! On est tous  
dans la même galère. --Azouz Begag and Abdellatif  
Chaouite, *Ecarts d'identité*, 1990.

Zebda's song, a response to an infamous speech given in 1991 by then Paris mayor Jacques Chirac at a gathering of the RPR (now UMP), underscores the contradictions in the debates surrounding the issues of immigration and integration. No longer willing to be treated as 'immigrants,' the members of Zebda reclaim their rightful place in France by elaborating a sort of defense, alluding to, among other things, their births in France, their ancestors' participation in wars for which they fought on the side of the French, and the roles that their fathers and grandfathers played in building modern France. None of these facts are mentioned by Chirac in his speech, which instead draws on extreme characterizations of immigrant families as a justification for ending family reunification.

Comment voulez-vous que le travailleur français [...] qui travaille avec sa femme et qui ensemble gagnent environ 15 000 FF et qui voit sur le palier à côté de son HLM entassée, une famille avec un père de famille, trois ou quatre épouses et une vingtaine de gosses et qui gagne 50 000FF de prestation sociale sans naturellement travailler. Si vous ajoutez à cela le bruit et l'odeur, eh bien le travailleur français sur le palier devient fou, il devient fou. C'est comme ça ! Il

faut le comprendre. Si vous y étiez vous auriez la même réaction. [...] Et ce n'est pas être raciste que de dire cela...<sup>236</sup>

Evidently, the rhetoric has not evolved much from Chirac's 1991 speech to Sarkozy's 2006 interventions on immigration. Like Sarkozy, Chirac constructs a "we" versus "they" schema, but he goes even further by opposing the French worker to the lazy Muslim Arab or African immigrant who does not work but instead collects generous government handouts. Rather than cite poor wages for laborers, insufficient housing, and high unemployment rates which affect minorities more severely than the French, Chirac instead places all the blame on the immigrant population, whose "natural" laziness, noisiness, and smell offends the industrious, employed Frenchman. Although the colonies are no more, the colonial racist rhetoric continued and continues to tap into certain segments of the French population's psyche. On the video archive of the 1991 speech, Chirac pauses after the line "sans naturellement travailler" and one can hear the audience applauding; when he says in a rather dramatic fashion "si vous ajoutez à cela le bruit et l'odeur," then pauses in an equally dramatic way, the audience erupts in laughter. He clearly posits the superior Frenchman over the inferior Muslim Arab and African, the very definition of racism. What he failed to see, and what many refuse to accept, is that "le travailleur français" that he cites in his speech could very well be named Mohamed and not Jacques. At the time of the speech, many of the immigrants who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s had been in France for thirty to forty years; it is not unrealistic to imagine that within three to four decades these immigrants had gained citizenship or integrated to some degree.

Furthermore, the Muslim family that Chirac depicts in his speech, "une famille avec un père de famille, trois ou quatre épouses et une vingtaine de gosses," also reveals an ignorance of

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<sup>236</sup> Excerpt from Chirac's 1991 speech transcribed from [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xh014\\_chirac-le-bruit-et-lodeur\\_events](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xh014_chirac-le-bruit-et-lodeur_events).

the family structure in Muslim cultures. The family model in Muslim cultures is the extended family, and the “trois ou quatre épouses” whom Chirac cites may not necessarily be several wives but rather the mother, mother-in-law, adult sister(s) of the wife, or even adult daughters. Muslims who have immigrated to countries such as France are expected to conform to the nuclear family model, which is itself a relatively recent phenomenon in many Western societies that have experienced the extended family model at some point in their histories. Having to adapt to a fundamental shift in the way family is experienced could not have been easy for the newly arrived wives of the immigrant workers.

Benguigui, in an interview regarding *Inch’Allah dimanche*, specifically evokes the newfound intimacy in which Zouina and Ahmed find themselves in France and in which many North African couples no doubt experienced after family reunification. “Pendant dix ou vingt ans, les Algériens immigrés avaient travaillé durement. Quand leurs femmes sont arrivées, c’étaient des inconnues pour eux. Ils n’ont pas su les accueillir.”<sup>237</sup> This awkwardness is depicted in the scene where Zouina sees her husband at the train station after a long absence. Their physical discomfort is apparent, especially compared to the excessive expressions of emotion between mother and son; their inability to even really look at each other or speak to each other further highlights the discomfort they are experiencing in this unfamiliar situation.

From a political perspective, Chirac is exploiting an issue that garners much attention from the media and plays into the fears of the French populace: polygamy. Polygamy is a reality among some immigrant communities in France, particularly among some West African communities originating from Mali and Senegal where polygamy is the norm<sup>238</sup>, but it is not the

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<sup>237</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview with Yves Alion. *L’Avant-scène Cinéma* 506 (Nov. 2001) 136-138.

<sup>238</sup> Statistics are unavailable for the number of polygamous families in France, but various estimates indicate that there are 140,000 to 400,000 people living in polygamous families in France. Polygamy was made illegal in 1993

prevalent Muslim immigrant family in France as Chirac would suggest. The question of polygamy is addressed in Benguigui's films, particularly in *Femmes d'Islam* and in *Inch'Allah dimanche*, where Zouina's mother-in-law threatens to bring over a second wife for Ahmed. Zouina mentions this threat to Nicole (the young French divorcée who has befriended her), to which she replies "Il n'a pas le droit." Zouina responds rather resignedly, "Si, il a droit, meme à quatre. Je serais la première alors." If the estimates of polygamous families are accurate, then by and large most immigrant families have aligned themselves with the norms of the host country.

Ten years after Zebda's "Le bruit et l'odeur," Benguigui still felt it necessary to explicitly address the supposed cultural differences that exist between young French of North African descent and mainstream French society amidst the 2005 urban riots.

Chers enfants, la France est notre pays. Au fond de vous, vous le savez.

Vous vous sentez étrangers lorsque l'on rentre « au bled »... Vous aimez les mêmes musiques que vos camarades de classe, vous regardez les mêmes films, et, surtout, vous espérez la même promotion sociale.<sup>239</sup>

The focus on the 'second' and 'third' generations within contemporary immigration debates is due in part to the fact that they are young and highly visible as a result of increased media attention. Benguigui's plea, though addressed to the "children," is directed at policy

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by the Pasqua immigration laws, and some of the measures that the government has taken to address this issue is "de-cohabitation" whereby the additional wives and their children are moved into separate apartments and the refusal to give residency permits to more than one wife in a polygamous arrangement. "France's polygamy problem." Genevieve Oger. *Deutsche Welle*. 7/31/05. Accessed 6/10/09. <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,1664241,00.html>>. "African Women in France Battling Polygamy." Marlise Simons. *The New York Times*. 1/26/96. Accessed 6/9/09. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/26/world/african-women-in-france-battling-polygamy.html>>. "Thousands of families in despair as France enforces ban on polygamy." Adrian Pennink. *The Independent*. 4/1/01. Accessed 6/9/09. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/thousands-of-families-in-despair-as-france-enforces-ban-on-polygamy-689622.html>>.

<sup>239</sup> Yamina Benguigui, "Appel des mères à la responsabilité," *Le Monde*, 10 Nov. 2005 <<<http://www.lemonde.fr>>>.

makers and the French public at large as it was published in *Le Monde* and therefore not likely to reach the group she is addressing. By placing emphasis on what these children have in common with their classmates, she is attempting to buttress her claim that they are French. Youth as a social group does indeed traverse traditional social categories, as Noiriél points out, and generally there tends to be more diversity within this group as evidenced by films such as *La haine* (Kassovitz, 1995) and *L'Esquive* (Kechiche, 2003) which both feature racially and ethnically diverse groups of adolescents in French urban housing developments. But youth, by definition, have yet to be defined or assigned their roles in society. Although they are made aware of their 'differences' on a daily basis<sup>240</sup> as children and teenagers, it is at the juncture of adulthood where young Maghrebi and other minorities encounter exclusion and discrimination on account of their origins.

Azouz Begag's and Abdellatif Chaouite's humorous definitions of "intégration" also underscore the inability to define the term in contemporary France. They pose the rhetorical questions: What are the signs of integration? At what point will the children and grandchildren be considered integrated into French society? How can one know when one is integrated? It is in this respect that the term and the concept of integration becomes the object of a 'mésentente' in discussions about immigration. It is a term employed often and by many parties in the discussion, and it is a concept that everyone understands but at the same time does not understand. As Begag and Chaouite write "Ce n'est pas ce qu'on vous demande!"<sup>241</sup> Rancière defines "mésentente" in the following terms: "Par mésentente on entendra un type déterminé de situation de parole : celle où l'un des interlocuteurs à la fois entend et n'entend pas ce que dit

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<sup>240</sup> See, for example, Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba*, an autobiographical account of the author's childhood in the Lyon region.

<sup>241</sup> Begag and Chaouite, *Ecarts d'identité*, p. 10.

l'autre.”<sup>242</sup> More specifically, “Les interlocuteurs y entendent et n’y entendent pas la même chose dans les mêmes mots.”<sup>243</sup> This is the case with the term integration: all agents involved in discussions on immigration use the word, but what it actually means for each party remains elusive. No one seems to be able to agree on what “integration” is. What it is not, according to Weil, is assimilation:

Il y a là comme un paradoxe : le terme intégration a été emprunté à la sociologie et préféré-en France, mais aussi en Europe et dans tous les pays d’immigration-à celui de l’assimilation-processus d’adaptation dont le résultat recherché était la disparation dans la sphère publique des différences culturelles, stade ultime de l’acculturation.<sup>244</sup>

Integration, in sociological terms, is defined as follows:

L’intégration désigne en effet un processus multiforme, un ensemble d’interactions sociales provoquant chez des individus un sentiment d’identification à une société et à ses valeurs, grâce auquel la cohésion sociale est préservée. L’intégration est ainsi définie par Émile Durkheim comme le processus par lequel une société parvient à s’attacher les individus, les constituant en membres solidaires d’une collectivité unifiée.<sup>245</sup>

If this is indeed what integration is, then French society is largely at fault for the absence of social cohesion between the different segments of its population. It has not succeeded in attaching many of its own citizens who instead feel alienated and disenfranchised in their own country.

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<sup>242</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente* (Paris : Galilée, 1995) 12.

<sup>243</sup> Rancière 13.

<sup>244</sup> Weil 47.

<sup>245</sup> Weil 48.

What has perhaps muddied the parameters of the debates on immigration is the use of the term integration when what one is really alluding to and desires is assimilation. At times, the two concepts are confounded. For example, in a 2002 intervention on integration by then president Jacques Chirac, he explicitly uses both terms. This particular debate was titled “L’intégration: un défi pour la République.” While the term ‘intégration’ is employed consistently throughout most of the intervention, Chirac substitutes it with “assimilation” in reference to previous waves of immigration: “C’est à ce prix que le processus d’assimilation à la française, qui a permis d’accueillir des vagues d’immigration successives au cours des siècles précédents, pourra fonctionner à nouveau.”<sup>246</sup> As the definitions previously provided indicate, integration and assimilation are two distinct processes ; the former involves adapting to a society to the point of being indistinguishable, the latter does not entail such erasure of one’s particularities but rather hinges on identification with the values of that society. Furthermore, assimilation occurs as a result of the erasure of cultural differences in the public sphere, but both eliminating cultural differences and delimiting the parameters of a “culture” seem to be difficult if not impossible tasks. Cultures are not static and are always evolving, especially as they encounter other cultures. Even those perceived to be the most “integrated” into French society nevertheless retain some aspects of their native cultures. Citing Noiriel’s *Le Creuset français*, Weil highlights the perceived (and oft-cited) effortless integration of immigrants from Belgium, Spain, Italy, and other European countries, but also points out that their integration was neither an easy or painless process, nor did it result in an abandonment of the culture of origin.

Ce processus ne s’était pas accompli en un jour, sans conflits, stigmatisation ni violences. Cela ne signifiait pas que les liens avec les pays d’origine avaient

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<sup>246</sup> Jacques Chirac, “L’intégration: un défi pour la République,” <<http://www.2002pourlafrance.net/lesfaits.html?idArticle=223>>

disparu. Au contraire, ils avaient pu se maintenir : usage de la langue maternelle, vie associative, traditions culturelles ou religieuses.”<sup>247</sup>

Noiriel’s study is replete with testimonies by European immigrants and their children which tell of the hardships they faced on a daily basis in France on account of their origins.<sup>248</sup> Even in France, where the idea of a “national” culture is generally accepted and strong centralizing tendencies have been in place, there nevertheless exists some cultural variations between regions. The successful 2008 French comedy *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* (2008) in fact derives its comedy from the prejudices that exist between southern and northern French<sup>249</sup>. “Le nord,” as it is referred to throughout the film, is depicted as a backward, almost foreign region where the language, food and people are practically unrecognizable as French. The film’s enormous popularity<sup>250</sup> would seem to indicate that French audiences still strongly related to (and were able to laugh at) these prejudices. As *Time* notes, “[Dany] Boon has made no secret that his motive was to dismantle and mock French prejudices about the north and its inhabitants. As the box office figures show, French cinema lovers are lapping that effort up.”<sup>251</sup> The rhetoric of a strongly unified, culturally homogenous France is betrayed by the reality of a multicultural, multiethnic citizenry which originates not only from beyond France’s borders but also within the country itself.

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<sup>247</sup> Weil 48.

<sup>248</sup> Noiriel cites an interview by Italian novelist Inès Cagnati for the newspaper *Sud-Ouest* in which she describes her daily interactions with French girls: “Their universe was hostile, aggressive; they didn’t want us there. I understood neither its language nor its rules; nor did I know what I had to do, not even to earn their tolerance, but at least to deserve their forgiveness for being myself, for being different.” (166)

<sup>249</sup> The comedy is about a postal worker from the south of France who, wanting to be transferred to the Côte d’Azur, pretends that he is handicapped in order to improve his chances of a transfer. His ruse is discovered, however, and as “punishment” he is transferred to Nord Pas de Calais where he must live among the Ch’tis.

<sup>250</sup> The *New York Times* reports that the film earned over \$185 million in its first eight weeks and was set to beat the domestic record set by *Titanic* for 20.7 million viewers. “Vert acres? France sees the joy of being stuck in the sticks.” *New York Times*. Elizabeth Vincentelli. 4/27/2008. Accessed 5/29/09. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/27/weekinreview/27vince.html?ref=movies>>.

<sup>251</sup> “French Movie Finds Success in Unlikely Corner.” *Time*. 10 Mar. 2008, 29 May 2009 <<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1720828,00.html>>.

Boone successfully used cinematic comedy to ridicule prejudices that exist among Frenchman. Perhaps this is why filmmakers such as Benguigui and Allouache are drawn to comedy to address rather serious socio-political issues; a successful humorous depiction of cultural differences between mainstream French society and its minority sub-populations may go a long way in dismantling preconceived and ill-conceived notions that feed into existing discriminatory practices and attitudes. Allouache is particularly adept at this; he constantly plays with audience (and his main character's) expectations about the immigrant community in the 1996 film *Salut cousin!* After Mok, the beur character of the film, has described his family situation in the cité to his naïve cousin Alilo, newly arrived from Algeria, Alilo expects the worst when he goes to meet them. Mok culls every possible cliché about the urban immigrant life in his description: the crime-ridden, poverty stricken cité, the sister who had to turn to prostitution, the drug addicted or imprisoned brother. Mok's family, in turn, initially appears to conform to Mok's description, but then in true comedic fashion, Allouache dismantles each stereotype and we discover a very well-adapted family whose children have become more or less successful in their individual endeavors, with the exception of Mok himself. This strategy makes the audience aware of its own biases and prejudices and at the same time neutralizes them or makes them less effective.

Despite the idealistic streak that runs through Benguigui's, Boone's and Allouache's films, there still remain serious social problems regarding immigrants and their descendants that require action. Though previous waves of immigrants, primarily European, were able over time to integrate rather successfully into French society, the later immigrants from Africa and Asia continue to have difficulty finding their place in France. It is not merely a question of one's identity but rather has concrete repercussions on the lives of the individuals in question. Weil

attempts to explain these difficulties by pointing to other related problems. Unemployment has hit this particular segment of the population particularly hard, and contributes to already present social tensions, xenophobia, and ‘communautarisme.’<sup>252</sup> He also attributes these difficulties to the deplorable living conditions that these immigrants continue to face and adds that where one goes to school depends on where one lives, thus creating another obstacle to social advancement for immigrants and their children. Finally, the polemic that erupted over nationality rights as a result of some immigrants being granted the right to stay in France in 1984 has created resentment within all parties, thereby dampening or overshadowing any progress made in this arena.<sup>253</sup>

For Weil, the conditions cited above have prevented immigrants and their descendents from identifying with French society, a key component of the integrative process as defined by Durkheim. To integrate individuals, society must interpellate them, to “attach” them to its values. While the Republic touts the ideals of “Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” in reality these ideals are rarely attained when it is a matter of immigrants and minorities, resulting in social fractures. “Certainement ces débats ont-ils contribué à interrompre un processus d’identification qui était en cours et même à provoquer une « désidentification ».”<sup>254</sup> Further alienating some of these individuals is the shadow of colonial history and policies that continue to reverberate in contemporary attitudes and in legislative practices. A recent illustration of this is the move by

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<sup>252</sup> There is much talk of ‘communautarisme’ when alluding to the Muslim population in France, but is this a result of a conscience decision by the immigrants and their families or have immigrants been forced into the same living spaces? Benguigui would and does argue the latter in her latest documentary *9/3 Mémoire d’un territoire*. As Begag and Chaouite wryly note in *Ecarts d’identité: Communauté maghrébine: recherché mon frère désespérément...*,” p. 9.

<sup>253</sup> Weil 48-50.

<sup>254</sup> Weil 62.

then Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy to reinstate a state of emergency<sup>255</sup> during the 2005 riots that had its roots in the colonial era. The 1955 law was initially applied, in fact, to quell an anti-colonial Algerian insurgency. By implementing these measures Sarkozy essentially created an analogy, an equivalency between Algerian insurgents and French rioters. As Philippe Bernard wrote in *Le Monde*,

...le recours par le premier ministre à “*la loi de 1955*” sur l’état d’urgence, apparaît, au-delà du débat sur son efficacité pour ramener l’ordre, comme une provocation dont les effets psychologiques et politiques sur les millions de Français issus d’Afrique noir, du Maghreb, et singulièrement d’Algérie, n’ont pas fini de se faire sentir.<sup>256</sup>

Some have faulted the republican model for failing to integrate many of its citizens, but Benguigui often cites republican ideals as the best means to integration. Article 1 of the French constitution reads: France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organised on a decentralised basis.<sup>257</sup>

Arguing against the perceived incompatibility between Islam and secularism, Benguigui writes “...seule la laïcité républicaine peut permettre l’intégration pacifique de populations

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<sup>255</sup> Bernard describes the policies legalized by this law and its psychological effects on the community: “Brandir la loi qui, au début de la guerre d’Algérie, a légalisé la chasse au faciès et la prise en main du maintien de l’ordre et de la justice par l’armée, c’est souligner le parallélisme entre les souvenirs cuisants des repressions policières des années 1950-1960 contre les nationalistes algériens et les images des cités où vivent leurs enfants et petits-enfants. C’est renvoyer ces jeunes nés en France à une extranéité incompréhensible, révoltante.”

<sup>256</sup> Philippe Bernard, “Banlieues: la provocation coloniale,” *Lemonde.fr* 18 Nov. 2005, 18 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.

<sup>257</sup> <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/english/8ab.asp> (This version reflects the Raffarin reforms of 2003 which added the last sentence to the article).

différentes.”<sup>258</sup> She continues: “Dans l’Etat de droit républicain, la même justice doit valoir pour tous, immigrés aussi bien que natifs du pays. Les “immigrés” n’ont plus à être distingués. Ils sont devenus une composante de la population.”<sup>259</sup> Faulting not the republican secular model but rather the failure to live up to its ideals, Benguigui insists that everyone submit to the secular laws that govern public life because in principle they exist for the common good. If these ideals and laws are respected, then a more active citizenry will result. In practice, however, these ideals are far from being realized. While not ignoring the Islamic fundamentalism that takes root in certain Muslim communities in France and elsewhere, preventing or discouraging some adherents from heeding secular laws and customs, for Benguigui the larger issue stems from a society that has refused to integrate its immigrant and minority citizens, even though they have participated in its economic and historical development.

Ceux qui donnent tant à la République, en assumant des tâches souvent ingrates et mal rétribuées, doivent jouir de la plénitude des acquis sociaux, sans discrimination implicite ou explicite. Enfin, il faut que soit assurée une visibilité de toutes les composantes de la République parmi les acteurs de la vie sociale, dans les médias, ainsi que dans l’art.<sup>260</sup>

This is precisely what Benguigui attempts to do in her films. She opens a cinematic space for the excluded that renders visible and audible faces and voices that had been long ignored and kept out of debates on immigration. What materializes in her films is the human face of immigration, the subjectivity of immigrants who have been denied their individuality in popular, political, and even cinematic and literary representations. This is the very definition of

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<sup>258</sup> Yamina Benguigui and Henri Peña-Lopez, “L’exigence laïque du respect mutuel,” *Le Monde diplomatique*. January 2002. 1 Oct. 2005, <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2002/01/BENGUIGUI/16037>>.

<sup>259</sup> Benguigui and Peña-Lopez.

<sup>260</sup> Benguigui and Peña-Lopez.

politics as defined by Rancière: creating a part (share) for those who have no part (do not share) in society. From the 1994 documentary *Femmes d'Islam* to the 2008 film *9/3, mémoire d'un territoire*, the questions of discrimination and the failure of many French citizens to be integrated into mainstream society (or to be recognized as having integrated) have been crucial components of her cinematic and political projects. The violence and hopelessness in many of the urban suburbs originate from or are exacerbated by the social and economic exclusion, i.e. discrimination, experienced by many young French people of Maghrebi and African origin. Despite the promise enshrined in the French Constitution to “ensure the equality of all citizens...without distinction of origin, race, or religion,” it is precisely because of their origins, race, and religion that these individuals are excluded.

In addition to using film as a means to bring attention to these questions, Benguigui herself credits cinema as the means by which she herself has integrated into French society. “Je m’enracine en faisant ces films, en racontant des pans d’histoire de France.”<sup>261</sup> Cinema has led her to a better understanding of immigrant history and of her own history. Although her parents were not immigrant laborers as many of her interviewees are, Benguigui shared many of the experiences of her generation :

J’ai vécu tout ce qu’ont vécu ces enfants qui se révoltent violemment.  
L’humiliation, le racisme, je sais ce que c’est. Avoir des parents algériens, je sais ce que c’est. La guerre d’Algérie, les suites et les conséquences, je sais aussi.<sup>262</sup>

She is referring to her father’s activities as a leader for the MNA (Mouvement national algérien, a rival of the FLN), his four-year imprisonment by the French, the murder of her uncle and the loss of other members of her family during the Algerian war, and her upbringing in

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<sup>261</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview, *Journal l’Humanité*. 5 Dec. 2001, 11 Apr. 2005 <[www.humanite.presse.fr](http://www.humanite.presse.fr)>.

<sup>262</sup> Yamina Benguigui, *Périphéries.net* <<http://www.peripheries.net/g-beng.htm>>.

France. Cinema simultaneously bridged the knowledge gap and created the necessary distance for Benguigui to arrive at a better understanding of her own history and of a extremist rhetoric and attitude that do nothing to further the cause of those who have been wronged. Such positions imprison those who hold them, while cinema, for Benguigui, opens a space for argument, negotiation, and evolution. Not surprisingly, many, if not all of her films, conclude with no clear resolution, signaling that much work has yet to be accomplished in this respect. Despite the progress that has been made in recent decades, thanks to artists such as Benguigui and others who share her cause, this political undertaking must repeatedly confront a social order that continues to exclude immigrants, what Rancière calls “la police.”

## 4.2 POLICING AND POLITICS

Rancière defines *la police* as follows:

La police est ainsi d’abord un ordre des corps qui définit les partages entre les modes de faire, les modes d’être et les modes du dire, qui fait que tels corps sont assignés par leur nom à telle place et à quelle tâche ; c’est un ordre du visible et du dicible qui fait que telle activité est visible et que telle autre ne l’est pas, que telle parole est entendue comme du discours et telle autre comme du bruit. (52)

The order of bodies that Rancière calls the police determines what and how things can be done, seen, and said, and its functions to continuously maintain that order. Everything and everyone that fall within that order are allocated to their proper places. Nowhere is this more evident than with immigrants and their descendants, upon whom the presence of the police is incessantly exerted. The *police* manifests itself through the immigrant population and

immigration policy through a variety of means: assigning ‘names’ to minorities, relegating them to the outskirts of cities and hence the margins of society, as well as through legislative practices that are always attempts to control the immigrant. The measures taken to control immigrants attest not only to the pervasiveness of the police (it emanates not only from the government but also from other institutions like the media and employers as well as from society in general), but the inability to do so completely. This is perhaps the reason that the most recent wave of immigrants and their families receive so much attention from the media and political circles; despite attempts ‘to put them and keep them in their place,’ these efforts are never completely successful, hence the riots that erupt occasionally in the suburbs and the achievements of individuals such as Yamina Benguigui, Azouz Begag, and Rachid Bouchareb.

Policing manifests itself beginning with the naming of persons of color, particularly North African and African, as “immigré” whether they are in fact immigrants or not. As the term “immigré” has taken on a decidedly negative cast since it has become a politically-charged issue, designating someone as “immigré” attaches to him or to her a whole range of other controversial questions, such as crime, terrorism, and religious extremism. Even immigrants no longer want the term “immigré” attached to them. In an interview with a family originating from Africa, a young girl tells of how her appearance as a Black woman prevents her from obtaining any work, a problems that also plagues her father. When she refers to herself as “immigré,” her mother is quick to correct her: “Tu n’es plus immigrée, tu es française, il faut pas oublier.” Then turning to the interviewer, “elle est française, il faut pas qu’elle dise le mot immigré.”<sup>263</sup>

By associating the term “immigré” to the persons of North African or African descent, the actual names of these individuals becomes, by extension, negative as well; as one immigrant

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<sup>263</sup> Benguigui, *Le plafond de verre*

observes in *Mémoires d'immigrés*: no matter what he did to integrate himself into French society “Je suis toujours le Mohamed.” The discrimination inherent in his observation is not only a question of attitude; it has real consequences for those trying to advance, especially in the realms of education and work. The sociologist Saïd Bouamama reiterates this point in *Le plafond de verre*: “Dans l’inconscient collectif le Mohamed ou la Fatima sont capables de travaux ouvriers, mais ils ne sont pas capables d’être cadres. Le Mohamed et la Fatima sont capables d’obéir mais ils ne sont pas capables de diriger.” Perhaps the most stark example in the film of such discrimination based on names, and hence origins, is the testimony of Kamel Bensmaïl. Having been born in a bidonville to an immigrant laborer, this individual managed to overcome major obstacles to obtain multiple degrees, the most advanced one being the DEA in Economics. After years of job searching with no results, he (at the time of the film) was resigned to landscape work. “Quand j’ai appris que Pierre, Paul ou Jacques... avaient trouvé un travail encore une fois, je me suis jamais dit pourquoi eux et pas moi? Je me suis dit, pourquoi pas nous deux?”

One’s name and origins also determine one’s social situation. As Rachid Bouchareb notes in a joint interview he did with Yamina Benguigui for *VSD*, “Car lorsqu’on est un enfant d’origine maghrébine, on est systématiquement orienté vers une école technique. J’ai passé un CAP de mécanique générale, comme tous les copains du quartier.” To this Benguigui responds “On voit bien que l’orientation se fait en fonction des origines et pas du carnet des notes.” Both Bouchareb and Benguigui as successful filmmakers managed to escape the places that have been assigned to them. Others are not as successful. Benguigui’s *Le plafond de verre* addresses the question of discrimination in the realm of employment; all those interviewed in the documentary are intelligent, educated individuals with professional aspirations but are unable to

obtain an interview in their respective fields because their CVs have Maghrebi or African names on them. A director of human resources interviewed in *Le plafond de verre* tells how employers, inundated with hundreds of CVs for one position, manages to reduce them to a manageable number: “Ils veulent minimiser leur risque. Ils ont tendance à éliminer tous les CV qui vont être un peu exotiques ou quant à l’origine du candidat ou les parcours.” Faced with this situation, it is not surprising to discover that one of the interviewees of the documentary has changed her name in the hopes of obtaining an interview.

Another attempt at policing the immigrant population has been the consistent practice of relegating them to the margins; in spatial terms this means the foyers, bidonvilles, cités de transit, and currently the banlieues of major French cities. Foucault’s notion of discipline provides a starting point for the discussion of the partitioning of bodies, in this instance immigrant bodies. Foucault defines disciplines as “methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body [and] assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility.”<sup>264</sup> Discipline, he continues, “proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space.”<sup>265</sup> As *Mémoires d’immigrés* shows, immigrant workers from the Maghreb and Africa were constantly subjected to such bodily controls; from the physical examinations during which they were inspected like cattle to the constant surveillance of their movements between their arrival in France and their return to their countries of origin. Their movements were constrained in a closed-circuit that limited their contact with the rest of society.

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<sup>264</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977) 137.

<sup>265</sup> Foucault 141.

This control also extends to living spaces. “Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*”<sup>266</sup> whereby “Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual.”<sup>267</sup> The objective of such partitioning, or enclosure, “was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals...”<sup>268</sup> In other words, it is a means to establish knowledge about individuals, to know where they are at all times. Although enclosure intends to limit and disperse unmanageable groups of bodies, what has resulted in some of the urban peripheries is an agglomeration of bodies that are difficult to control. The limitations of enclosure in this example becomes manifest when discipline no longer functions, as in the case of urban riots and the creation of alternative, unpoliceable orders of bodies known as “les zones de non-droit.” Benguigui has recently taken up these issues in her documentary *9/3, mémoire d’un territoire*. According to Benguigui, the “ghettoïisation” of minorities is not accidental but rather part of a systematic plan of segregation.

D’une dégrégation sociale, on est passé à une ségrégation raciale, que des sociétés HLM, sans tête et sans visage, orchestrent et organisent aujourd’hui. [...] Aujourd’hui, si vous êtes une famille noire, on va vous diriger vers telle HLM parce qu’il y a des Noirs. On visualise mieux. Quand on voit arriver le chef de famille, on pense : « c’est la tour une telle, bâtiment tel ». (VSD)

*9/3, mémoire d’un territoire*, attempts to trace the history of Seine Saint Denis, the most visible and recognizable of the French *banlieues*, as it was the site of the unrest in 2005 after the electrocution deaths of two young Frenchmen of Maghrebi origin. Seine-Saint- Denis is also a product of policing as the name itself conjures images of lawlessness and poverty, no doubt

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<sup>266</sup> Foucault 141.

<sup>267</sup> Foucault 143.

<sup>268</sup> Foucault 143

attributable to the negative media coverage it regularly receives. Like the Arab or African sounding name, saying that one is from Seine-Saint-Denis is sure to result in closed doors and lack of opportunity. Adding to the already negative associations that Seine-Saint-Denis evokes is the fact that it shares the same departmental number as a former French colony. When asked for his opinion on the documentary, Bouchareb replies “Je ne savais pas qu’on avait récupéré le numéro du département de Constantine, du temps de l’Algérie française [lors du redécoupage de l’Ile-de-France, effectif en 1968, NDLR] pour la Seine-Saint-Denis.”<sup>269</sup> The 9/3, as it is popularly referred to, highlights not only the racial segregation that exists in France but also the economic disparity. The statistics for the department further highlight its economic and social distress. Although situated within the wealthiest region in France and of Europe,<sup>270</sup> Seine-Saint-Denis is home to approximately 1.5 million residents, it experiences a high unemployment rate (11.5 % at the end of 2006<sup>271</sup>), the highest among the departments of Ile-de-France,<sup>272</sup> and almost a third of its population is under the age of 30 years, a segment of the population that is already vulnerable to high unemployment. Eighteen percent of its residents live below the poverty line.<sup>273</sup>

Isabelle Adjani, the star of Benguigui’s latest fiction film, *Le paradis? C’est complet!* (release forthcoming), serves to illustrate the effects of the *police*. An accomplished actress who began her career with the prestigious Comédie française and has earned several Césars for playing iconic French figures such as Camille Claudel (1988), Queen Margot (1994), and Victor

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<sup>269</sup> Bouchareb, *VSD*

<sup>270</sup> <[http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/article\\_imprim.php3?id\\_article=23618](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/article_imprim.php3?id_article=23618)>.

<sup>271</sup> <<http://www.seine-saint-denis.fr/Portrait-chiffre.html>>.

<sup>272</sup> This observation is based on statistics for 2005 <[http://www.paris-iledefrance.cci.fr/pdf/eco\\_regionale/chiffres\\_cles/2007/04\\_emploi.pdf](http://www.paris-iledefrance.cci.fr/pdf/eco_regionale/chiffres_cles/2007/04_emploi.pdf)>.

<sup>273</sup> <[http://www.lepost.fr/article/2008/09/29/1276295\\_seine-saint-denis-93-les-chiffres-cles.html](http://www.lepost.fr/article/2008/09/29/1276295_seine-saint-denis-93-les-chiffres-cles.html)>.

Hugo's daughter Adèle in Truffaut's *Histoire d'Adèle H* (1975),<sup>274</sup> Adjani was once voted one of the most beautiful women in the world by the French public.<sup>275</sup> Yet even she has not escaped attempts to police her identity. During the height of anti-immigrant and anti-Algerian hostilities in the 1980s, Adjani revealed her Algerian roots. "I felt that I had to speak out...So I said publicly for the first time that my father was Algerian."<sup>276</sup> Because her physical appearance and mannerisms do not correspond to the expectations some may have of a person of Algerian descent, Adjani's 'coming out,' so to speak, disturbed the 'ordre du sensible.' In a 2008 interview with Adjani and Benguigui, Catherine Schwaab observes "Avec vos yeux bleus, Isabelle, on n'imaginait pas une origine maghrébine."<sup>277</sup> In the aftermath of her disclosure, she became the target of outrageous rumors<sup>278</sup> and was made to feel as if she were no longer "French." "I talked about the persecution of Algerians, and told about racism in my childhood," she said. "And it was as if, after that, I wasn't French anymore."<sup>279</sup>

Raised in an HLM in Gennevilliers by an Algerian garage worker and a German mother, Adjani managed to escape the place assigned to her to grow up and become one of France's most admired actresses. Once her origins were discovered, though, efforts were made to put her back in her place. "Quand j'ai commencé à parler de mes origines, de mon père algérien et que j'ai pris des positions antilepénistes, je me suis fait remettre à ma place."<sup>280</sup>

*Policing* not only originates from society at large, however. Even from within her family Adjani was encouraged to remain in her place; this is a recurrent theme among the children and

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<sup>274</sup> "Isabelle Adjani," *imdb.com*.

<sup>275</sup> "La plus belle femme du monde." 11/8/04

<sup>276</sup> Glenn Collins, "The 'Hounding' of Isabelle Adjani." *nytimes.com* 6 January 1990.

<sup>277</sup> Catherine Schwaab, "Isabelle Adjani, Yamina Benguigui: Blessures d'enfance." *Paris Match*

<sup>278</sup> One rumor that circulated after her public intervention was that she was suffering from AIDS; other sources claimed she had died. According to Adjani, *France Soir* nearly published her obituary, forcing her to go on French public television to "prove" that she was in fact alive. "The 'Hounding' of Isabelle Adjani." *NYT*

<sup>279</sup> Collins, *nytimes.com*.

<sup>280</sup> Isabelle Adjani., interview with Marion Festraëts, *L'Express* 2 June 2009 <[www.lexpress.fr](http://www.lexpress.fr)>.

grandchildren of North African immigrants.<sup>281</sup> “Chez moi, c’était: “Ne vous faites pas remarquer et tout se passera bien.” En clair : n’essayez pas de faire de vos vies quelque chose de mieux que ce que nous sommes capables de faire.”<sup>282</sup> In the same *Paris Match* interview she speaks of her father’s desire to “devenir le plus français possible” by speaking impeccable French and almost never speaking Arabic.

Despite the consequences of her confession, Adjani has continued to speak out against discrimination against immigrants; her most recent activities include protesting in Paris against Sarkozy’s proposed DNA testing of those wanting to join their families in France. Regarding her acting career, Adjani’s portrayal of a Maghrebi politician faced with the difficulty of burying her Muslim father in France is the first role that she has taken (or that has been proposed to her) in which she plays someone of Maghrebi descent. Coincidentally, Adjani’s father is buried in the Bobigny cemetery, the only private Muslim cemetery in France.<sup>283</sup> The question of burial has preoccupied Benguigui as a filmmaker for at least a decade, and it is a theme that has appeared regularly in both her documentary and fiction films. Creating a representational space-cinematic, societal, political- in France for immigrants and their descendants is one of Benguigui’s stated objectives, therefore it is not surprising that opening up a space for death be a part of that overall project. For Benguigui, the burial of immigrants in France is of prime importance, especially for their children and grandchildren, as it has an integrative function, both symbolic and virtual:

On voit émerger des retraités. On murmure que certains voudraient bien se faire enterrer ici. Mais il y a cinq millions de musulmans en France et un seul

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<sup>281</sup> Those interviewed in Benguigui’s documentaries, including famous author Azouz Begag, often speak of the desire of the parents to remain unnoticed.

<sup>282</sup> Adjani, *Paris Match*

<sup>283</sup> Once a private cemetery attached to a hospital, Bobigny cemetery was created for Muslim soldiers who fought on the side of the French during World War I. It currently houses 7500 tombs. Marie-Ange d’Adler, interview with Nadjia Bouzeghrane, *El Watan*. 27 June 2005 <elwatan.com>.

cimetière musulman. [...] Quand nous pourrons enterrer nos morts alors l'enracinement réel débutera.<sup>284</sup>

At issue is the insufficient number of cemetery space in France for Muslims, who according to Islamic custom should be buried where they die and who must be buried facing Mecca. As a consequence, eighty to eighty-five percent of those wishing to be buried in the Islamic tradition are repatriated to their countries of origin.<sup>285</sup> The struggle to be included in the national imaginary for immigrants and their descendants thus continues after death. Although more and more space is being made available for Muslims, it does not appear that the demand will be met anytime soon. Pascal-Hervé Daniel, service director for Paris cemeteries, predicts one solution: “La solution viendra, peut-être, à long terme, des catholiques et des athées, qui sont de plus en plus nombreux à se faire incinérer et qui vont ainsi libérer de l’espace.”<sup>286</sup>

Not only is being buried in France of symbolic import for some, such as Benguigui, but the ways in which Muslim burial has evolved in France also points to the level of acculturation that has taken place among those of the Islamic faith. Once very simple and unadorned, some Muslim tombstones are now ornate and often decorated according to Western aesthetics. “C’est un témoignage de l’intégration: on garde ses traditions, mais on adopte aussi certaines habitudes du pays où l’on vit.”<sup>287</sup> This integration extends to death rituals as well ; according to Pascal-Hervé Daniel, “Depuis quelques années, on y voit même des familles venir fêter la Toussaint avec les chrétiens.”<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview, *Journal L’Humanité*. 5 Dec. 2001, 11 Apr. 2001.12/5/2001 <[www.humanite.presse.fr](http://www.humanite.presse.fr)>.

<sup>285</sup> Marie Lemonnier, “Musulmans cherchent sepulture.” *Le Nouvel Observateur*. 24 Apr. 2008. <[www.nouvelobs.com](http://www.nouvelobs.com)>.

<sup>286</sup> Lemonnier.

<sup>287</sup> Marie-Ange d’Adler, *el watan*

<sup>288</sup> Lemonnier, *Le nouvel observateur*

The *police*, as articulated by Rancière, also extends to the way immigration has been legislated for the past 30 years. There has been an incessant series of reforms on the matter since the 1980s, and according to the Brookings Institute, “France now holds a record for legislative change in the area of immigration.” Among these policies are the family reunification policy which began in the 1970s, aide au retour which offered monetary incentives to return to one’s country of origin, expulsions, restrictions on immigration and zero immigration policies, police checks, and most recently voluntary DNA testing to ensure that those wanting to join their families in France are indeed related to them. The latest bill on voluntary DNA testing also includes provisions that “...requires hopeful newcomers to take a language test and show that they are familiar with French values” (BBC News) as well as a clause that “would allow France to collect census data on the racial and ethnic backgrounds of residents” (Washington Post). Despite criticisms of the bill and analogies to Nazi treatment of the Jews, the bill passed with small majorities in both the National Assembly and the Senate (BBC). According to the same article, an opinion poll by *Le Parisien* showed that a majority (49%) of those polled supported the bill, while 43% opposed it.

The multiple and repeated attempts to police the “immigrant” population, through a proliferation of legislative measures and other means, demonstrate to what extent the “immigrant” escapes. One cannot no longer be certain as to who the immigrant is because the term is applied to immigrants and non immigrants alike.

In more recent years, Benguigui has become increasingly active in the public sphere, working on behalf of immigrants and French who have found themselves left out of the national narrative and on the margins of society. In addition to her periodic public interventions into questions of integration, laïcité, the wearing of the veil by Muslim women and other issues, she

was named to the Haut Conseil à l'Intégration by Chirac in 2006 and elected conseillère to the Conseil de Paris in 2008, where one of her primary functions is to work on human rights and anti-discrimination initiatives.

Her notion of politics, though, is inseparable from her work as an artist. When asked about her recent assignment as adjointe to Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë, she responds:

La politique, j'en fais depuis toujours. Paris m'a donné mon identité. Je suis une des seules réalisatrices en France à prendre son bâton de pèlerin pour aller défricher les terres, réveiller les consciences et animer des débats là où le politique ne va pas. Cette candidature vient confirmer quinze ans de travail sur le terrain. C'est ça, pour moi, être une cinéaste engagée, témoin de son temps.<sup>289</sup>

Benguigui's film do indeed undertake the work of politics and quite effectively, but we can observe once again that she is adopting subject positions that may be called into question. She characterizes herself as one of the few female filmmakers to have taken up certain issues, a disputable claim given the work that has occurred in the last couple decades on colonial history and immigration within historical, artistic and journalistic circles; the emergence of the Beur cultural movement and the success of filmmakers such as Bouchareb and Charef from the 1980s to the present are indications of these efforts. Her role as a French female filmmaker of Maghrebi descent does place her in exclusive company; no other filmmaker from a similar background has attained the level of success that Benguigui has, but it is not clear from her statement how this particular dimension of her experience renders her work and advocacy more effective, authoritative, or groundbreaking than those of others. Her control of the discourse surrounding her films and her intentions has arisen in the quasi-vacuum of critical production on

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<sup>289</sup> Yamina Benguigui, interview, *Nouvel Observateur*

her cinema and may also be symptomatic of an anxiety underlying the different and perhaps competing positions that she publicly assumes. At the very least, by making these types of statements she risks appearing arrogant.

Benguigui's political project manifests itself in large part through her films, naturally, and her most recent documentary on Seine Saint Denis (2008) considered by her to be her most political film to date, was in fact inspired by a disruption of order. As she was presenting *Le plafond de verre* in a Parisian cinema in November 2005, a group of rioters entered the cinema and shouted "Tahiya le 9-3" ("Que vive le 9-3!") As she states when recounting this incident, "Tout vient d'un cri." Instead of hearing mere noise, as some did, these words interpellated Benguigui who then turned to film to explore the history and evolution of this department in an attempt to understand how it came to be representative of the social ills of the country. As she did in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, Benguigui avoids the oft-used clichéd television representations of the department as a crime-ridden violent space.

On y montre ce qui est visual: la drogue, les bastions imprenables par la police...Evidemment que les banlieues sont « sensationnelles ». Je ne pense pas qu'un sujet sur la façon dont vivent les Antillais de 70 ans dans une tour intéresse M6, car ils n'ont pas le projet d'être informatifs. Les gens sont habitués aux séries télé où la police affronte des gangs, et dans un documentaire sur la banlieue, c'est en live.<sup>290</sup>

Bouchareb is much more critical of media representations of the banlieue : "C'est de la désinformation honteuse. C'est nul."<sup>291</sup> Both Benguigui's and Bouchareb's criticisms of mediatic representations of the *banlieue* are legitimate; stories with sensational elements are

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<sup>290</sup> Benguigui, interview, *VSD*

<sup>291</sup> Bouchareb, interview, *VSD*

favoured more than mere informative pieces, often to the detriment of the true import of the story. However, it would be misleading to assume that their films, and films in general (even documentaries) are merely informative; both Benguigui and Bouchareb employ a variety of melodramatic techniques (music, framing, action) to create affective responses like empathy, sympathy, and shock in the viewer.

In *9/3*, Benguigui once again works to open a space in French history for the workers (both immigrant and French) who were greatly responsible for the prosperity and modernization of France in the twentieth century. “Pour moi, ces ouvriers sont des héros, au sens mythologique: celui qui tente de changer son destin en allant au-devant des épreuves.”

Clearly, her idea of politics is tied in with cinema and artistic creation in general. Not only has she addressed issues of political and social concern in her films, what is shown and what is enunciated in her films also constitute a political act. In this respect, her practice of politics is akin to Rancière’s definition of politics, which is bound to the question of aesthetics.

Je propose maintenant de réserver le nom de politique à une activité bien déterminée et antagonique à la première : celle qui rompt la configuration sensible où se définissent les parties et les parts ou leur absence par une présupposition qui n’y a par définition pas de place : celle d’une part des sans-part. Cette rupture se manifeste par une série d’actes qui refigurent l’espace où les parties, les parts et les absences de parts se définissaient. L’activité politique est celle qui déplace un corps du lieu qui lui était assigné ou change la destination d’un lieu ; elle fait voir ce qui n’avait pas lieu d’être vu, fait entendre un discours là où seul le bruit avait son lieu, fait entendre comme discours ce qui n’était entendu que comme bruit.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Rancière, *La méésentente*, 53

For Rancière, political activity concerns a shift in the way things are viewed, heard, experienced. By featuring immigrants on the screens of French cinemas and televisions as speaking, human subjects and by treating topics that may have been otherwise ignored, Benguigui's films render visible and audible individuals who have been largely invisible and voiceless. Like the plebeians that Rancière cites, who through speech become "des hommes" or "des êtres qui engagent sur des mots un destin collectif," Benguigui's films provide a vehicle through which immigrants voice their experiences, the wrongs that have been committed against them, and their very subjectivities. It remains to be seen whether society, the contemporary counterpart to Rancière's patricians, will recognize their speech as such.

### **4.3 COMMUNITY**

Benguigui's interventions into immigration and integration debates as a filmmaker and more recently as a public political figure aim to effect political change on both a psychological level (through cinema) and through tangible, practical legislative means. Her films endeavor to interpellate various audiences: Muslim women, North African and African immigrants, the children and grandchildren of these immigrants, those responsible in government and in the economic sectors, and French society at large. Although her films have reached audiences beyond the borders of France, the challenges she raises in her film and in her political work are situated primarily within France, and what emerges through her films as the primary stake in these discussions is the very future of France. Immigration and its consequences are not merely historical sidenotes or issues that only concern a segment of the population in France, it is a 'national' problem with widespread implications. The question of immigration, particularly that

originating from former French colonies, has resulted in a rethinking of what it means to be French, and what it will mean to be French in the coming decades.

Benedict Anderson's definitions of community and nation provide a useful point of departure for a discussion of these concepts. According to Anderson, nationalism is essentially a deep, emotional attachment to a nation, and all nations are constructions of the imagination. A nation "...is an imagined political community"<sup>293</sup> that is "imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."<sup>294</sup> All communities, in fact, are imagined: "...all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined."<sup>295</sup> A community, therefore, is bound by a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself. Much has occurred in France in the thirty-six years since Anderson's study was first published; while it may have been easier in the past to feel as if one 'belonged' to the French nation (and this may be more perception than reality), the consequences of colonialism and immigration have rendered such a belonging problematic for a substantial segment of the French population. Immigrants originating from formerly colonized African countries have definitively settled in France, posing particular problems in terms of historical narratives and national belonging. The children and grandchildren of these former colonial subjects were and perhaps still are caught between differing narratives about the past and different modes of being, aptly demonstrated in the *Beur* literature that appeared in the 1980s. Immigration and the issues that have subsequently emerged have been political fodder for several decades now, ensuring that the 'problem' of immigrants is always in the foreground of social and political debates. Too long

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<sup>293</sup> Anderson 6.

<sup>294</sup> Anderson 7.

<sup>295</sup> Anderson 6.

the object of these debates and excluded from them, immigrants and their children are making themselves seen and heard in the public spaces of art and politics. These developments have led to declarations of a crisis of the nation, of community. The societal transformations brought about by decolonization prompted Julia Kristeva to make this observation in the early 1990s:

In the absence of a new community bond—a saving religion that would integrate the bulk of wanderers and different people within a new consensus, other than “more money and more goods for everyone”—we are, for the first time in history, confronted with the following situation: we must live with different people while relying on our personal moral codes, without the assistance of a set that would include our particularities while transcending them. A paradoxical community is emerging, made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners.<sup>296</sup>

Kristeva defines ‘foreigner’ as both the same and Other; we fear, loathe, and are fascinated by the figure of the Foreigner because he or she provokes within us a feeling of foreignness, strangeness. In this sense we are all foreigners.

To a certain extent, we see this happen in *Inch’Allah dimanche* through the character of Madame Donze. At the beginning of the film, she appears certain of herself and of her place in the community. She is the one, after all, scrutinizing Zouina’s family’s every move and informing them at every turn of their ‘rights.’ The arrival of Zouina and her family and Madame Donze’s subsequent interactions with them, however, slowly begin to erode this certainty as well as her sanity to the point where she suffers a mild nervous breakdown approximately midway through the film. After rehearsing her thank you speech for having won the garden contest (and

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<sup>296</sup> Kristeva 195.

looking at herself in the mirror while doing so), her husband finds her in tears and is bewildered as to the reason for her distress. Towards the end of the film, one senses that Madame Donze has reconciled herself, albeit warily, to the presence of the Algerian family. She becomes less hostile to her Algerian neighbors and even awaits Zouina's return home with Nicole, Madame Manant, and Ahmed in the final scene of the film, further suggesting an accommodation of the family. Ideally, then, Benguigui suggests that a community would eventually be able to recognize the foreigner within and without and be able to live together, not in perfect unity, but in relative tolerance.

Many artists and intellectuals recognize, however, that political action against exclusionary and discriminatory practices is required until that level of tolerance is attained. More importantly, as was pointed out earlier in the chapter, the last massive wave of immigration arrived between the 1950s and 1970s, yet they, and especially their offspring, continue to be victims of rampant discrimination and social exclusion. These individuals have been constitutive of France for decades, yet they are still treated as immigrants, as foreigners. Acceptance or tolerance of the 'foreigner' as a solution may in fact no longer be adequate, for many of those considered "foreign" and treated as such are not foreign and do not consider themselves as foreigners. They are French, yet they are excluded from participating in the social life of the nation, spatially, economically, and symbolically. They are not stateless subjects, for they are from a juridical perspective French nationals and citizens, but for many, they do not feel 'French.' This was already expressly evident in the third part of Benguigui's *Mémoires d'immigrés* which focuses on the children and grandchildren of immigrants. This is indeed the crux of Benguigui's project: to lay bare these contradictions and prompt change, both in the way the French think of themselves and the way they organize or police their members.

Furthermore, Kristeva speaks of “particularities” as one of the challenges inherent in the emerging paradoxical community she writes of, but in reality these particularities, commonly referred to as cultural differences and often cited as barriers to integration into French society, are becoming less relevant as time passes. They may have been pertinent in the past, when the immigrants arrived, but with each successive generation raised in France they become less so. The children and grandchildren of immigrants speak French, go to French school, and participate in ‘French’ cultural rituals, as Benguigui’s documentaries demonstrate. The bitter history that marked so many of their parents is becoming increasingly distant in time, even though reminders of this history remain visible in anti-immigrant rhetoric and discriminatory practices. Many of the immigrants themselves have made efforts to integrate into the French community, culturally, economically, and linguistically. The mothers featured in the second part of *Mémoires d’immigrés* demonstrate to what extent integration, or at least efforts to integrate, are taking place, at least from the immigrant’s position. They attend midnight mass and open their own businesses, and they consider France their home. These individuals may be named Fatima and Ahmed and practice Ramadan, but in many respects they are indistinguishable from any other French person. It is worth noting that claims of insurmountable cultural differences as an obstacle to integration emerge around issues that are not particularly relevant for the majority of the individuals in question, such as polygamy, the wearing of the veil, and more recently the wearing of the burqa.<sup>297</sup> Such controversial sideshows overshadow the real problem in France

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297 The number of women wearing the burqa in France is negligible ; according to Mohammed Moussaoui, president of France’s Representative Muslim Council, this practice is “an extremely marginal phenomenon.” “Sarkozy backs drive to eliminate the burqa.” *Nytimes.com* 22 June 2009, 28 June 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/europe/23france.html>>.

concerning the offspring of former immigrants, the majority of whom do not adopt the aforementioned practices, and that is the failure of society to recognize them as equal citizens.

Etienne Balibar, though referring to the challenges that face Europe as a community and not solely France, also speaks of a crisis of the nation-state. For him, community models based on nations and nationalisms are no longer adequate in the face of postcolonial and global migrations; they may even be detrimental to the emergence of the new community that is required in the face of these realities. As a nation-state that has been traversed with these migrations, France serves as a microcosm of the challenges that face Europe. Balibar argues that the “*closure* characteristic of national identity” “is profoundly incompatible with the social, economic, technological, and communicational realities of globalization”<sup>298</sup> and calls for a renewed commitment in France to a “community of citizens” that “should be the result of all those who are present and active in the social space.”<sup>299</sup> He urges a re-imagining of the idea of community that fundamentally transforms the dynamic between shared cultures and histories and the creation of a community of citizens that ensures the rights of all present:

The heart of this aporia seems to me to lie precisely in the necessity we face, and the impossibility we struggle against, of collectively inventing a *new* image of a people, a new image of the relation between membership in historical communities (*ethnos*) and the continued creation of citizenship (*dēmos*) through collective action and the acquisition of fundamental rights to existence, work, and expression, as well as civic equality and the equal dignity of languages, classes, and sexes.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Balibar, *We, the people of Europe?* 9.

<sup>299</sup> Balibar devotes chapter 3 of his study to the question of interior exclusion in France of its ethnic minorities, 50.

<sup>300</sup> Balibar 9.

This is precisely what Benguigui endeavors to do as a political filmmaker and public figure. A new France needs to be imagined, and Benguigui uses the tool of cinema to practice politics in the way that Rancière has defined it: as an interruption into the police order and a shift in the way that existence is experienced, or in what he calls the ‘ordre du sensible.’ Her films make visible what had been relegated to the shadows, the immigrant experience. By providing a vehicle through which immigrants and their children speak for themselves of themselves, Benguigui’s films open a space for a new French community that includes the excluded. Through cinema, she attempts to reestablish an historical genealogy within a national framework by incorporating the immigrant story into the French national narrative. By reestablishing an historical genealogy that includes immigrants, she thereby restores a familial genealogy to immigrants and their descendants; her message to immigrants and their descendants is essentially “you have a right to be here.” To society at large she is demonstrating that these ‘immigrants’ are citizens of France; they speak the language of France, they’ve been educated in French schools, and they share French values. Cinema, television, and the Internet are today’s novels and newspapers; they are the most efficient and accessible way to reimagine, to reenvision this new community.

At the same time, concrete action is required on the legislative and juridical fronts to safeguard the rights that Balibar enumerates. Benguigui recognized this and has more recently turned to politics in the traditional sense (as the art of governing, legislating) to promote policies that discourage racial and ethnic discrimination and to ensure the equal rights and opportunities of everyone present. In this way, her work on both fronts is closely aligned with Balibar’s appeal to a newly imagined community that would attempt to reconcile both historical, cultural communities and a community based on citizenship and rights. A recommitment to the

republican ideal of equality is the preferred means to creating a community of citizens made up of individuals of different cultural, religious, and historical affiliations.

Communauté de citoyens, la nation républicaine ne se fonde en principe sur aucune référence religieuse, aucun particularisme culturel, aucune conception obligée de la vie privée. La République n'est pas chrétienne ou islamique: elle s'interdit de se réclamer d'une confession militante, ou d'un athéisme officiel-et c'est pour cela qu'elle accueille tous les individus en les plaçant sur le même pied d'égalité, quelle que soit leur option personnelle. Il n'y a rien en elle qui puisse justifier l'exclusion, ou la rendre possible.<sup>301</sup>

Despite the constitutional guarantee that all are equal- Article 1 reads "It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion"-ethnic minorities are victims of pervasive discriminatory practices in France, especially in the employment sector. It is a sign that a society founded on and touting republican principles is failing in its promise to ensure equal opportunities for all of its citizens, and it is therefore a societal affair to address its inequalities. In the case of France, these inequalities are too often linked to ethnic origins; an Arab or African sounding name on a CV all but guarantees that the individual bearing that name will not have the opportunity to present him or herself for an interview, as many of the interviewees in *Le plafond de verre* illustrate.

The social fractures that result from the inequalities rooted in different sectors of society, like their victims, may not always be visible; they are made apparent through films like Benguigui's *Le plafond de verre* and manifest themselves periodically in the social unrest that erupts in the peripheries of urban centers. Rendering visible the problem of discrimination thus

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<sup>301</sup> Yamina Benguigui and Henri Peña-Ruiz "L'exigence laïque du respect mutuel." *Le Monde diplomatique*. January 2002, 1 October 1 2005. <[www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2002/01/BENGUIGUI/16037](http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2002/01/BENGUIGUI/16037)>.

becomes the initial step in her political project; legislative measures must then ensue to create the conditions for tangible change. This is why both artistic political work and legislative political work are necessary; sometimes to change hearts and minds, one needs to change (or enforce) the laws.

On a symbolic, linguistic level, Benguigui creates an inclusive community through the various uses of “nous,” “la société française,” “notre société,” “ces jeunes Français issus de l’immigration.” Oscillating between a community of belonging (‘enracinement’) and a community of citizens (‘citoyenneté’), Benguigui attempts to reconcile the ‘ethnos’ and the ‘dēmos’ that Balibar speaks of when he elucidates the challenges that face an emerging European community, the challenges that will continue to confront France in the decades to come.

What we can observe so far from Benguigui’s work on immigration, both cinematically and in her public interventions as a citizen and more recently as a politician, is that we are no longer really talking about immigration. While her films were initially concerned with the questions of immigrant memory, history, and society’s responsibilities to them, they are now more concerned with fostering a sense of citizenship and belonging among the various segments of the French population. The development of her work coincides with developments in French society at large; immigration in terms of sheer numbers is no longer an issue in France.

La France est certes un vieux pays d’immigration mais il y a déjà vingt-cinq ans qu’elle n’est plus un pays d’immigration massive. [...] Si la France a un sérieux problème d’intégration à résoudre, que ce soit dans le système éducatif ou le marché du travail, cela concerne d’abord les enfants issus de grandes vagues migratoires ouvrières des années 1950-1974, parvenus à l’âge actif en temps de crise économique. Cette question majeure nourrit aujourd’hui le débat public. Il

ne faut pas la confondre avec celle du flux actuel des immigrants, qui reste, malgré toutes les majorations qu'on voudra, très en deçà des niveaux atteints il y a trente ans...<sup>302</sup>

Though practical issues regarding immigrants (such as burial, retirement, etc.) still occupy an important place in Benguigui's work, it is the existence of the millions of their descendants, French citizens who are unable to access full citizenship, that will continue to challenge and reshape notions of what it means to be French in the years to come. As Balibar states, "We now see that this question of the interior exclusion of "immigrants" constitutes a genuine test of truth for the nation-form and for the "community of citizens" to which it gives a name."<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> François Héran, "Cinq idées reçues sur l'immigration," *Population et Sociétés* 397, January 2004 <[www.ined.fr](http://www.ined.fr)>.

<sup>303</sup> Balibar 61.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

It is unclear what the France of the future will look like; much is transpiring within its borders and beyond that will have a profound impact on the way the French view themselves and how they conceive of themselves as an historical and political, even national or transnational community. History has played a significant role in France's national identity, but the twentieth century has witnessed some monumentally tragic events that have elicited reexaminations of the past. France's colonial past and the debacle of decolonization is one such event. Until relatively recently, this area of discussion was perceived as taboo, although in reality it was being addressed by many in the arts, history, and other fields. The scholarly and artistic work cited in this study attests to the production on this matter that has been taking place for decades now. What appears to have changed, thanks to the aforesaid work, is that official recognition is now starting to catch up to the debates that have been present elsewhere. The parameters of the colonial debate—mostly focusing on Algeria—that has been occurring place in France in the last decade have shifted considerably, and new *lieux de mémoire* have been created to acknowledge this less than glorious moment in French and Algerian history.

This is part of a larger, more general trend, as France appears to be increasingly willing to confront its past. Julie Fette writes of the apology movement that emerged in the 1990s regarding France's role in the Holocaust; Chirac's public apology, the first of its kind by a state official, set off a series of apologies from various institutions: the Catholic Church, Parisian

lawyers, a union of police officers, leading to the perception of a ‘saturation of repentance.’<sup>304</sup> Naturally, these apologies did not occur without contention and disagreement, even within the aforementioned institutions, but according to Fette, they were viewed essentially positively by the French public and are a “key tool in the national healing process.”<sup>305</sup>

By 2006, according to Fette, the “Algerian past has undeniably replaced Vichy as the preeminent historical passion in French society.”<sup>306</sup> Calls for an official apology for the torture that took place at the hands of the French, as well as for the entire colonial machine, have remain unheeded however, and it does not appear likely that one will issue from the current Sarkozy administration any time soon. The case of Algeria renders an official apology problematic, for as was discussed in the first chapter of this study, the Algerian war resulted primarily as a push for Algerian independence, but evolved into a multifaceted conflict that pitted not only Algerians against French but Algerians against Algerians and French against French. To whom would an apology be directed, in this case? Furthermore, Algerians and their descendants are not the only group to be victimized by neocolonial biases and practices in France. Morocco and Tunisia were able to proceed to independence from their protectorate status in much less traumatic fashion, yet they and their descendants are unable to escape the discriminatory practices and racism that afflict those of Algerian descent.

The memory politics that have emerged as a result of these discussions have further muddied the waters of the debate.<sup>307</sup> The various attempts to officially commemorate the

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<sup>304</sup> Julie Fette, “Apology and the Past in Contemporary France,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 26 (Summer 2008) 78-113. (Others have denounced this trend; see for example Daniel Lefeuvre’s *Pour en finir avec la répentance coloniale* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006).

<sup>305</sup> Fette 80.

<sup>306</sup> Fette 99.

<sup>307</sup> For further reading on this subject, see Pascal Blanchard’s and Isabelle Veyrat-Masson’s *Les guerres de mémoires: La France et son histoire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

Algerian war have not succeeded in bringing the different participants to a reasonable consensus about the past; in fact, these remembrances have often provoked controversy. The 2005 law on the positive role of colonization, for example, meant as an expression of gratitude for those who supported France's efforts in the colonies—veterans, *pied noirs*, *harkis*—was promptly condemned by many and parts of the law were eventually repealed.

One also wonders if the recent focus—academic, journalistic, and political—on colonial history is symptomatic of a desire to avoid attending to social and economic inequities and injustices in contemporary France, particularly prevalent among the non-European immigrant community and their offspring. There is a precedent for such impulses, as questions of colonialism and immigration have been treated by some as distinct, separate events. The fact that, as Kristen Ross observes, “In the France of today the tendency to ‘keep the two stories [post-war modernization of France and decolonization] separate’ has, I think, very serious social and political consequences, consequences that are being played out in the rise of the various neoracisms of the 1980s and 1990s that focus on the figure of the immigrant worker.”<sup>308</sup> It should be noted that it is the descendants of these immigrant workers, by and large French citizens, who are now the targets of racist and xenophobic discourses as well as discriminatory practices. Since immigrant laborers from the soon-to-be-liberated colonies participated extensively to France's modernization, treating the two events as discrete phenomena is indeed problematic, both for historical reasons and for issues of collective memory.

Benguigui's cinema emerged in this context and are a response to these trends, for it attempts to reestablish links between the narratives of decolonization and modernization through a cinematic historical project that addresses the gaps in French historiography. This is

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<sup>308</sup> Kristen Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995): 8.

particularly evident in *Mémoires d'immigrés* and *Inch'Allah dimanche*, both of which treat immigration in the context of France's economic expansion in the decades following World War II. By effecting this historical work through documents (print and audiovisual archives, for example), Benguigui in turn creates another historical document, the documentary, which then becomes a frame of reference (as it has been for this study) for further consideration of questions of immigration and its place in systems of representations of histories and subjectivities.

Her films are not calls for official apologies or commemorations, nor do they advocate solely for one specific faction of the past conflict, although they do foreground immigrants' experiences. As has been noted in this dissertation, her own positions are complex and she is ever moving between them as a filmmaker, public advocate, and individual political subject and citizen. The trajectory of her work provides some insight to her overall project. Initially concerned primarily with questions of history and memory, her films have recently turned to the salient political and social exigencies of contemporary France, as well as Europe. France, after all, is not the only country to be affected by global migrations and former colonized subjects; Germany and England, among others, must also find ways to accommodate the different cultures, religions, and histories that now inhabit their spaces and to ensure that all of their citizens have equal access to the political process.

For Benguigui, reparations and apologies for the past would come in the form of a more equitable society that welcomes the participation of all of its members. Such endeavors would not only benefit those victimized by history; it would be a tangible step towards the realization of the Republican ideals on which the French nation is founded, therefore in the interest of everyone. The evolution of her films suggests that in order to address these questions, one has to first acknowledge the wrongs of history and take steps towards a more inclusive, complete

account of the past. In some ways, the process is akin to treating a patient; a doctor would not suggest treatments without knowing the history of the patient and without analyzing the symptoms of the illness.

Benguigui's work has contributed greatly to a better understanding of the immigrant dimension of colonial history, but much more cinematic work on this topic is imperative for France to effectively deal with this problematic era and to be able to reconcile itself to its history with reasonable success. Film is particularly powerful in these efforts, not only because it works on multiple levels to interpellate the viewer (image, sound, symbols, etc.) but also because cinema, and especially television, are accessible to a wider, more diverse public. Benguigui exploits both media for this very reason. Many other actors are implicated in the colonial narrative, including the Europeans who settled in Algeria and then were repatriated to France during decolonization, the military who fought to maintain a French presence in Algeria, the Algerians who fought on the side of the French, as well as the metropolitan French whose engagement with the events taking place in Algeria ranged from fervent opposition or support to disinterestedness. Their memories, though abundant in journalistic and literary venues, have been treated less frequently in film in recent years.<sup>309</sup> Interestingly, Fanon argued in *Wretched of the Earth* that a decolonized society was one in which the last shall be first, and in the case of debates surrounding colonial history in France, the formerly colonized subject-turned-immigrant has dominated the conversation. More nuanced reflections on the other participants' motivations and actions (without condemning or condoning any specific group) would further contribute to the discussion. In the end, all were caught up in colonial ideology's logic and contradictions,

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<sup>309</sup> Alexandre Arcady's 1979 film *Le coup de Sirocco* about a family's repatriation from Algeria to France and Brigitte Rouan's 1990 film *Outremer* featuring pied noir protagonists are a couple notable exceptions.

and even those exposing these blind spots, like Fanon and Memmi, were doing so at a time when the colonial machine was already in the process of dismantlement.

Benguigui's films testify to the divergent experiences that colonization and decolonization engendered. What makes Benguigui's *Mémoires d'immigrés* especially powerful is that it provides both objective historical facts and individual personal experiences of those affected by colonialism and its aftermath. Although the accounts of the interviewees challenge each other at times, these seeming contradictions are not exclusionary; the immigrant laborer's version of events is no more or less valid than that of the French official, even if the official account manifests a certain level of bad faith. What emerges from the film is not merely the conclusion that Maghrebi immigrants were the victims of the French capitalist machine, even though they were in many regards, but rather that all of the individuals involved were caught up in that particular historical and economic moment and each experienced it very differently. In this way, the documentary is essentially a constructive project. Acknowledging the plight of the Maghrebi immigrant does not, in Benguigui's films, imply that others were not also victims of historical processes.

The question of victimhood is further explored in her fiction *Inch'allah dimanche*. Zouina, the protagonist, is the most evident victim of the film, as she is the target of violence and hostility by multiple individuals: her husband, her mother-in-law, Madame Donze, and Malika. Yet as the plotline develops, we observe that almost every character in the film has been victimized to some extent by the colonial history that has unfolded around them. The film brings into contact multiple histories and experiences, allowing them to interact with each other, and concludes on an optimistic tone suggesting that the coexistence of these diverse and often antagonistic individuals embodying particular historical experiences is indeed possible.

Michael Rothberg takes up similar questions in his recent study *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009). In it, he challenges the discourses that have monopolized discussions of collective memory and identity; specifically, he takes issue with certain tendencies to frame these discussions in exclusionary terms, where recognizing one group's victimhood precludes the acknowledgement of other victims and other forms of victimhood. He instead prefers the notion of "multidirectional" memory that involves the encounters of different historical memories. He argues for the consideration of memory "as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative."<sup>310</sup>

Benguigui's films do this type of memory work on different levels. On the one hand, they create encounters between histories which do not result in clear winners and losers, what Rothberg characterizes as competitive memory. On the other hand, the question of colonial history and its offenses are used in her films as a launching pad to address contemporary grievances in French society, the former informing the latter in a number of ways that were outlined in chapter one.

This kind of memory work can create the conditions for a more inclusive national collective memory that is constructed not from a singular, unilateral history and a mythic French identity but rather from multiple histories and diverse experiences. Expanding the French collective memory to allow for immigrants and their children renders contemporary social issues affecting these individuals *French* problems rather than *immigrant* problems; all in society should feel implicated in addressing these questions. Benguigui uses the public sphere of cinema to call attention to these issues, and these three spheres of discussion—history, collective

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<sup>310</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009) 3.

memory, and the current situation of ethnic minorities in France—are in constant dialogue in Benguigui’s films.

Cinema thus becomes the privileged space to observe and engage with this process. Documentary appears to be a legitimate and legitimating choice for Benguigui; its interest with the past has a long history, and its overt political potential is unquestionable, even expected. Tragicomic fiction, on the other hand, produces affective responses on the part of the viewer that allow for and encourage empathy, compassion, and identification with the supposed Other, while also hinting that tragedy does not have to be the inevitable outcome.

Benguigui’s confidence in the ability of cinema to affect mindsets and to effect societal change is without question. Art has certainly been a major contributor to the historical and political debates discussed in this study, particularly when these debates have been lacking elsewhere. The cinematic image is and will continue to be a very powerful tool in shaping arguments about history, justice, identity, and it has the power to say what cannot yet be said. As Rancière writes:

“...the image...is a way in which things speak and are silent. In a sense, it comes to lodge at the heart of things as their silent speech. [...] Silent speech, then, is the eloquence of the very thing that is silent, the capacity to exhibit written signs on a body, the marks directly imprinted by its history, which are more truthful than any discourse proffered by a mouth.”<sup>311</sup>

In the charged arena of historical debate, where silences cohabit with a plethora of competing discourses, the cinematic image becomes an alternative locus of truth, that which bears witness to experience. The image of the immigrant, as well as those of millions of young

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<sup>311</sup> Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 13.

people who were born of immigration, then, is as informative as their voiced testimonies and is able to counter the reductive, inflammatory discourses surrounding these individuals. Therein lies the power of cinema: the juxtaposition of the image and the once-silent/silenced voice of the immigrant to those of state policy makers and authoritative figures in her documentaries; despite what those in power say about immigration and immigrants, their faces, bodies, and voices tell another story. Benguigui, throughout her cinematic endeavors, has insisted on the power of the image to “faire évoluer les mentalités.” Let us hope that her films will continue to bear witness to the emerging community of France for many years to come.

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