Can Films Speak the Truth? Mathieu Kassovitz's La Haine (1995) and Philippe Faucon's La Désintégration (2011)

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Recommended Citation
Jouan-Westlund, Annie Ph.D. (2015) "Can Films Speak the Truth? Mathieu Kassovitz's La Haine (1995) and Philippe Faucon's La Désintégration (2011)," *Cultural Encounters, Conflicts, and Resolutions*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cecr/vol2/iss1/6

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Keywords

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1. Introduction:

La Haine (Dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995), one of the first banlieue cinematic narratives, which brought the plight of the French urban periphery on national and international screens, coincided with actual rioting in Parisian suburbs during the summer of 1995. Its depiction of 24 hours in the lives of a trio of racial minorities gave the audience the apocalyptic vision of a portion of French society hurtling toward social explosion. *La Désintégration* (Philippe Faucon, Director, 2011) took the parable of the decaying multiethnic suburban social time bomb central to *La Haine* to a further level by focusing on the process of religious indoctrination leading a trio of urban youths to terrorism. The January

and November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris highlighted the prophetic nature of the film depicting the metamorphosis of young men into suicide bombers.

If *La Haine* and *La Désintégration* expose similar issues of violence, racism, brutal spatial and social exclusions in French *banlieues*, the directors' aesthetic, visual and narrative strategies differ and produce a radically different viewing experience. *Hate* was celebrated as much as challenged for its use of MTV aesthetics to produce a visually seductive, youth-oriented social cinema with a prominent use of music and hip-hop culture. *La Désintégration*, on the other hand, is a low-budget film characterized by its tight narrative, frontal approach, use of non-professional actors, and lack of dramatization. *La Haine*'s hyper-realist and reflexive aesthetic film language desires the audience to empathize with its main characters and their social conditions. In contrast, *La Désintégration* offers an "objective," surgical exploration of the characters' behavioral changes with minimalist acting, limited dialogues, and no suspense.

2. Methodology:

Border studies are viewed as "a reflection of the confrontations, resolutions, and encounters of people's relationships in the world" (Medina-Rivera & Wilberschied, 2011, introduction). Today's context of increased spatiality encourages foreign language educators to turn their attention to the symbolic, metaphoric, and psychological aspects of contact zones in the world. As one of those, the French urban periphery gave birth to a marginalized population resulting from the convergence of personal factors and external social conditions embedded in an economic, cultural, and political context. Intercultural knowledge and competency, defined as the adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative worldview allowing people to interact appropriately and effectively in a variety of cultural contexts (Bennett, 2008), is also a priority in the classroom. In order to increase students' intercultural competency, faculty experts recommend the development of a process based on students' experiences and competencies to reflect on their own cultural assumptions to gain knowledge of the world. In the process of becoming interculturally competent, students learn the ability to see the world through the other's eyes and interpret material within its cultural context. Viewing films in the classroom fully participates in the process of building intercultural competency, which often requires a revision of beliefs, concepts, and attitudes that were taken for granted. Film has provided an excellent

vehicle for working toward intercultural competency because of its textual features.

Umberto Eco's definition of a text as a fabric woven from signs, open and interpretable, which must be viewed as a coherent whole, could apply to films. Eco (1979) considers a written text as a machine that demands the bold cooperation of the reader to fill in a series of gaps of unsaid elements. His theory of textual cooperation giving the reader an essential role in the process of making meaning is applicable to cinema, which requires the viewer to apply polyvocal interpretive processes in order to actualize the film's meaning and director's intent. According to films theorists[1] such as Christian Metz, the meaning of a film is determined by its reception in a community of interpretation. Metz (1991) argues that the spectator constructs the fabula or story of the fiction through the viewing process: "Films realease a mechanism of affective and perpetual participation in the spectator" (p. 4). Taking the position of an active rather than a passive spectator, Metz investigates spectatorial activity and response generated by films' textual structures and visual responses. His interest in filmic perception and narrative comprehension led him to establish that films "speak to us with the accents of true evidence, in the process of a filmic mode, which is the mode of presence, and to a great extent believable" (p. 4).

As any other form of art, cinema is a proposition to an audience aimed to produce a sensation. The readability of a film is measured by its impact on an individual or collective audience. Reception theory provides a means of understanding cinema by understanding how viewers perceive films. In the viewing process, films act as cultural mediators and the cornerstone of intercultural experiences and systems. While students watch films, they can use their imagination to engage in another person's experience and access different emotional and intellectual dimensions. Their capacity to feel empathy for film characters participates in the suspension of judgment and facilitates a process of transformation in the area of cultural reflection. Intercultural competence takes into consideration actual political and cultural developments on the global scene. The information gathered for this reception analysis stems from a group of university students enrolled in an intermediate French civilization course entitled *Modern France*. The course objectives are the introduction of major political, social, and cultural events that shaped the characteristics, values, and challenges of French society today. The

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[1] Film theory is an academic discipline, which uses concepts from psychoanalysis, gender studies, sociology, and other fields to explore the essence of cinema and conceptual frameworks to understand film's relationship to reality and society in general.

outcomes are students' increased competence in understanding contemporary French history, national identity, and ideology. The content of the course is multimedial (linguistic, oral, and visual), and a portion of the curriculum is dedicated to documentaries and feature films selected for their representation of particular historic, cultural, and social events that have impacted French culture in the past 50 years. This empirical comparatist analysis concerns students' viewing experience of *La Haine* and *La Désintégration*, the meaning created by the process of spectatorship, and its capacity to enhance intercultural competency.

According to Gilles Deleuze (1983), viewers' "engagement with a film is not merely a process of becoming conscious of what happens in the film but rather a process through which "our consciousness is found by what happens in the film" (p. 57-58). This qualitative rather than quantitative study based on student viewers' responses[2] will measure and contrast *La Haine* and *La Désintégration*'s ability to reach and teach a student audience on the plight of urban periphery in France while transforming its perspective in the area of intercultural reflection.

3. Historical and Cultural Contexts:

Contextual factors, such as the viewers' identity, circumstances of the film exhibition, and preconceived notions concerning the film can impact the spectatorship experience. Because the viewers were a collective audience of students learning about contemporary French society, their knowledge of France social, historical, and political issues affected the cinematic reception. One of the objectives of the course was to increase students' understanding of the complex notion of national identity. Both films were included in the curriculum and selected for this study because of their specific focus on the French suburban social and racial landscape. Prior to watching the films, students were provided an historical and social overview of housing projects in French suburban areas called *banlieues*. *Beur* and *banlieue*, two terms that emerged in France in the 1980s, are often used interchangeably to indicate a place where young people of the second generation immigrant population live as well as the identity they claim for themselves (Celestin & Dalmolin, 2007, p. 353). The etymological origins of the term *banlieue* carry the connotations of

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[2]The course, one of the civilization requirements for the French B.A. at Cleveland State University, included 13 male and female sophomore and senior students. All students participated in the lectures before the viewing and the discussions after the viewing. They also completed a written questionnaire on their reactions to various issues in the films (space, aesthetics, social exclusion, dramatization, gender, and language).

banishment, exclusion, exile, and a semantics of exclusion. Nowadays banlieues still refer to a multicultural space pushed outside beyond the walls of the city. Perhaps to a greater extent today than in the past, French suburban areas reflect an insurmountable difference between cities intra-muros and extra-muros. The *banlieue* is a setting where the inhabitants confront the difficulties of a dual heritage: North-African parents from a traditional village culture and the French republic in which they were born and raised. A sub-category of *banlieue*, designated as *cité*, is often represented by sensationalized media as places of physical threat, high rates of delinquency, theft, vandalism, noise, drug dealing, and assaults (Mayol, 1992, pp. l65-77).

Two years prior to the release of *La Haine*, 3 million people or almost 6% of the total French population, lived in such disadvantaged areas, a sufficient critical mass to concern political leaders (Begag & Delorme, 1992, p. 75). As long as economic prosperity lasted, the concentration of the poorest and least qualified population groups in *cités* were made invisible. But, the end of the 30 "glorious years" (1945-1975) in the 1980s, the rise of a political party (*Front National*) with a racist anti-immigrant platform, and the appearance of a second generation of immigrant youth made ethnic minorities more visible and challenged the traditional notion of French identity. The early 1990s saw a climate of instability and violence between *cités* inhabitants of various social and ethnic origins that prompted Presidential candidate Jacques Chirac to base his campaign on putting an end to *fracture sociale*, the riff between haves and have-nots at a time of high structural unemployment and precarious economic conditions (Celestin & Dalmolin, 2007, p. 379). Although another priority soon replaced the president's platform (the reduction of budgetary benefits), the climate of fear and chaos that reigned in many *cités* inspired the characterization as "grey zones" where the state as well as the police avoided frontal intervention.

In 1998, France's victory in the soccer World Cup revealed the possibility of a French identity that would go beyond ethnic barriers. *Black-blanc-Beur,* a phrase coined in the 1980s, was used to describe the multi-ethnic victorious French national team and the victory celebration parade gathering hundreds of thousand of happy French people of all races on the Champs Elysées on July 13. 1998. Th French perceived the historical event (which was shown in class) as a *moment de grandeur,* providing a national cement of French identity, a reminder of De Gaulle's liberation march in the 1940s (Celestin & Dalmolin, 2007, p. 393). That brief moment of national glory gave the impression that French people could gather and celebrate a new post-modern identity recognizing all ethnic minorities. Only four years later, Jacques Chirac focused his

presidential campaign on the insecurity associated with urban tension and the underlying perception that ethnic minorities were the main cause of urban and social unrest. The president's platform at the turn of the new millennium deepened the perception of Arabic minorities as responsible for the economic and insecurity issues in French society. Many perceived the expansion of the European Union as a threat to traditional French values. Globalization, impacting the erosion of French industry, increased domestic unemployment and spurred a growing fear of a disappearance of French identity.

The international context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the consecutive military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan also had an impact on some French Arab youths seeking an affiliation above and beyond French citizenship. The new millennium showed an intensification of particularistic identities based on ethnic or religious backgrounds and an increase of Islamist terrorism, which appealed to a growing number of youths disillusioned with the republic's promise of integration. *Stasi laws* voted in 2004 the ban of ostentatious displays of any religion in French schools grounded public secular space but were seen as another measure singling out Muslim students. In 2005, severe riots erupted in a Parisian banlieue where two teenagers of Arab dissent were electrocuted in an electric substation during a police chase. These events resulted in two weeks of confrontation in housing projects all over France. Schools, gyms, and cultural centers were destroyed; 8,400 vehicles were scorched, and 2,600 arrests were made in almost 100 towns in the French territory. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy promised zero tolerance for the *racaille*, translated as "scum" or "riffraff" in Anglophone press (Celestin & Dalmolin, 2007, p. 398-399).

Students learned that, since those dramatic events, France has continued to experience a fragmentation of identity that caused the crumbling of the conventional definition of being French. Whereas violence and unrest used to be restricted to peripheral urban areas, most recent actions of young Islamists who were raised in French *cités* brought the issue to the remainder of the nation. In 2012, France became the theater of an unprecedented anti-Semitic attack by Mohammed Mehra, a second-generation immigrant who killed 3 children and one adult in a Jewish school in Toulouse. Finally in January 2015, the Kouachi brothers, who had grown up in a Parisian banlieue, committed a barbaric terrorist attack on French satirist paper *Charlie Hebdo*. The tragedy, largely commented upon in class, caused a worldwide movement of protest illustrated by the January 11, 2015 Republican March, gathering hundreds of thousands French citizens who denounced the French Islamists' violent actions and affirmed their allegiance to the freedom of the press and

fraternity among all citizens of any religious backgrounds. The murderers had rejected the French state and its secular rules to obey new orders from the Islamic State. January 11 was identified as another historical moment that crystalized French identity. Demonstrators displayed a wide range of slogans derived from *Je suis Charlie* encompassing French Muslims who dissociated themselves from the terrorists and asserted their allegiance to the French republic.

La Haine (1995) and *La Désintégration* (2011) project images of the *cités* within the historical and sociological contexts described in this brief overview taught in the classroom. *Hate* predicts the tragic consequences of social exclusion and police brutality in *cités* that occurred during the 2005 riots, and *La Désintégratio*n is a premonitory account of the dangers of the growing Islamist indoctrination taking place in French *banlieues*. A comparison of the reaches and limits of these feature films is based on three paradigms submitted to the student viewers after they watched both films: Spatial, social, and cultural exclusion; masculinity and gender representations; and realism and aestheticism.

4. Spatial, Social, and Cultural Exclusions:

Students had no difficulty identifying both films as two depictions of the French *cité*. They immediately recognized both propositions as spatial representations of the failure of the French model of integration and the social and racial divide in a two-speed society between those who participate in life, work and consumer society and the others caught up in unemployment and poverty. A commonality between the two productions to which students were particularly attentive is the representation of the inhabitants of the *banlieue* as characters imprisoned in their ghettoized world. Students perceived the rest of society as a force shutting them out and locking them into stagnation. They identified films characters mainly as victims of a social structural rejection. In *La Haine*, rejection takes the form of racial discrimination and violent confrontation between the youths and the police. One major difference that the audience noticed relies in the fact that chronic male unemployment featured in both films does not carry the same importance. *La Haine* represents employment through dealing drugs and stolen goods, an illegal form of work in legitimate society that seems to pay everyone's bills and not cause too much trouble. In *La Désintégration*, on the other hand, students were sensitive to the fact that the major roadblock faced by Ali (Rashid Debbouze), the film's main character, securing an internship to validate his degree is at the origin of his rapid fall into Islamism and rejection of French society.

A majority of students who watched both films thought that *La Haine* provided a more effective representation of *banlieue* as a place of social exclusion (80%), a judgment based on the shots showing a space of concrete buildings with social activities and characters' whereabouts in the *cité*. Student comments seem to contradict the claims made by some critics that the film could not offer an accurate comment on the contemporary conditions of urban working class communities because its director, who was not an Arab, but rather a descendant of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, did not possess first-hand experience of the culture. In *La Haine*, students were particularly receptive to the depiction of the tense and violent relations between the *cité* inhabitants and the rest of the population. The film suggests that the police and the media's roles are to keep the *banlieue* youths at bay. The intrusion of journalists in the *cité,* the day after the riots, indicates that mainstream society tends to look down at the *banlieue* population, much like a zoo. When Hubert (Hubert Koundé), shouts at the journalists, "We are not Thoiry,"[3] he refuses to be looked at by French national media as a stereotype of savagery and disorder and to see his *banlieue* mediatized as theme park of *fracture sociale*.

The second part of the film, taking the three friends on a nocturnal journey to Paris intro-muros, only accentuates the characters' marginalization, according to the student viewers. During the RER train ride taking them to Paris, Hubert sees a billboard sign that reads "The World is yours," which a few students found ironical since Paris is not their world. On their journey to the city, the trio is rejected from every place they attempt to enter: The night-club, the drug dealer's apartment, the art gallery, and the taxi that could take them back home refuses to accept a stolen credit card handed to the driver by Saïd (Saïd Tagmaoui) because the name on it says David. When they successfully hot-wire a car in a last effort to leave the city, they realize that none of them has the necessary skills to drive the vehicle. In fact, *La Haine* depicts Paris as a place where things are worse and where the police are more aggressive. It gave students an illustration of the non-assimilation between the *cité* and the city and the consecration of the outsider status of the people who live in the outskirts. By inviting the student viewers to follow the main characters through daily routines in and out of the *banlieue* the day after anti-police riots, the film was successful at engaging its audience, with the life of *banlieue* youths and their interaction with the rest of the population.

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[3] Thoiry is a safari theme park outside of Paris where tourists can drive through and observe wild animals at their leisure.

While exclusion takes the form of endless wandering and containment in *La Haine*, marginalization and vulnerability are derived from a lack of social mobility in *La Désintégration*. The main character Ali is prevented from moving up the social ladder due his inability to secure an internship. Students commented that his interactions with the population outside the *cité* were not particularly offensive. Although the film alludes to an unequal treatment at Ali's mother's (Zahra Addioui) workplace concerning her work schedule, Ali's interviews are filmed without sounds or dialogs and don't reveal overt forms of racism. Student viewers can only judge from the disappointment on his face that they were unsuccessful. As students pointed it out, rejection in *La Désintégration* is not as obvious, dramatic, and forceful as in *La Haine*. They also called attention to the fact that the film does not include any physical or verbal altercation between Arabs and the police. It offers the audience an insight into the growing feelings of frustration in the characters' minds that will transform them to terrorists. Instead of exclusion, *La Désintégration* gives the audience an account of the process of self-exclusion. Ali's personality is transformed by the indoctrinator's speeches despite his relatives' attempts to change his views. His caring mother tries to give him another version of the practice of Islam whereas his older brother (Kael Laadaili) serves as a role model of successful integration into French society.

Comparing both films, students stated that exclusion is treated from a personal scope in *La Désintégration,* whereas *La Haine* confronts the thematic from a collective perspective. The signs of exclusion that students observed in *La Désintégration* were related to the cultural, religious, and linguistic depiction of the *cité*. They all commented on the opening scene of the film showing the population praying in the public courtyard. In total contrast with *La Haine*, which opens with actual footage of rioting, this introduction gives the audience a representation of a peaceful practice of Islam. Because of this scene and the tragic end of the film, students generally felt that *La Désintégration* was more about the dangers of religious extremism in a *cité* inhabited with a Muslim population rather than a comment on the social, racial, and cultural representations of *banlieues* in France. As a result of the background information provided in class on the history of recent immigration in France, student viewers were sensitive to the single ethnic focus in the film.

A sign of their increased cultural competence was their interpretation of the use of the Arabic language in some dialogs as a depiction of aloofness and self-containment but not necessarily as a form of exclusion from mainstream society. *La Désintégration*, set in a *banlieue* of northern France, focuses on the fate of three young men united by their

anger and disillusion with the capacity of French society to fulfill their life expectations. Unlike *La Haine*, which shows movement from inside to outside of the *banlieue*, characters in *La Désintégration* are confined in a few places within the *cité*, such as the family apartment, the boxing ring, or the mosque. In fact, Ali's desperate search for an internship was the only example of exclusion identified in the film, but student viewers could not decide whether it was due to racism or the economic situation or both. In conclusion, student spectators were able to differentiate between the economic and vertical marginalization depicted in *La Désintégration* and its racial and horizontal version in *La Haine*.

5. Masculinity and Gender Representations:

A second paradigm in contrasting the viewers' perceptions is the films' representation of male and female characters. Both films deal with young male communities and offer similar modes of circulation and containment in a comparable suburban space, so students could expect similarities in their depiction of masculinity. In her article discussed in class, Vincendeau (2000) could not summarize it any better when she wrote that *La Haine* was "a testosterone-filled world" (p. 314) and noted that most voices on the soundtrack were masculine. Other than the obvious male symbolism of the police gun found by Vinz (Vincent Cassel), as an emblem of power, Vincendeau points out to the significance of one of the most popular images from the film representing Vinz's pretend shoot at the camera with his fingers (2000, p. 315). The promotional image discussed in class sums up the pseudo gang and gun culture displayed in *La Haine*. All students agreed that the characters' physical appearance situates the film in a macho world. Vinz, the Jewish male in the film, has a shaved head but should not be confused with the skinheads he beats up. Saïd and Huber, his Arabic and African friends, favor various sports gear such as a leather jacket and camouflage pants with strong war and combat connotations. To many student viewers, *La Haine* seemed to replay representations of radicalized images of North American gang culture in a different context and with a different message[4]. Rather than just a signifier of aggressive masculinity, the gun means anxiety and desperation for the youth. The gun appearances on the screen are usually associated with masculine violence and destruction, and ambivalently linked to vulnerability and lack of authority and organization in the group. That

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[4] Film references that Kassovitz acknowledges are *Boyz in the Hood* (Directed by John Singleton, 1991), *Menace II Society* (Directed by Allen Hughes, 1993), and *Do the Right Thing* (Directed by Spike Lee, 1989).

weapon, which is supposed to provide phallic potency, belongs to the police; thus, it is not surprising that its use will not just serve the trio's revenge but also their self-destruction.

Student viewers were struck by the youths' language in *La Haine*, an old form of backstreet slang consisting in inverting syllables called *verlan*[5] revived in the 1970s and used by *banlieue* youths to claim their own identity. Young American student viewers tended to equate this form of language with *banlieue* gang-speak and were sensitive to the obscenities and aggressive connotations of *verlan* particularly apparent in Saïd's fast verbal flow. The trio's prancing, spitting, nose picking and punching are part of a general masculinist gesture spurred by police aggression. A great amount of testosterone is also demonstrated at the police station where Hubert and Saïd are brutalized by a couple of sadistic officers who try to inflict mental and physical torture without leaving trace as they humiliate the youths' pride and calling them sissies.[6] In the macho world of *La Haine*, viewers could only get a glimpse of female characters represented by mothers, aunts, grandmothers and sisters at home. They are shown cooking, sewing or doing homework. Male characters verbally abuse female journalists, art galley visitors, or subway passagers. A recurrent sexual insult in the film is *nique ta mère* (literally, "fuck your mother") and the most common name-calling is *bâtard* (bastard). Although they were briefly acquainted with Vinz's traditional Jewish family, viewers perceived the grandmother's input as comic and anecdotal. Students viewed sisters as unnecessary burdens whose behavior should be closely watched and reputation not compromised even by sexual insults. The film depicts an overall dominant masculinity manifested by the male youth's body and verbal language that nullifies the role played by female characters[7]. There are no male authority figures in *La Haine* and no possibility of redemption through romantic love or family care. As the masculine youth is left adrift and wandering in the *cité* and Paris, the only father figure appears in the form of an old man encountered in a public toilet who tries to teach the youth a moral lesson about life and dignity through an anecdote that does not make any sense to them.

Student viewers perceived gender representation as the most important difference between *La Haine* and *La Désintégration*. As opposed to Vinz, Hubert and Saïd, Ali, Nasser (Mohammed Nachit) and

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[5] The amount of verlan used in the film makes it practically mandatory to use subtitles when showing the film in class.

[6] Students ranked this scene as the most violent in the entire film.

[7] Ginette Vincendeau quotes M. Kassovitz's sexist justification of the absence of women in his film as "a desire to keep the idea of the film as pure as possible" (*Humanité-Dimanche*, 18-24 May, 1995, 270).

Nico (Ymanol Perset) appear as regular, peaceful youths. They perceived Ali as a good student and a caring son about to graduate with a professional degree in mechanical maintenance. His mother jokingly worries about him smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and catching AIDS. Students interpreted Rachid's character, Ali's older brother, as a successful example of professional and cultural integration who lives with a non-Muslim French woman. The only character who seems adrift in the trio is Nasser who is thrown out of his sister's apartment after beating up a white resident who had called young children *sales arabes* ("Damn Arabs"), the only scene of physical and verbal violence in the film. Nasser, who has been in jail, is known for petty thefts and is looking for refuge in the *cité*. Nico recently converted to Islam, which he identifies as the religion of the poor and underprivileged and the only expression of social rebellion. All three express themselves in standard French with a few expressions used by young people. Arabic is the language they share during family interactions or meetings at the mosque.

Student viewers all agreed that *La Désintégration,* as opposed to *La Haine,* focuses on the role played by female protagonists in the narrative. The opening scene of *La Désintégration* shows Ali's mother looking out the window at the service for Aïd in the *cité* courtyard. This choice indicates that the tragedy developed in the film is witnessed and observed through the eyes of the mother figure. In the interview included in the DVD special features, Rashid Debbouze, who played Ali, admitted that his mother in the film, played by a non-professional actress, was the main hero. Ali's sister is portrayed as strong and assertive. She chooses to speak French rather than Arabic with her family, refuses to wear the veil and considers herself as a fully integrated French woman who speaks and behaves freely in the *cité*.

Students interpreted the father figure in *La Désintégration* as a critical element in the film narrative. The scene showing Ali visiting his father succumbing to cancer was identified as a decisive moment in the narration when Ali's disillusion turns into rage and falls into the spiral of extremist indoctrination. The vision of Ali's father illustrates weakened masculinity, hopelessness, and impotence. The last words pronounced on his deathbed about the hardship of his life corroborate Ali's growing resentment toward French society and are interpreted as a blessing for his vengeance. Among all the male figures portrayed in the film, the indoctrinator symbolizes the charismatic big brother. Rather than using agressivity and violence, Djamel (Yassin Azzouz), a few years older than the three friends, uses a soft syrupy voice when he teaches the drifters lessons on Koranic rules and international politics. Students felt Djamel's charisma relying on his capacity to be good listener and a skillful teacher.

They observed his use of a Socratic approach as he manages to convince the young men that they are victims of discrimination[8]. While providing a shelter to Nasser, an ideological support to Nico (now renamed Hamza), Djamel's views gradually affect Ali's interpretation of his frustration with French society. Through comparisons of scenes of confrontation and dialogs from both films, students concluded that physical and verbal violence in *Hate* was frontal and spectacular, but it was essentially ideological and less As opposed to *La Haine* visible in *La Désintégration*. Much less obvious and cinematographic, the power of words in *La Désintégration* carries a more destructive and hateful representation of society that will lead to destruction.

6. Aestheticism and Realism:

The final paradigm relevant to the reaches and limits of the two films is the complex relationship between what viewers can see on screen and what they can understand to be real. *La Désintégration* has a strong social anchorage and represents a form of traditional realism common to a lot of *banlieue* films, whereas *La Haine* is characterized by a blend of aesthetic and sociological priorities. With a casting of non-professional actors, except for two, Director Philippe Faucon aimed to stay as close to reality as possible, using little drama and a rigorist approach to his topic. As a result, students found the depiction of the French Arabic community in *La Désintégration* particularly realistic, with Ali's family use of traditions and Arabic language. Yet, some thought that *La Haine*'s representation of a trio of multi-religious and cultural backgrounds was more representative of the population living in French banlieues. Confusing nationality with ethnicity, a student wrote: "*La Haine* was more realistic because it represented several nationalities," forgetting that all characters in the films were French citizens. Although the trio of young men does not accurately reflect the actual ethnic composition of French *banlieues*, students did not view the trio as an unrealistic or as a naive representation of social relations in the *cité* and considered it an accurate depiction of the tense and violent relations between the characters and the police. For that matter, the use of newsreel footage in the introductory sequence of the film is another badge of realism. Starting with live-news reminiscent of camcorder home videos or surveillance footage, *La Haine*'s

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[8] Djamel reads and translates the Koran to the three friends. He skillfully asks questions and hints at the answers. For instance, when he keeps on asking Ali about his unsuccessful job search, Djamel says: "You can't find one. Can your friends find one? Did you really think you could find one with your name? You are so-called educated but you have access to nothing because they think you are nothing."

introduction aims to give the impression that the world presented in the film is in a raw and unmediated fashion.

Despite these realistic features, Kassoviz's cinematic literacy results in many signs of self-conscious aesthetic contextualization questioning the film's reality discourse (Higbee, 2006). The visual sophistication of *La Haine* has often been used to contest its claim to accurately represent the *banlieue* (Vincendeau, 2000, p. 318). However, student viewers seemed to respond very positively to the aestheticized account of violence in French *banlieues*. They particularly enjoyed the black-and-white stock as a feature combining realism with aestheticism.[9] Other incongruous elements in Kassovitz's film grammar include the time counter reminding the viewers the director's narrative manipulation and the mobile camera used to accelerate and slow down the trio's movements (Higbee, 2005). In addition, sharp cuts, dramatic zooms, strange distortions along with incongruous scenes such as the Jewish wedding dance or the cow in the middle of the *cité* are directly inspired by music videos and advertisement.

As expected, student viewers responded favorably to this particular representation of social crisis in French *banlieues*. They identified with the use of hip-hop cultural markers that introduced the flavor of urban neighborhoods notably, the scenes of DJing and break dancing, two elements in the film showing that the *banlieue* vocabulary used by the director has been infiltrated with United States counterparts. Film dialogs are also inflected with reconstructed and decontextualized American urban slang. The international mode of representation of a French social situation seduced student viewers and explains its success with young audiences in general. Avoiding shooting the *banlieue* with more traditional realism, Kassovitz offered his audience voyeuristic but humanized entertainment. By situating the film on the side of the youth and the inhabitants, the film provokes affective responses by student viewers who are able to empathize with the main characters and their social conditions. A response to critics' claim that the director's extreme film literacy thwarts authenticity could be that the actual focus of the film is not *banlieue* but society in general. The long shot of planet Earth and voiceover version of the parable serve as the structuring device in the film narrative discussed in class: It's about a society in free fall. To reassure itself, it repeats endlessly; "So far so good, so far so good, so far so good… it's not the fall that matters, it's the landing" (Sharma & Sharma, 2000). The film draws the student viewers' attention to the lack of political and social actions facing the volatile racial and class situation in French *banlieues*.

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[9] Most students wrote in the survey: "Black and white is cool."

All students concurred that, in comparison with *La Haine*, *La Désintégration's* message relates more specifically to the process of extremist religious indoctrination leading to terrorism affecting some *banlieue* inhabitants. They showed most empathy for Ali's difficulties to find a job due to the glass ceiling obstacles and for his mother whose painful scream concludes the film. Although a majority of the student viewers considered *La Désintégration* to be a more realistic fiction because of its accurate depiction of challenges faced by French Arabs and recent terrorist attacks, several students showed personal preference for *La Haine*, which they found more relatable. According to them, the usefulness of *La Désintégration* in a discussion of Islamism and religions in France was balanced with *Hate,* whose cinematic style could be more appropriate in a cinema course.

7. Conclusion:

This comparatist qualitative empirical reception analysis of the *La Haine* and *La Désintégration* following the paradigms of exclusion, gender representation and aestheticism versus realism, highlighted these two cinematographic propositions as useful instructional tools through which students can gain a valuable insight into French suburban, social, and racial landscape and increase their intercultural competency. Both films give the viewers an account on how hate is bred and how it ends in self-destruction. In 1995, the French Minister of Interior and the Prime Minister organized a private viewing of *La Haine* for the members of the government in an attempt to comprehend the eruption of suburban riots. One would assume that, following the tragic Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015, *La Désintégration* would be on the top list of visual resources for those in the current government in charge of the difficult task of eradicating jihadist's recruitment in France.

According to Richard Rushton (2009, p. 48), "there is no spectator who watches (and listens to) a film, for the spectator is only ever formed by watching (and listening to) a film" (p. 48). *La Haine* and *La Désintégration* are complementary in their effort to denounce mediatized stereotypes of French *banlieues*, which have become "a cultural cliché, a metaphor, a shortcut for a vaguely formulated yet deeply seated malaise" (Rosello, 1997, p. 240), and which are too hastily stigmatized and marked by isolation from the nearby city and the rest of France. Viewing these films, students were able to experience a foreign culture through the other's eyes at two levels by exploring the French *banlieue*, a misrepresented aspect of French culture within the society. By bringing

the periphery to the center of the audience's attention, these films enlighten students of French regarding the living conditions of those whose origins are outside of French borders and the tragic consequences of those conditions, not only for themselves but also for the entire nation. The students' capacity to feel empathy for the film characters during the viewing revealed a positive and constructive transformative process in their understanding of the complex racial and social conditions in France. In the name of universalism inscribed in the French constitution, the prohibition of quotas and statistics for racial minorities produces a veil hiding a de facto discrimination and a blatant exclusion of ethnic minorities in French society. The opportunity to watch these films enabled students to identify one of the greatest civilizational challenges faced by France today. Students demonstrated one major intercultural learning outcome gained from the film viewing when they suggested that, in order to stop frustration, prevent further violence in the *banlieues*, and secure safety for all, France may have to reconsider its universalist integrationist project, begin recognizing religious particularisms as a reality, and guarantee more diversity in society.

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