

Maghrebi-French Directors Behind the Camera: The Cinema of the Second G¹

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In an article entitled “De Nanterre à Hollywood” (“From Nanterre to Hollywood”), published in a 1996 issue of *L'Express*, Dalila Kerkouche writes: “leur père tenait le marteau piqueur, eux manient la caméra. Les cinéastes beurs promènent leur douce France dans la Mecque du cinoche” “Their fathers held the jack-hammer, they hold the camera. Maghrebi-French directors display their sweet France in the Mecca of cinema.”² Kerkouche refers to several Maghrebi-French directors who emerged on the French scene in the mid 1990s, including Rachid Bouchareb, nominated for an Oscar in Los Angeles in 1996 for *Poussière de vie*; Karim Dridi, director of *Bye-Bye* (1995), which he presented to the International Film Festival in San Francisco in 1996; Malik Chibane, director of *Hexagone* (1994) and *Douce France* (1995); Zaïda Gorab-Volta, director of *Souviens-toi de moi* (1996); and Rachida Krim, who was preparing *Sous les pieds des femmes*, a film released in 1997. Continuing in the wake of Medhi Charef, who became known with *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède* (1984), these directors are part of a group of artists and writers who are gaining recognition for their works and performances and making a mark as Maghrebi-French creators.³ I present here several facets of Maghrebi-French cinema in analyzing films by Malik Chibane, Karim Dridi, and Thomas Gilou, who render the lives of Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French individuals living in projects in cities or at the outskirts of cities in the mid 1990s. In addition, I examine a

film by Rachida Krim and a documentary by Jamina Benguigui. Both explore events of the Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French past, namely immigration to France and the fight for Algerian independence on French soil.

Screening Maghrebi Life in France

Hexagone (1994) and *Douce France* (1995) by Malik Chibane, *Bye-Bye* (1995) by Karim Dridi, and *Raï* (1995) by Thomas Gilou were well received when they appeared on the big screen; they were subsequently shown on television with good ratings. TV guides emphasized that Dridi is a lucid and tender director who captures admirably the condition of young Maghrebi-French in France. Chibane was praised for his moving and truthful rendering of the “banlieue” ‘projects,’ and the sincerity and the generosity of Gilou’s film attracted the attention of the critics. With these films, Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou established themselves as full fledged, viable directors and they are now considered part of the New New Wave alongside other directors such as Kassovitz, Desplechin, Klapisch, and Guédiguian who also make films about today’s France.⁴ Commenting on the production of the New New Wave, Pierre Jeancolas states that in their films New New Wave directors represent a “réel de proximité” ‘reality close to them’ (57). By this he means that they make films that are both documentaries and the result of their personal experiences and observations. Adapting Jeancolas’s formulation, I say that New New Wave directors have created a personalized realism.

What is the personal experience of Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou? Of Kabyle origin, born in the Drôme in Southern France, raised in Goussainville in the outskirts of Paris, Malik Chibane is an electronic technician who became a film director. Karim Dridi is the son of a French mother and a Tunisian father. He studied in Saint-Denis, a University in a suburb north of Paris, and began his career in film making industrial films and documentaries. Thomas Gilou is ethnically also Second G, but of African origin. He wrote the scenario of *Raï* in collaboration with Aïssa Djabri, who grew up in Nanterre.⁵ Djabri was the first Maghrebi-French person to graduate from *Idhec*.⁶ As Maghrebi-French individuals

Chibane, Dridi, and Djabri are aware of the fact that most of the time the Maghrebi population is ignored, hidden, or constructed in very negative terms by the French media. In 1997 Djabri remarked "Le soir quand je vais au cinéma ou quand j'allume la télé, je pense aux 5 millions de musulmans qui ne se reconnaissent pas sur l'écran" 'In the evening when I go to the movies or when I turn on my TV, I think about the five million Moslems who do not recognize themselves on the screen' and he denounced the integrationist solution which "nous refuse toute représentation au cinéma sous prétexte de gommer les différences" 'denies us any representation in film under the pretext of erasing differences.' Malik Chibane declared that he made films because he wanted to fight the cultural invisibility of the Maghrebi-French living in the outskirts of cities (qtd. in Kerkouche). Furthermore, as sons of immigrants and as diasporic subjects, Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri are acutely aware of their identity and ethnicity. For them assimilation, cultural specificity, and allegiance to France and/or their country of origin are existential questions.

How are these experiences concretized and rendered in the films? Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri invent scenarios which take place among Maghrebi families, consisting of parents who came from North Africa and their children raised in France. Their characters are confronted daily with issues of nation, community, race, class, religion, gender, and sexuality. In order to examine how these directors engage with and articulate these pressing issues to create the personalized realism of their films, it is necessary to focus on places, spaces, language, music, customs, clothing, dialogues, and interactions which are the semiotic elements the directors draw on to render Maghrebi experience in France. I consider these films to be ethnographic constructions elaborated through the eyes of Maghrebi-French individuals. By this I mean that the directors construct images, situations, and dialogues based on their knowledge and experience of first and second generation Maghrebi life in mid 1990s France. It is the renderings of their experience which constitute the representation of the films.

Nation/Community/Race/Identity

Territory, national soil, and geopolitical location are components which define groups and individuals and give them a sense of belonging to a specific, well defined geographic space, a sense of anchoring and stability. Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri pay special attention to these components, which determine individuals' subjectivities in their films. They do not place their characters in indeterminate places, but rather, using various devices, make a point of situating them within France. With the titles *Hexagone* and *Douce France* Chibane chooses words which connote Frenchness par excellence. As Jill Forbes notes, *Douce France* is the beginning of a famous song by Charles Trenet: "Douce France, Cher pays de mon enfance" 'Sweet France, beloved country of my childhood.' It evokes eternal France, a motherly, protective, beautiful, and harmonious France. The term "hexagone" represents the personality of France, circumscribed within this specific geometrical shape which is by now a symbol of France.⁷

The film *Hexagone* opens up on a field of wheat, we hear church bells, and in the distance appears the community nestled in a pastoral surrounding. We learn later that its name is Goussainville, which is situated in the Val D'Oise. *Douce France* is set in Saint-Denis, a small active city north of Paris, with its shops, basilica, and animated streets. In *Raï* the characters live in Garges-lès-Gonnesse, also in the Val d'Oise, in well-kept buildings. The setting of *Bye-Bye* is the multiethnic neighborhood of the Panier in the center of Marseilles, but the camera also shows the well known basilica Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde and a panorama of Marseilles and its shipyards. In their mise-en-scène, then, the films emphasize that the Maghrebi-French and their parents live on French soil and are part of France. Furthermore the directors recall historical facts which remind spectators how Maghrebis and their children are linked to France.

In *Douce France* the father, born in Algeria, refers to the fact that he fought in France's colonial war in Indochina: "J'ai fait l'Indochine pour nourrir mes parents" 'I fought in Indochina to feed my parents.' We learn that he is a Harki, which means that he

fought on the side of France during the Algerian war. In his apartment he displays a portrait of De Gaulle. Moussa, the son, explains to his friend Jean-Luc: "Mon père a choisi la France" 'My father chose France.' Mouloud in *Bye-Bye* composes a rap song which says that the Maghrebis are in France because the French brought them from North Africa. With these reminders, the characters express, if not their allegiance to France, at least the fact that their lives have been implicated with France and its colonial endeavors.

At the same time, the films show many interactions during which the Maghrebi-French are reminded that they live in a special France which exists next to the other France. The main protagonists, young men and young women, raised in France, speaking French, and going about the normal activities of individuals in their twenties, i.e. dating or seeking entertainment, are repeatedly confronted with experiences which make them feel excluded, and rejected by the French for being Maghrebi-French. Topography, places, and spaces mark their marginality. The scene at the entrance of a club where young male Maghrebi-French Blacks are forbidden to enter is now a topos found in many films, including *La Haine*. Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri also use it because it corresponds to real life experiences of *Beurs* and Blacks and concretizes the rejection in terms of inside and outside. In *Raï*, Aziz, Djamel, Laurent, and Mezz drive from their project in the outskirts of Paris to the center of Paris, to go to a club. When they arrive they are not permitted to enter, but, with the help of French girls, they get in. However, once inside, the girls realize that the young men are Maghrebi-French and walk out. In *Hexagone*, at the door of the club the young men are told "Pas d'Arabes dans la soirée a dit le patron" 'No Arabs in this party says the owner.' In addition Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri show how the French and the Maghrebis and their families do not live in the same spaces and places, and point out that the French seek and want this separation.

In *Hexagone*, Chibane presents this situation in a humorous way. After having been rejected from the club in Paris, the young men go to a multiethnic club in the suburbs. A newcomer whose

father wants to open a business in town asks about the population. Here is the conversation: “Y a beaucoup d’Arabes? Y a que ça. Y a beaucoup de Noirs et d’Africains? Y a que ça. Y a beaucoup de Turcs? Y a que ça. Y a beaucoup de Français? Les Français, ne te casse pas la tête. Y en a rien qu’à la télévision” ‘Are there Arabs? Lots of them. Are there many Blacks and Africans? Lots of them. Are there many Turks? Lots of them. Are there many French? French, don’t worry. They are only on TV.’ The accumulations, repetitions, the affirmative tone, and the final punch line create a joke like structure which foregrounds the reality of ethnic separation. In *Hexagone*, Annick, the post office employee, tells Nacera, in a very affirmative tone, full of conviction, that she lives in Paris because “en banlieue il y a trop de Noirs et d’Arabes” ‘in the outskirts of Paris there are too many Blacks and Arabs.’ In *Bye-Bye*, French workers are sitting in a bar discussing how it is time to clean up France and take action against foreigners. Just at this moment, young Rhida and his cousin walk by. They grab him by the collar and say, “L’Algérie c’est en face, ici c’est la France” ‘Algeria is across the way, here it is France,’ meaning: do not trespass in this part of town. So the films underscore the fact that France is not the same France for everybody. For Maghrebi-French there is an inside from which they are excluded and an outside where they are tolerated, there is a center and they are on the periphery, there is Paris and they live in the suburbs, there are places where they want to go and they are forbidden to do so.

For French-French individuals in France, identity is not a problem. They are French and considered French, and their identity is not contested or despised or even talked about. They do not have to wonder about being called French or about referring to themselves as French or something else. This is not the case for Maghrebis and Maghrebi-French who, for instance, are frequently asked for their identity papers by the police. The three directors take on this question of identity and show various interactions during which the identity of the Maghrebi-French is contested or despised by the French, or rejected by the Maghrebi-French themselves. Having a Maghrebi-French identity, being Maghrebi-French, is experienced as a drawback for several characters so that

they feel compelled to deny or to hide their identity. In *Hexagone*, Slimane is interviewed at an employment agency by a young woman who incidentally could be taken for a Maghrebi-French. She asks a loaded question which already puts down Slimane, since it questions his Frenchness: "Vous êtes pas Français?" 'You are not French are you?' she says. He gives an ambiguous response, feeling that it is the best way to get out of this delicate moment: "Ma famille est de l'autre côté de la Méditerranée" 'My family is from the other side of the Mediterranean,' which could be the Maghreb, but also Lebanon or Egypt. And he adds "je suis né dans le quartier Saint-Augustin, à Goussainville" 'I was born in the Saint-Augustin neighborhood, in Goussainville,' hoping that this will establish him as having a French-French identity. Also in *Hexagone*, after having heard that Annick lives in Paris because there are too many Arabs and Blacks in the suburbs, Nacera tells her he is of Italian origin and that his name is Xavier. This statement will be interpreted by certain viewers as bitter and ironic, because at the turn of the century Italians were treated as inferior and dangerous others, just as Maghrebis are now.⁸ In *Raï*, as the three friends get ready to go out, one of them sees Laurent's chain where a Fatma hand hangs and says: "Cache ça, on va te prendre pour un Rebeu" 'Hide this, they will think you are a Maghrebi-French.' Indeed, as Azuz Begag comments in *Ecarts d'identité*, and as the films show, the look, physical appearance, and objects are overt markers of otherness and difference and are potentially liabilities for minority individuals.

In the films, the characters never refer to themselves as *Beurs*, but as *Rebeus*, using the *verlan* expression for *Beur*. The rejection of the term *Beur* is eloquently expressed in the rap song significantly entitled "Le Beur pourri" 'the rotten Maghrebi-French' Mouloud invents in *Bye-Bye*: "Ne m'appelle pas Beur, ce mot m'écœure. Ne m'appelle pas Beur car tu me mettrais en pleurs. Tous ceux qui m'appellent Beur de merde, je leur dis que je les emmerde" 'Do not call me *Beur*, this word makes me throw up. Do not call me *Beur*, you would make me cry. To all those who call me shitty *Beur*, I say I shit on you.' Mouloud puts into words the perception of young people of North African descent who do not

want to be called *Beurs* and do not want to be constructed as *Beurs*, because of the negative connotations associated with the term of reference *Beur*.⁹ Characters sometimes reveal that being *Beur* is a source of torment and psychological stress. In *Raï*, while driving to Paris, the three friends decide to affirm themselves : “on n’est pas des rebeus complexés, mais comme des beaux gosses, on s’assure” ‘we are not *rebeus* with complexes, but like good looking guys we are sure of ourselves,’ which indicates the feeling of inferiority they want to overcome. And Farida, in *Douce France*, tells Moussa a dream which reveals the anxiety of being North African: “J’ai rêvé que je ne serai plus une potiche maghrébine, que je serai une potiche juive” ‘I dreamt that I will no longer be a Maghrebi jar, but a Jewish jar.’¹⁰

While bringing out the negative attitude of the French towards the Maghrebi-French, and that of the Maghrebi-French against the fact they are called *Beurs* and therefore rejected, the directors construct their Maghrebi-French characters as likeable, friendly, good looking, intelligent, and resourceful young men and women. They also make a point of casting Maghrebi-French parts with actors who could pass for French, thus demonstrating that the stereotype of the dangerous Maghrebi-French with dark skin and black hair does not correspond to the reality. In *Raï*, Laurent, the Kabyle, is blond and light-skinned and could pass for French. In *Hexagone*, Moussa could pass for Italian. In *Bye-Bye*, Ismael and his uncle are not so different from the other men from Marseilles they work with, who are probably of Italian origin or Corsican. In *Douce France*, the first client who comes to Jean-Luc’s office looks French and yet he is Kabyle. The girl in the employment agency in *Hexagone*, Annick in *Raï*, and Jean-Luc, the Jewish boy in *Douce France*, are French in the films but could be taken for *Beurs*. And the actress playing Nacera/Xavier’s French girlfriend born in Brittany is Maghrebi-French in real life.

Most French individuals refer to Maghrebis and Maghrebi-French as “Arabes,” “Maghrébins,” or “Algériens,” and the stereotype has it that all male Maghrebis are called Mohammed. The films make a point of showing that Maghrebis belong to different ethnicities, come from different countries in the Maghreb, are

familiar with different customs, and can have a wide variety of names. In *Douce France*, we learn that Moussa's father is a Harki from Kabylie and that, in fact, it is not a very desirable position to be in. One of the customers in the bar insults Moussa by saying: "dans la famille vous êtes Harkis de père en fils" 'In your family you are Harkis from father to son.'¹¹ In *Raï*, Laurent explains "je ne suis pas un Arabe, je suis de Kabylie, Tizzi Ouzzou" 'I am not Arab, I come from Kabylie, from Tizzi Ouzzou.' The family in *Bye-Bye* comes from Tunisia. We are made aware that there are differences between Algeria and Morocco in *Hexagone* when girls discuss how in Morocco young people can choose their mate, whereas in Algeria the parents still arrange the marriages. As far as names are concerned, in *Douce France* when a French tenant addresses the Maghrebi-French calling him Mohammed, he is told: "My name is Rachid."

The films explore the relations and reactions individuals might have with their country of origin, often referred to as "le bled" 'the old country.' Several interactions and comments reveal that the *bled* has different connotations and provokes radically different reactions depending on the age of the characters. For the parents, it is back home in North Africa. It is the place where problems will be solved, where individuals who cause trouble are sent. It is the place where members of the family still live. It is the place where parents seek a mate for their children when they arrange their marriages. In *Raï*, the older brother asks his mother to send his younger brother, a drug addict, back to the *bled*. In *Bye-Bye*, after the fire which destroyed their apartment in Paris, the parents go back to Tunisia and expect their two sons, Ismael and Mouloud, to join them. Idriss is thinking of taking his family back to Tunisia because Rhida is a drug addict and causes problems, but his daughters and wife do not want to go back, they refuse to "rentrer au bled" 'go back to the old country.' For Maghrebi-French the *bled* is a foreign place they do not know, or do not want to know. Mouloud, in *Bye-Bye*, vehemently refuses to go to Tunisia which he calls "le bled de merde" 'shitty old country' and his brother Ismael is not keen to go either. This attitude culminates in the last scene when the two brothers decide defini-

tively not to return to the *bled*. *Bye-Bye*, the title of the film, can be interpreted to mean bye-bye to the old country. The *bled* can be a source of problems because its customs are imposed on young people who were born and raised in France and feel no link with such a place. This is the case of Slimane's sister who was married to a man from the *bled* she did not know and who left her with a child in *Hexagone*, or for Moussa, in *Douce France*, who is compelled to marry his aunt's daughter, a girl from Algeria he has never seen. The *bled* is a place considered backward by young people. In *Hexagone*, two Maghrebi girls are talking about an acquaintance and note that she has "la mentalité du bled" 'mentality of the old country' because she accepted "un mariage à l'ancienne" 'marriage according to old customs' i.e. an arranged marriage.¹² The films document how the characters' belonging to a specific ethnic group, their having a specific name, and their ties to the *bled*, be it acceptance or rejection, are part of their sense of nation and community.

Most French individuals have never come into direct contact with Maghrebi families. Yet Maghrebi-French are associated with young unemployed delinquents hanging out in the hallways of dilapidated buildings, ransacking neighborhoods, creating riots, and insecurity. Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabbri's films propose images which counter these stereotypes. They emphasize the significance of the family in the shaping of the identity of the Maghrebi-French living in France. They create characters who belong to normal, respectable, nuclear families composed of parents and children and grandparents. Fathers are definitely represented as the heads of the family, often behaving in authoritarian fashion, as in *Douce France* and *Bye-Bye*. The death of the father has drastic consequences in *Raï*. Dinner scenes display the family grouped around the table. Children show respect for their parents and elderly family members. Parents give advice and admonish their children, and children argue among themselves. In *Bye-Bye*, the parents call from Tunisia because they are concerned about their sons Mouloud and Ismael who are on their way back to Tunisia. The families live in middle class apartments that are well taken care of. They are afraid of criminality and fear insecurity.

rity, just like the French. And just as within French families, some children succeed, others fail, young kids rebel, young men are addicted to drugs, and parents are tormented and distressed. Sometimes they want to take measures to correct the problems, and sometimes they prefer to deny the existence of the problems because they are overwhelmed by them. In other words, the directors show that Maghrebi families are like French families, facing the same difficulties in raising their children. To be sure, in the films there are still drug dealers, drug addicts, and unemployment, which the directors do not want to hide. But the stereotypes of the Maghrebi-French drug addict and drug dealer are unpacked as it were, so that the reality behind these behaviors is explained in a very powerful fashion. Rather than being the consequences of vice, the drug problem in *Hexagone* is presented as being the result of a tragic circumstance, the death of the father which precipitated Nordine toward delinquency. And in *Bye-Bye*, it is to overcome discrimination and because he wants to be powerful that Renard sells drugs and has weapons. This is revealed when he explains to Mouloud, showing him a gun: "Avec ça tu deviens un homme, t'es plus un bougnoule. Tu baisses ou on te baise" 'With this you become a man, you are no longer a despised Arab. You screw or you are screwed.'

The choice of the family context is also significant because it enables the directors to foreground other important aspects of Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French identity such as customs, culture, and religion. It is within family life that the cultural links with the country of origin are evident. In *Bye-Bye* and *Douce France*, the characters watch TV programs in Arabic, probably broadcast from the Maghreb. Two important rites of passage in the life of the individual, marriage and funeral, are performed in France according to North African customs. Thus Chibane stages a wedding in *Douce France*, showing alternatively the bride in various dresses, preparing herself to be presented to the bridegroom, the men talking among themselves, and women dancing together. One can note the greetings, the special food, and the music. This is a traditional wedding arranged by the mother. In *Raï* we see how marriages are negotiated between the mothers of the groom

and the bride. And in *Hexagone*, we hear conversations between characters concerning the differences in wedding customs in Algeria and Morocco.¹³ In *Bye-Bye*, Dridi has Mouloud and Ridha, the two adolescents born in France, come upon a traditional funeral ceremony in process. The camera pans the rooms where the women are grouped together dressed and seated in a traditional Arabic way, then goes to the room where the body, wrapped in a white cloth, is resting while religious men sing prayers in Arabic. Religious customs, such as the celebration of the *Aïd*, when a sheep has to be sacrificed, are part of family life. In *Hexagone*, Chibane aims at dispelling the negative impression the French have of this ritual by linking the Ibrahim story of the Koran to the Abraham story of the Bible. A painting representing Abraham sacrificing the ram appears on the screen and we hear the voice over of Slimane explaining that it is similar to the *fête of l'Aïd* in the Arabic world during which a sheep is sacrificed. Later on in the film, we see Slimane's father preparing the carcass of the mutton hanging in their apartment. The *Aïd* is shown not to be threatening, cruel, or savagely incongruous, as the stereotypes have it.

The existence of social and cultural practices imported from the old country is also documented. As in the Maghreb and in France, in *Raï*, and in *Hexagone*, there are cafés where only men go and where they play dominos, listen to North African music, and watch traditional dancing. As in the old country, individuals consult a religious dignitary, the Marabout, to find a response to their family problems. Some believe in witchcraft, in the existence of the evil eye (*skol*), and in the power of talismans and amulets. In *Hexagone*, the characters listen to music as they are driving, and specify that it is kabyle music, thus pointing out that Maghrebi music consists not only of *Raï* but also of other styles as well. These are snapshots of North African culture and traditions which are now enacted and lived in France. And these customs, whether accepted or rejected by the Maghrebi-French, as in the case of arranged marriages or witchcraft, are part of the identity of the Maghrebis, old and young. This does not imply that French customs are not also present in the lives of these charac-

ters, as shown by the Christmas tree in the living room of the family in *Douce France*.

La Haine by Kassovitz made an impact for its message and its cinematographic qualities, but also for being a document of the ways of speaking of young people from the projects. It made spectators aware of *verlan*, of the “parler jeune et cool” ‘cool and “with-it” way of speaking.’ Similarly, Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabbri’s films make spectators hear how language is used in the Maghrebi community. It involves a complex array of possibilities which depend on the context, the age of the characters, and the place where speaking takes place. The characters belong to two linguistic communities: French and North African. In *Douce France* and *Bye-Bye*, during interactions within the family, the parents use Arabic only or French with Arabic expressions when they speak to each other. In *Bye-Bye*, the family watches TV programs in Arabic and in *Douce France*, the father watches sports broadcasts in Arabic. In *Raï*, the mother speaks Arabic to her sons, who respond in French. The children, adolescents, and young men and women speak French between themselves at home. At the mosque, in *Douce France*, the religious service, attended by Maghrebis and Africans, is conducted in both Arabic and French.

With their friends and in the outside world, young men and women speak *verlan*, which is a marker of their age and of youth culture more generally. Thus, in *Douce France*, Souad, the most French Maghrebi-French girl in the family, tells her Jewish ex-boyfriend: “Tu faisais partie de SOS pour te taper des rebeus et des renois” ‘You belonged to SOS [an anti-racist organization] in order to screw *beurs* and black girls.’ Souad speaks the typical popular French of her age.¹⁴ She calls her sister Farida a “pouffiasse” ‘a slut’ and in the conversation in the beauty salon she and her friend talk about “le mauvais trip” ‘the bad trip’ of her sister, meaning that she has fallen for religion. Farida, on the other hand, speaks a register of French typical of an educated French-French native speaker. Chibane sets up humorous and ironic situations with the character of Farida. He films her wearing her scarf and teaching French grammar in a Jewish school. And to bring out stereotypes and prejudices connected to accents he has her ask a French

apartment building superintendent for information wearing her head scarf. In a panic, the superintendent tells her husband that the daughter of a Hezbollah is at the door, but the husband reassures her saying: “elle n’a pas d’accent, elle est d’ici” ‘she does not have an accent, she is from here,’ meaning somebody who speaks French like a native is not dangerous. Thus linguistically, whether they speak Arabic fluently or simply use some expressions which function as ethnic identity markers, whether they understand or do not understand Arabic, the characters are connected to the old country by their exposure to that language. They also live in France and speak with different registers of French according to their generation. The stereotypical Maghrebi accent and ways of speaking, which a comedian like Smaïn draws on in his comic sketches, are countered in these films. Some older Maghrebis have an accent, Maghrebi-French pass for French.¹⁵

The films document how community, nation, and identity for Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French mean that two countries (France and a country in North Africa), two languages (Arabic and French, including *verlan*), and two cultures (Maghrebi and French, including the youth culture of the projects with Raï, Reggae, and Rap) coexist and mingle in their everyday life and experience and in their mindset.

Gender Roles and Sexuality

Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri are male directors sensitive to gender roles and to the condition of Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French women as well as men in France. Their portrayals of women are very provocative, for they propose a range of behaviors and show that different behaviors can coexist. Their female characters belong to two generations: the Maghrebi mothers who come from the old country and who are caught between tradition and modernity and the Maghrebi-French who have been raised in France. In *Raï* and *Douce France*, Maghrebi wives submit to the authority of their husbands but exercise their authority in the domains to which they are traditionally assigned. They run the household and arrange the marriages of their sons and daughters.

But they are represented as open-minded women who under-

stand that Western models influence their children. They become mediators between their husbands, sons, and daughters, taking the side of the daughters. They are involved in various activities typical of middle-class French women. The mother in *Douce France* drives a car; in *Hexagone*, she keeps a modern household; in *Bye-Bye*, she smokes cigarettes and helps her daughters with their English lessons.

Maghrebi-French women are given a variety of roles and positions. Sahlia, in *Raï*, and Souad, in *Douce France*, adopt modern, urban ways of living. They are determined to live as they see fit, earn their living, and leave the family. A young woman like Farida, in *Douce France*, is religious and wears a head scarf, but at the same time she is very modern, works on a computer, holds a job, and is independent. Spectators are made to feel that these women are strong and energetic, capable of taking care of themselves, and in control of their own lives. For instance, they know that the Maghrebi tradition requires that a young woman be a virgin when she gets married, so Sahlia, in *Raï*, tells Djamel that she can make love but she will not arrive dishonored at marriage because: "je ferai comme toutes les copines ont fait, je me ferai faire un voile" 'I will do like all my girl friends, I will get myself revirginized.' Thanks to modern Western surgery, tradition and modernity can coexist. *Douce France* emphasizes the solidarity which might exist between women, when we see the two rival sisters, Souad, the hip girl with short hair and short dresses, and Farida, the religious girl, driving Myssad, the Algerian girl, to the airport so that her arranged marriage does not take place. Not only do we see the association of the three women to resist a custom they cannot accept, but, as Carrie Tarr puts it, the three "beurettes" 'Maghrebi-French girls' are in the driver's seat. Symbolically this scene means freedom, independence, mobility, and determination.

In contrast, the directors do not offer a very positive picture of Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French men. Courageously, they take on the delicate and difficult issue of authoritarian husbands, fathers, and brothers. According to the traditional culture of the Maghreb, men are supposed to rule over their wives, daughters,

and sisters, be suspicious of women's morality, and consider that, as men, they are responsible for the honor of the family.¹⁶ However these customs clash with the life that Maghrebi-French women want and need to live. The films show the torments and difficulties young women experience in their daily lives because of the mentality of their fathers and brothers.¹⁷ Single Maghrebi-French women are not allowed to go about freely. The father slaps his daughter Souad, in *Douce France*, because she comes back late having worked a night shift in a fast food restaurant. In *Raï*, Sahlia has to beg her father to be able to stay out. She is literally harassed by her brother, who watches every move she makes. For instance, to go out to a club she needs to change her appearance and wear a blond wig to pass as French. Eventually she has to leave the family in order to escape the abusive authority of her father and brother. In *Hexagone*, Nacera does not want his sister staying out at night. He says to his father "Pourquoi tu la laisses sortir le soir? Ça se fait pas chez les Arabes" 'Why do you let her go out at night? It is not the custom among Arabs.'¹⁸

In addition to exposing the authoritarian attitudes of fathers and brothers, the directors portray the young men as sexually immature and tormented by sexuality. In *Raï*, Mezz is obsessed with sexuality. He states that his cousin injured his wife with his enormous penis. His jealousy reaches incredible heights when he sees his sister and Djamel kissing, or when he is told she made love with Laurent. Djamel, in *Raï*, expresses an ambivalent feeling towards women. After refusing to make love to his fiancée Sahlia, he tells her "Après avoir baisé les filles, j'ai envie de les jeter" 'After having screwed girls, I feel like throwing them out.' In *Bye-Bye*, Ismael, after having followed Yasmine and made love to her, tells her: "Tu me dégoûtes" 'You disgust me.'

Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri are in touch with contemporary attitudes and ways of thinking about gender roles and sexuality. They denounce the patriarchal attitudes of their male characters. They portray the fathers as backward and the young men as insensitive and selfish. But their portrayals of women are very positive. The women are in touch with themselves and perfectly adapted to current realities of modern life in France. Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri are in touch with contemporary male feminists giving a lesson of

open-mindedness to their fellow Maghrebi-French male spectators.

Revisiting the past

Two Maghrebi-French women directors are charting new paths with their films. In the wake of historians, novelists, directors, and individuals who remember and represent repressed or censored traumatic moments of France under the Occupation and France's involvement in Algeria, Jamina Benguigui and Rachida Krim are revisiting different facets of the past of Maghrebi immigrants in France. They are moved by the same impulse which underlies French writings about World War II and the Algerian war: the desire to make the past known, understand it, remedy the silences of history, and prevent oblivion.

Rachida Krim delves into a traumatic moment of the past of the Algerian community in France: the Algerian war. Her film *Sous les pieds des femmes* is a militant film which demystifies and demythifies the FLN (National Liberation Front) and the FIS (the current fundamentalist movement) by exposing the excesses of the Algerian revolutionary movement and the violence of the French repression, and confronting the excesses of the fundamentalists in the present. By juxtaposing Aya's and Amin's past, as militants of the FLN in France, and their present, Aya as Algerian-French in France and Amin as Algerian living in Algeria, Krim shows the parallel between the fanaticism and the idealism of the 1958 revolution and the fanaticism of the present day FIS activists. By means of an anamnesis provoked by the visit of Amin, her ex-lover and superior during the Algerian war, Aya relives this period of her life described in the flashbacks while her conversations with Amin center on the bitterness and disillusion she feels because of the failure of the revolution and the shameful treatment of women in present day Algeria. Through the unfolding of the past and the comments about the present, the film shows that history repeats itself with a macabre force. The present replays the past as we hear that Amin's intransigent, fanatic son, working for the FIS, displays the intransigence of his father as an FLN militant.¹⁹

Sous les pieds des femmes presents a mixture of national tragedy and individual trauma. It is about history lived subjectively, but it is especially about *herhistory*, the experiences of several women involved in the Algerian liberation movement. Like Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966), which foregrounds the participation of women in the clandestine activities in Algiers, Krim's film is an homage to the strength and determination of women who fought in France, for the independence movement. It focuses on Aya, a young traditional, illiterate Algerian mother who is forced by Amin, the leader of a revolutionary group, to abandon her children, transform herself into a French woman, and commit a terrorist act. She is captured and tortured in French jails. The film also very briefly portrays several other women: the old Maghrebi woman who takes care of Aya's children; Alisa, wife of a militant, executed by Amin and his group because of her adultery; the French woman who hides Aya and Amin from the police and tells them that two of her sons were killed by the Gestapo; and the French woman who is arrested by the police for her involvement with Algerian militants. These women, each in their own way, fought for the revolution. In an ironic reversal, thirty-five years later, Aya takes on the leadership role. As a young woman, she would ask Amin what the revolution would bring. Now she tells Amin that Algeria is not free, that although it seems that the women should be liberated, it is in fact the men who need to be liberated. And she becomes the inspirer who begs Amin not to give up, because Algeria is not free yet.

Sous les pieds des femmes does not take place in an apartment in a project, rather it presents ex-freedom fighters and their Maghrebi-French children living in an elegantly furnished house. The car, the clothes, and the taste of this family connote affluence and sophistication. In this setting memory and history impinge on the present. Through the dialogues spectators realize that the Algerian war is always present through the retellings of the father, the memories of the older daughter, the questions of the younger daughter, and the moodiness and sadness of the mother. And furthermore the whole family is deeply affected by the present events of Algeria. This is a feminist film which documents how Maghrebi

and Maghrebi-French have been affected and continue to be affected by the independence movement and the present situation in Algeria.²⁰

Benguigui's *Mémoires d'immigrés* (1997) is a documentary as riveting as a feature film. Its cast of men, women, and children elicits intense emotion as they reveal the sufferings, humiliation, and torments they underwent and still undergo. Benguigui, herself of Kabyle origin and raised in Northern France, was able to overcome the reticence of her interviewees by telling them her own story, the humiliations she had to endure, and her desire to revolt. In turn, they agreed to speak, hence the set of testimonies of *Mémoires d'immigrés*. The semantic field of *écart* which Azuz Begag unpacks in his study *Ecarts d'identité* is here concretized in all of its dimensions: exile, uprooting, arrival in a foreign and unknown land, loneliness, nostalgia for the old country, marginalization, and rejection. Benguigui juxtaposes past and present in a montage of interviews and old photographs of places and individuals, and the result is a powerful document which conveys the strength and resilience of the men and women who came as illiterates, lived in very difficult conditions in shantytowns or rudimentary housing, and were able to make a life for themselves. All of them, in their own ways, express themselves with emotional force and eloquence. Bodies, words, and places are testimonies of the hardships endured. *Mémoires d'immigrés* echoes many aspects of Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri's films. It emphasizes women's lack of freedom and the hardships of arranged marriages. Both parents and children speak of their bicultural experience and their double identity, but at the same time reject the idea of going back to North Africa. As far as language is concerned, as in the films, the documentary contains the same variations in linguistic registers, with older people speaking with a North African accent more or less marked, while the young educated people speak educated French, and the adolescents speak the cool, in language of the young people of their age. The film is an important document for French spectators. It informs them about facts they might not know, such as the search and recruiting process, and the hardships of the immigrants in

France. Statements by former recruiters such as “we needed strong men, docile workers” and “we did not want any fallout” make it very clear that the employers thought they could continue the colonial hegemony within France. *Mémoires d’immigrés* constitutes both an individual and collective anamnesis designed to bring about “un-forgetfulness” for the interviewees and for the spectators and explain the presence of the Maghrebis and their children in France.

Significance of the films

As Maghrebi-French directors representing their community, Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri concretize what sociologists and other researchers document in their studies and what writers write about in their novels, i.e. the complex nexus of ethnicity, race, and sexuality.²¹ They show that Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French subjectivities, sense of nation, community, language, and identity are splintered (*éclatée*), at the intersection of various positions, French and Maghrebi, traditional and contemporary. And indeed the films illustrate that for Maghrebis and more intensely for those who are Maghrebi-French, nation, community, identity, gender, and sexuality are sites of ambivalence, ambiguity, torment, and contradictory pulls. Maghrebi individuals of different generations are made up of discontinuous selves which are copresent; they are subjects in perpetual negotiation with the past and the present, tradition and modernity, France and North Africa.

As postcolonial directors, holding the camera to speak about their marginalized community, the directors elaborate dialogic representations in the sense of Bakhtin, since they seek to counter many of the negative stereotypes which exist about Maghrebis and Maghrebi-French. Their films display the diversity, differences, and divergences which exist within the Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French community. They counter the xenophobic attitude which stereotypically neutralizes or suppresses ethnic and cultural differences.

For Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French spectators the films certainly provoke an autoethnographic satisfaction because of their

diasporic consciousness. They are documents which bring their community out of marginality, valorize their existence, and speak about their own experience. Gestures, linguistic code-switching habits, and North African customs are there to be seen and heard. They are elements of artistic creation which reaffirm their group consciousness and identity and contribute to the conservation of the memory of their country of origin. At the same time, the films deal with real problems Maghrebi-French experience in their lives, such as various manifestations of French xenophobia. The dominating behavior of the brothers toward their sisters strikes a chord in female spectators since such situations are lived bitterly and resented by many Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French women living in France. And most importantly the films do not leave spectators with a feeling of powerlessness, of negative immobility and despair.

Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri know how to make interesting films which have a universal appeal. They are good story tellers, who invent moving, poignant situations. They cast likable young characters in the throws of existential problems. They use lively dialogues and fast paced narratives. But their films are also third-degree films which remind spectators that life in France is inscribed with questions of identity and racism, and that artistic creativity can deal with these issues. The plight of their characters is complicated by their ethnicity, by the fact that they are constructed and reacted to in France as others. Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri succeed in promoting both the consciousness of the painful collision that shape Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French subjectivities and the possibility of a peaceful co-existence of cultures. In addition, they problematize the notions of a single nation and single identity and make evident that other configurations, other models of identity exist and that identity can be double and hybrid.²²

In many ways, Krim's and Benguigui's films complement those of Chibane, Dridi and Gilou/Djabri. In *Mémoires d'immigrés* the testimonies of the men, women, and children corroborate the issues thematized in the feature films by Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri. Like the fictional characters of the films, old and

young individuals in the documentary struggle for an identity and are ambivalent about their doubleness. Sometimes they want to be North-African, are proud of being so. Sometimes they want to be French and be considered as such. They also experience xenophobia and rejection. Krim's film *Sous les pieds des femmes* is one more instance of a character's multiple identities. Aya had to shift her identity several times, had to construct herself differently depending on circumstances. And both films are about various connections and affinities immigrants have with their country of origin. There is now a Maghrebi-French intelligentsia, sometimes referred to as "beurgeoisie," living in France, consisting of professionals, artists, and writers who probably feel that the films by Chibane, Dridi, and Gilou/Djabri do not address them and in fact offer a biased representation of the community. Krim's film *Sous les pieds des femmes* proposes characters who belong to a well-to-do upper middle-class family and thus shows that integration and the displacement from the projects to the center are possible for Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French.²³

Benguigui and Krim are also post-colonial third-degree directors taking on political issues affecting Maghrebi and Maghrebi-French individuals. Benguigui overtly denounces the shameless exploitation of immigrants by the French. She documents that in order to reconstruct the country, stimulate its economic growth, and counter its demographic deficiencies, peasants from North Africa were recruited to build cars, roads, and houses for the French. Krim reminds spectators of the years when torture was commonly used by the French police on Algerian men and women fighting for the independence of their country. Benguigui and Krim give Maghrebi-French a historical depth to their lives, and bring to the fore a past for them to share.

The films and documentaries by the Maghrebi-French directors discussed in this paper are acts of identity. They conflate the historical, political, and personal, and represent the voices of the Maghrebi community surging out of marginality onto the French scene. They reveal that the experiences of Maghrebis living in France and Maghrebi-French are sites of multiple discourses

which bring diversity and novelty to French cinema. New images will no doubt continue to appear on the screens.²⁴

Notes

1. I do not write *Beur* cinema because many Maghrebi-French feel that the term *beur* has negative connotations. *Beur* is the *verlan* version of *Arabe*, *verlan* being a form of slang in which syllables of words are rearranged. To replace the term *beur*, the word *rebeu* (*beur* in *verlan*) was coined. But again *rebeu* was appropriated by the mainstream and took on racist overtones. Now *beur* and *rebeu* have been replaced by *la Seconde G*, which means second generation.

2. Translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

3. For a list of films by *Beur* and French directors focusing on Maghrebi life in France see "Third Cinema" and Tarr. Well known Maghrebi-French include Faudel, called the young prince of Raï; Azouz Begag, whose first novel *Le Gone de Chaâba* (1986) was adapted for the screen in 1997 by Christophe Ruggia; Paul Smaïl, whose first novel, *Vivre me tue* (1997), was a best seller, and Kader Belarbi, member of the Ballet of the Paris Opera. For a more detailed assessment of Maghrebi artistic production in France see Hargreaves and McKinney.

4. For instance, Claude-Marie Trémois includes them in her 1997 book on the New New Wave, *Les Enfants de la liberté*. Maghrebi-French directors refuse the labels *Beur* or *Maghrébin* which assign them a minority position and imply a difference and an inferiority compared to the mainstream French creation. They consider themselves to be French directors. In an interview which appeared on the Internet in 1997 Dridi explained that after his film *Pigalle*, which is not about Arabs, he could no longer be called a "cinéaste Beur," because he made films on other topics as well.

5. Thomas Gilou has made a name for himself with films representing different ethnic groups living in France. *Black Mic Mac* (1988) is a comedy dealing with the problems affecting a group of Cameroonians squatting in an old building in Paris and *La vérité si je mens* (1997) is also a comedy, which takes place among Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews in Paris.

6. *Idhec* (Institut des hautes études du cinéma) has now been replaced by the *Femis* (Fondation européenne des métiers de l'image et du son).

7. Jill Forbes points out that the Trenet song has been transformed by a *beur* musical group, *Carte de séjour*, which created an interesting blend of romantic frenchness and Arabic instrumentalization. Chibane, in using the title *Douce France*, establishes an interesting bicultural intertextuality (Forbes and Kelly 271). In his essay entitled "L'Hexagone" in *Lieux de mémoire* (1997), Eugen Weber provides information about the usage of the word which is particularly interesting in this context. He writes that the term *hexagone* began to be used regularly during the Algerian war, and that this usage implied that France was no longer an empire but only "un petit hexagone." "Hexagone" became a derogatory term used by French from Algeria to refer to a France which was abandoning Algeria.

8. On the treatment of European immigrants such as Italians and Belgians in France at the turn of the century, see Noiriel.

9. In 1997, Paul Smâil, author of the best seller *Vivre me tue*, told a journalist of the *Nouvel Observateur* (October 9-15): "Je suis content de lire un article très élogieux (dans *Paris-Match*) sur mon livre . . . Mais quand je vois que l'article est titré 'au bon beur' je me dis que le mec qui a chié ça a de la chance de ne pas se trouver à portée de mon gauche . . ." "I am very pleased to read an article full of praise about my book. . . . But when I see that the article is entitled 'to the good *beur*' [pun on an ad for butter, *au bon beurre*] I tell myself that the dude who came up with that shit is lucky not to be close to my fist. . . ."

10. This is an allusion to a feminist slogan which stated that women do not want any longer to be "potiche ou boniche." *Potiche*, which means jar, is a slang word for a dumb, passive, good looking woman, an object to be looked at; *boniche* is slang for maid.

11. For information on the Harkis, see Roze.

12. *Bled* is one of many Arabic words which have entered French slang, in which it means a lost, backward place. It has the same connotation for young Maghrebi-French.

13. In her novel *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991), Nina Bouraoui describes in detail the wedding practices of Algeria. She uses the technique of singularization to emphasize the cruelty and absurdity of both the

preparation of the ceremony and the ceremony itself, which becomes an ordeal imposed on the bride. Chibane adopts a similar strategy, in showing the complex scenario the mother has put together to marry her son, Moussa, to a girl from Algeria. He is mentally tormented and physically sick and vomits out of desperation and disgust. He, like the girl in *La Voyeuse interdite*, is a pawn in the hands of his mother, who arranges every detail of the ceremony.

14. Studies of *verlan* and the *parler jeune* can be found in Louis-Jean Calvet and Pascal Aguilou and Nasser Saïki.

15. For a stimulating study of the use of stereotypes in recent French films, novels, and popular culture see Rosello *Declining the Stereotype*. Her discussion of Smaïn's manipulation of the stereotypical Maghrebi accent appears on page 43.

16. See the study by Noria Allami. Allami, an Algerian psychoanalyst working in the Paris area, explains how in the Maghrebi tradition the father, the uncles, the brothers, and the cousins form a congregation to protect the sister (35).

17. *Dounia* (1998) by Zaïda Ghorab-Volta focuses on authoritarian fathers and shows the archaism of the North African conception of the family.

18. This behavior has been interpreted by psychiatrists as an incestuous desire which in Maghrebi families takes the place of the Oedipal feelings in Western families. See Douglas and Malti-Douglas 205.

19. Bourlem Guerdjou, in his first film, *Vivre au Paradis* (1999), offers another portrayal of the life of Algerians in France during the Algerian revolution. The main character, Lakhdar, refuses to get involved in the revolutionary activities.

20. Rachida Krim is also the author of a documentary entitled *El Fatah* (1996), on the discovery and appreciation of her North African roots. Focusing on hands decorated with henna and tapestries by Delacroix imported from Barbès (a Paris neighborhood inhabited by North African and other minority groups), Krim expresses her love for Algeria as well as France and considers this work an homage to her deceased grandmother who was born in Algeria but lived in France. This is another document on immigration and on the lives of women caught in between tradition and modernity, the old country and France.

21. See, for instance, Hargreaves, Begag, *Écarts*, and Sebbar, *Le Chinois* and *Shérazade*.

22. These films address issues of identity and concretize experiences of diasporic subjects which have been discussed by such theoreticians as Homi Bhabha (1998) and Maera Y. Shreiber (1998), among others.

23. According to Kerkouche, Saïd Amadis was planning a documentary for FR3 on Maghrebi-French lawyers and artists. His intention was to show these individuals not as extraordinary successes but as normal achievers. "Je veux les montrer non pas dans leur exemplarité, mais dans leur banalité. Montrer l'intégration c'est déjà l'accélérer. Ce serait là montrer l'évolution et le déplacement de la banlieue, de la cité vers le centre" 'I want to show them not as exemplary, but as banal. Showing integration is already accelerating it. It would show the displacement from the outskirts, from the projects towards the center.'

24. The relationships between Maghrebi-French and ex-colonizers, the *Pieds-noirs* or their descendants, are beginning to be explored as well. A French director of *Pied-noir* origin, Dominique Cabrera, in *De l'autre côté de la mer* (1997), presents a positive story on this topic. The film is about the relationship which develops between a former *Pied-noir* from Oran, who must have an eye operation, and his ophthalmologist, the son of Kabyle immigrants. The *Pied-noir* speaks Arabic and French whereas the Maghrebi-French speaks only French. As the story unfolds the descendant of Kabyles discovers his Algerianity.

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