

# La haine and sans toit ni loi



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Marginality within a society speaks of something or someone that is not important which results in them being excluded from society and leaves them feeling alienated. 'La Haine' and 'Sans toit ni loi' are two films developed around the period of 'la fracture sociale', the former centred on the community in particular and the later centred primarily on the individual. The 1980's saw the rise of civil unrest in inner cities, which similarly led to a rise in unemployment and educational problems.

There was also the perceived threat of national identity, and at the same time worries about Muslim integration had commenced. It was at around this time that there was the 'affaire du foulard,' a very controversial period as the French republic separates the church and the state. The difficulty of integration and threat of national identity, developed into the French media using the 'la fracture sociale.' 'La Haine,' was brought out at a moment in France during the Mitterrand period, where serious questions were being asked about integration and immigration.

A controversial film, Mathieu Kassovitz' film 'La Haine,' represents an account of 'la fracture sociale,' or rather divisions within a society.

Marginality is a result of divisions within a society, and in the case of 'La Haine', these divisions are due to social and racial conflict. Because of such conflicts and divisions it results in certain social, as well as ethnic groups, being excluded from society as a whole. 'La Haine,' is set in Paris and more specifically in the 'banlieu's' of Paris, the outskirts of Paris.

The fact that it is set on the outskirts of Paris already brings a long with it certain connotations, the fact that it is set a part from Paris itself, all of which

are negative. A term particularly used to describe the people within les banlieus is 'les exclus. ' This term quite clearly depicts that they are excluded from the rest of Paris. Kassovitz has translated this problem of exclusion by reinforcing its universal aspect, which represents a principally masculine world. La Haine is centred on a group of friends, all three of a different race, religion and ethnicity.

They have been excluded by society and made to become the margins of society because of their accent, their geographical and economic isolation. They are three characters that have not been accepted into society, even though they were born in France and are not immigrants. Almost all the characters in 'La Haine' are male and female characters; " underlining their disempowerment" (1) often boss the three main characters around. The city is divided along gender lines as well as lines dividing social class.

The interiors are home to the woman as is the middle to upper class, and the outside is masculine as well as working class. This is quite clearly creating margins for division within the French society as a whole. Paris is a tool that plays a part in upsetting spatial relations with the three friends, not only in the male-female sense, but it also causes them to be separated from Paris and the middle class of society. They feel that presence is not accepted within certain places in Paris " the spaces become prisons of one kind or another. (2)

In this case it is the banlieue that is their prison, it is this space that is excluding them from the rest of society and thus alienating them. 'La Haine is constructed around the opposition between Paris and the banlieue The

exclusion and enclosure that this group of friends faces appears to have forced them to turn and adopt a different identity. The influence of the American culture, via movies and gangster films, is evident from the use of the informal language and slang which convey a feeling of the ghetto.

They have practically been rejected by their own society/identity and they appear to have no other choice but to adopt certain American attributes. This is not only emulated in their use of slang, but also in their clothes and the music that they listen to. All of which are typical traits of the American culture. 'La Haine pushes the idea of assimilation of immigrants into French society throughout the film, resulting in them having to cut off any links they have with their country of origin. Youth in the film are very distant from their parents and also their traditions.

This may be because of the struggle; they face on a day to day basis, to fit in. They are considered insiders because they are resident in France while fitting into the youth culture of the banlieue while being outsiders because of racism because of their country of origin. This indicates that they must reject both their parents and their country in order to survive, otherwise they will be unsuccessful in their assimilation. Lack of identity because of young age is often the case, but with the youth of the banlieue do not really have that reasoning behind their exclusion.

It is perhaps the message behind the film that the youth of the banlieue are being forced into criminal and violent actions, because the French society is unwilling to acknowledge the predicament in which they are in. It then becomes a vicious circle, and this predicament into which they are forced

becomes their destiny. It is just that the audience feel a degree of sympathy towards these main characters, so they are not necessarily violent, nor are they particularly involved in drugs or crime but due to their social situation they have been branded as 'les exclus', the excluded ones of French society.

Kassovitz offers his audience, through the space of 'La Haine,' an experience, which is familiar to contemporary France either through personal experience, politics or more recurrently through the media. The portrayal of marginality in contemporary France and its problems, are often the result of the mediatisation of the banlieu and its social problems, which then creates a specific image of the banlieu and its habitants to the rest of society.

At this time there were several films that were produced based largely upon the banlieue, and this emergence of films was labelled by critics as the cinema de banlieu. All of which tended to focus on social exclusion within the deprived boundary of cities within France. The effect of space appears to be particularly poignant part in the film. The movement of the camera into certain spaces, alongside the sense that they are being foregrounded into the space immediately forces them to the front of the screen; this is created through fuzzy and unclear backgrounds.

Another effect used to make a space feel enclosed is the use of mirrors. All of which communicate the feeling of an enclosed space. Rather than the three friends being liberated, and being allowed to move freely in an open space, they appear to be trapped in such an enclosed space. This may be compared to Nikita, where we find Nikita herself moving in very elaborate

spaces, she is not being restricted whereas the groups of friends are. In 'La Haine' community members are linked by their own exclusion.

What we see in 'Sans toit ni loi,' presents a different form of marginality, that of a homeless woman roaming the streets. It is normally perceived that when a person is hitch-hiking or even travelling by road that he/she will form certain friendships along the way. Mona represents not only a female figure, but also one of who is travelling alone. Not only is she reflecting her alienation from society by firstly being alone, but also by defying traditional female expectations of how she should be living.

It puts into question her Feminine role, which is explored through Mona's life on the road after her death. To those who meet Mona along her journey, they find her radical and out of the ordinary. They are not used to meeting people, and woman of this nature and this prevents her from forming any sort of bond with those that she meets as they are incapable of understanding her. Mona also possesses an indifference to any forms of normality, and it is this indifference to normal social relations that enamours her to some while at the same time others find repelling.

The people that appear to be enamoured by her are those that wish to be in her position, free to have the space to do what they want to do, those that are enclosed and caged in their traditional and suffocating female roles.

These women at first sight see Mona's braveness and rebellion, and contemplate what it would be like to be in her position. Her presence affects middle-aged housewives, schoolgirls, truckers, mechanics, construction

workers, academics, and domestics. Each reacts to her in a way that is indicative of her or his social position in the community.

For example, a young farm girl helps Mona fill her water bottle at the family pump and later, during a family dinner, she tells her parents she wants to be free like the camper. When her mother asks who would make her dinner every night, the girl quietly replies, " At times it would be better not to eat. " To this girl, who lives a sheltered life with her parents in a tiny village, Mona represents the freedom to go where she pleases without answering to anyone, a life full of excitement. Other parents worry that their daughter will turn out like Mona.

In reference to Mona, a wife tells her husband, " She's got character. She knows what she wants. Marry the wrong man and you're stuck for life. I liked that hippy. " To this middle-aged matron, Mona represents the freedom of choice. From these short observations on Mona, frequently given by witnesses who appear only once and are not involved in any of the more complex social relationships in the film, a complete range of views on Mona is expressed. Otherwise others find her, and this is for the most part, offending and disgusting.

All owing to her smell, dirtiness and her appearance, all of which normal women who fit into society find disgusting and it is these women that are the main cause of excluding her from society. Not only is it the vagabond role or image that which excludes a person from society, but it is also these liberating and rebellious characteristics that cause Mona to be alienated from society. Mona has five significant relationships throughout the film. She

has two female " friends," Madame Landier and Yolande, two lovers, David and Assoun, and one intellectual partner, the Goatherd.

Through encounters that Mona has along her travels and the relationships which she develops, Varda explores Mona's capacity for emotional warmth, her intelligence, and her independence, but more specifically these relationships explore other people's views of Mona and they express who she " should" be. It is society that imposes these views on people, forcing them to have certain expectations and notions about others. Madame Landier and Mona are societal opposites. Madame Landier has a career, she has a home, and she is clean and well fed, while Mona does not possess any of these qualities.

Mona is a drifter, an outsider, and as such it is her role "... to provoke self-examination and doubt in the minds of those who 'belong'. " (3) We never really understand Mona or who she is, and perhaps this is because of the way in which she detaches herself from others. But it is more probably because we are incapable of relating to Mona, and this forms a kind of block in our thoughts and feeling towards her. We cannot understand her perhaps because we are unwilling to. We possibly in effect learn more about the interviewees and in particular ourselves as spectators.

It is Mona's detachment from others leads to her deterioration in her health and her ability to read social situations in which she finds herself, and which eventually leads to her death. 'Sans toit ni loi,' represents a woman's escape from patriarchal control, through utter braveness and rebellion, and an indifference to what is considered the norm amongst



society. It is her death that is the first sequence in the film, and it is particularly shocking. The question may be asked whether Mona's life would have been cut so short, had she been accepted by society for her unique qualities.

Mona faces several rejections in her journey, the harshest of which is the rejection given by the Goat-herder. In his own words he chose a "middle road between loneliness and freedom," when he decided to reject mainstream society but to keep a family. The morning after Mona's arrival his irritation with her begins to show. He thinks she has slept long enough so he makes a great effort to wake her. As they speak he learns that she lives for the complete freedom of the road, that she has no desire for anything and that she is lazy and ultimately ungrateful too.

He moves her out of the house and into an abandoned trailer in the yard in order for her to start a potato farm. To disguise her hurt at being moved away from him and his family, Mona exclaims, "You three and the herd are a crowd" as she moves into her tiny new home. Once in her new home Mona forgets about her potato farm. She stays in her trailer reading, smoking and sleeping. The Goatherd, in frustration, finally kicks her off his property telling her it's not fair that all she does is sit around all day while he and his wife work.

During the conversation when he asks her to leave, Mona tells the Goatherd that if she had the chances he has had (he has a Master's degree in Philosophy) she would not be living in the squalor in which he exists. 'You live in filth just like me, only you work more,' she tells him. Later when he

offers his "testimony," (which immediately follows Mona's rape) the Goatherd says: "By proving that she's useless, she helps the system she rejects. That's not wandering, that's withering. "

The Goatherd is "...tired in the thrall to the work ethic of the society which [he] affects to despise,"(4) and cannot endure Mona's laziness. According to Varda the Goatherd is "...the worst judge of all because he wants to be marginal but in his way. He doesn't accept other people. "(5) The Goatherd lives in some sort of system, although it too is marginal, whereas Mona has rejected the system entirely and functions in an even bigger margin of society. Mona's rejection of social and sexual productivity is counter the idea of women.

Her identity as a woman stops her from having fixed identity, along with her constant moving about. "Mona's independence from a fixed identity is an assertion of her alterity (otherness). "(6) In 'Sans toit ni loi,' Tracking shots are very important, the importance of direction moving from right to left giving the impression of backward movement which may be interpreted as moving against the culture and the tide, which reflects Mona's character. Even her degree of independence is emphasised by the tracking shots; they do not follow her exactly, as the camera either overtakes her or she overtakes the camera.

Although we consider Mona as part of the marginal of society, throughout the film we also see her interacting with other groups of marginals: the Maghrebian migrant workers, the homeless and also the goatherd. Yet Mona also finds exclusion amongst these groups too, this is particularly obvious

when the goatherd says to her: " You're not a drop out, you're just out. You don't exist. " This may as well be the case because although Mona is alive, it is as though she is not really living. La Haine' and 'Sans toit ni loi' are two films which present the theme of marginality, the former questioning marginality in terms of femininity and female marginality and the later concerned with marginality within the community.

'La Haine' and " The Banlieue is presented as a desert, with no feeling of public space and precious little private space either; Paris where Vinz, Said and Hubert spend almost half the film, is rejecting and alienatory. " 'La Haine' is in fact, to quote Olivier Mongin, " the impossibility of developing an identity, personal or collective. This film is concerned In 'Sans toit ni loi,' the interviews function almost as verbal testimonies; they are not chronologically placed fading in and out, an unconventional style. They also create distance for the spectator, and it is this effect that allows us to judge Mona in some way. We also are able to judge Mona through Varda's use of art. When Mona comes from the sea it recalls the myth of Venus, but in reality Mona is the total opposite of this. Mona is dark from the dirt, smelly and of 'undefinable shape. '