


# Reframing difference

*Beur and banlieue* filmmaking in France

Carrie Tarr



# Reframing difference

*Beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking in France



# Reframing difference

*Beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking in France

CARRIE TARR

Copyright © Carrie Tarr 2005

The right of Carrie Tarr to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*Published by Manchester University Press*  
Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA, UK  
[www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk](http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk)

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN13 978 0 7190 6877 5 *paperback*

First published by Manchester University Press 2005

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

# Contents

List of illustrations	page vi
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1 Questions of identity in <i>beur</i> cinema: from <i>Le Thé au harem d'Archimède</i> to <i>Cheb</i>	26
2 <i>Beurz</i> in the hood: <i>Le Thé au harem d'Archimède</i> and <i>Hexagone</i>	48
3 Ethnicity and identity in Mathieu Kassovitz's <i>Métisse</i> and <i>La Haine</i>	62
4 <i>Beur</i> and <i>banlieue</i> cinema in 1995	73
5 <i>Beur</i> women in the <i>banlieue</i> : <i>Les Histoires d'amour finissent mal en général</i> and <i>Souviens-toi de moi</i>	86
6 Masculinity and exclusion in post-1995 <i>beur</i> and <i>banlieue</i> films	98
7 Grrrls in the <i>banlieue</i> . <i>Samia</i> and <i>La Squale</i>	111
8 Memories of immigration: <i>Sous les pieds des femmes</i> and <i>Vivre au paradis</i>	124
9 <i>Beurs</i> in the provinces: from <i>L'Honneur de ma famille</i> to <i>Drôle de Félix</i>	136
10 Heroines of cross-cultural social protest: <i>Marie-Line</i> and <i>Chaos</i>	153
11 <i>Beur</i> filmmaking in the new millennium: from <i>Le Raïd</i> to <i>Jeunesse dorée</i>	167
12 Voices from the Maghreb: from <i>Le Thé à la menthe</i> to <i>La Fille de Keltoum</i>	187
Conclusion	210
Filmography	214
Bibliography	219
Index	226

## List of illustrations

1	<i>Vive la République!</i> (1997). Lazennec Films. Photograph © Isabelle Weingarten. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from Isabelle Weingarten.	<i>page 2</i>
2	<i>Police</i> (1985). © Gaumont. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from Gaumont.	10
3	<i>Taxi 2</i> (2002). Leeloo/ARR Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive.	14
4	<i>Le Thé au harem d'Archimède</i> (1985). KG Production. Courtesy of the BFI. Reproduced with permission from KG Production.	34
5	<i>Baton Rouge</i> (1985). Lyric International/TFI. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from TF1 International.	37
6	<i>Miss Mona</i> (1987). KG Production. Courtesy of the Ronald Grant Archive. Reproduced with permission from KG Production.	41
7	<i>Cheb</i> (1991). 3B Productions. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from 3B Productions.	43
8	<i>Le Thé au harem d'Archimède</i> (1985). KG Production. Courtesy of the BFI. Reproduced with permission from KG Production.	55
9	<i>Hexagone</i> (1994). Alhambra Films. Courtesy of the BIFI.	57
10	<i>Métisse</i> (1993). Productions Lazennec. Supplied and reproduced with permission from Lazennec.	66
11	<i>La Haine</i> (1995). Productions Lazennec. Photograph by Guy Ferrandis. Courtesy of the Ronald Grant Archive. Reproduced with permission from Lazennec.	70
12	<i>La Haine</i> (1995). Productions Lazennec. Photograph by Guy Ferrandis. Courtesy of the Ronald Grant Archive. Reproduced with permission from Lazennec.	76

13	<i>Etat des lieux</i> (1995). Actes et octobre/MKL. Courtesy of the BIFI.	77
14	<i>Bye-Bye</i> (1995). ADR Films. Courtesy of the BFI. Reproduced with permission from ADR Films.	80
15	<i>Douce France</i> (1995). Alhambra Films. Photograph by Muriel Huster. Courtesy of Alhambra Films.	82
16	<i>Les Histoires d'amour finissent mal en général</i> (1993). Productions Desmichelle. Courtesy of the BIFI.	91
17	<i>Souviens-toi de moi</i> (1996). Pierre Grise. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from Pierre Grise Distribution.	94
18	<i>Souviens-toi de moi</i> (1996). Pierre Grise. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from Pierre Grise Distribution.	95
19	<i>Ma 6-T va crack-er</i> (1997). Why Not Productions. Photograph © Xavier Z Nauw. Courtesy of the BIFI.	102
20	<i>Le Gel, les oiseaux. . . et ta mère</i> (1999). Extravaganza. Courtesy of the Ronald Grant Archive. Reproduced with permission from Extravaganza.	108
21	<i>Clubbed to Death</i> (1997). Pierre Grise Distribution. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive.	113
22	<i>Samia</i> (2001). Ognon Pictures. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive.	115
23	<i>La Squale</i> (2000). Ciné Nominé. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive.	118
24	<i>La Squale</i> (2000). Ciné Nominé. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive.	119
25	<i>Sous les pieds des femmes</i> (1997). Clara Films/Borromée Production.	129
26	<i>Vivre au paradis</i> (1999). 3B Productions. Photograph © R. Arpajou. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from 3B Productions.	132
27	<i>L'Honneur de ma famille</i> (1997). 3B Productions. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from 3B Productions.	139
28	<i>La Vie de Jésus</i> (1997). 3B Productions. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from 3B Productions.	142
29	<i>Sauve-moi</i> (2000). Agat Films. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from Agat Films. <i>Tous droits réservés.</i>	146
30	<i>Drôle de Félix</i> (2000). Pelleas Films. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from Pelleas Films.	148
31	<i>Marie-Line</i> (2000). La Chauve-souris. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from La Chauve-souris.	160

- 32 *Chaos* (2001). H&K. Photograph © Emilie de la Hosserraye – H&K. Reproduced with permission from H&K. 164
- 33 *Origine contrôlée* (2001). Blue Films/Deluxe Productions. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive. 173
- 34 *Inch'Allah dimanche* (2001). Bandits Longs. Courtesy of the BIFI. Reproduced with permission from Yamina Benguigui/ Bandits Longs. 177
- 35 *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (2002) Hauts et courts. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from Hauts et courts. 181
- 36 *Jeunesse dorée* (2002). Agat Films. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from Agat Films. *Tous droits réservés.* 185
- 37 *Le Thé à la menthe* (1985). A2. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive. 192
- 38 *Un amour à Paris* (1988). Production de la Lune. Courtesy of the BFI. 193
- 39 *Salut cousin!* (1996) JBA Production. Supplied by and reproduced with permission from the Ronald Grant Archive. 196
- 40 *La Faute à Voltaire* (2001). Flach Film. Courtesy of the Ronald Grant Archive. Reproduced with permission from Flach Film. 198

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce the figures illustrated in this book. If any proper acknowledgement has not been made, copyright-holders are invited to contact the publisher.

## Acknowledgements

This book consists of a collection of essays on *beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking in France, written over a period of some ten years. Together they chart the development of the phenomena which came to be known as *cinéma beur* and *cinéma de banlieue* from the 1980s through to the early 2000s. I am indebted to the staff at Manchester University Press for the opportunity of revising them for publication, and to *L'Esprit createur*, *Etudes Transnationales*, *Francophones et Comparées/Transnational*, *Francophone and Comparative Studies*, *Iris*, *Modern & Contemporary France*, Oxford University Press, *Portsmouth Working Papers* and Wallflower Press for permission to reprint a modified version of articles which were first published with them. I would also like to thank the British Academy for funding a study visit to Paris which enabled me to research the final two chapters.

Thanks are also due to Ginette Vincendeau for inviting me to write my first article on *beur* cinema, to Dominique Blüher, Diane and Michel Dincuff, Danielle Robinson, Alec Hargreaves and Will Higbee for assistance in procuring videos, to Andy Belsham for his technical assistance, to Lieve Spaas, Stephen Barber and other colleagues at Kingston University for their encouragement and, above all, to Frank McMahon for his unfailing intellectual, moral and practical support during the book's gestation.



## Introduction

There is a moment in Eric Rochant's comedy *Vive la République!* (1997) when a group of (mostly) unemployed young people, who have decided to set up a new political party to challenge what they perceive as the exclusionary politics of the French Republic, agree that the one *beur* present (a young man of Maghrebi origin) should represent both *blacks* and *beurs* (figure 1). The film mocks their token and ineffectual mobilisation of 'politically correct' Anglo-Saxon discourses on democracy and multiculturalism. But its simultaneous awareness of difference and refusal to take it seriously draw attention to the fault lines in the universalist discourses of French Republicanism. Since the French Revolution, France has prided itself on being the land of equality, founded on an abstract concept of universal citizenship which renders ethnic, gendered, religious or class difference irrelevant (Hargreaves 1995:160; Rosello 2003: 136). The acknowledgement of difference, which underpins the multi-culturalist policies and practices of countries such as Britain and the USA, has therefore been rejected as leading to undesirable forms of 'communitarianism'. Yet the heterogeneous, multicultural nature of contemporary postcolonial France – and the inequalities in the way its diverse cultures are valued – would appear to be self-evident.<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the millennium, a number of concessions were made in relation to universalist principles, such as the enactment of the law on parity, which requires a quota of women candidates to be selected for parliamentary elections, and the establishment of the PACS (the Pacte Civil de Solidarité), which legalises the relationships of same-sex couples. However, the question of religious and ethnic difference continues to provoke divisive public debates. Since 1989 a series of '*foulard* affairs', instances of Muslim girls refusing to remove the Islamic headscarf in school, have fomented controversy about the place of religious symbols within the secular institutions of the Republic. The wearing of the *hijab* is seen as so threatening to the Republican principles of universalism and laicity, as well as to the freedom of women, that in February 2004 the national assembly voted to ban such symbols in school rather than encourage tolerance for signs of difference. At the same time, initiatives taken by



1 The founder members of a new political party in *Vive la République!* (1997).

the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris to privilege student intakes from schools in disadvantaged areas have been criticised for compromising the Republican concept of equality. Debates about (and resistances to) France's changing identity as a plural, multi-ethnic society are thus at the forefront of public preoccupations. The aim of this book is to assess the ways in which filmmaking in France might contribute to such debates by foregrounding the voices and subjectivities of ethnic others and thereby reframing the way in which difference is conceptualised.

The core focus of the book is the appearance and after-effects of two related phenomena in the history of French cinema, *cinéma beur* and *cinéma de banlieue*. The term *cinéma beur* was first coined in a special issue of *Cinématographe* in July 1985 to describe a set of independently released films by and about the *beurs*, that is, second-generation immigrants of Maghrebi descent, one of the most prominent being Mehdi Charefs *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède* (1985). *Cinéma de banlieue* emerged within French film criticism in the mid-1990s as a way of categorising a series of independently released films set in the rundown multi-ethnic working-class estates (the *cités*) on the periphery of France's major cities (the *banlieues*), the most significant of which was Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995). In both cases, the labels have proved controversial and potentially reductive (see Hargreaves 1999; Higbee 2001a). My use of the slightly different terms, *beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking, aims not to reify particular categories of films but to emphasise filmmaking as a set of (changing) practices, whether it be

*beur* filmmaking (the work of directors of Maghrebi descent, though the term could also cover other forms of *beur* authorship) or *banlieue* filmmaking (the work of directors aiming to represent life in the *banlieue*). What the majority of these two permeable and overlapping sets of films have in common, however, is a concern with the place and identity of the marginal and excluded in France. This study foregrounds representations of the *beurs* in these (and other) films, first because of the existence of a significant but generally little-known and little-discussed corpus of films made by *beur* filmmakers themselves (included in the filmography), and second because, as the descendants of immigrants from France's former colonies in the Maghreb, the *beurs* have been the most visible, the most stigmatised and the most dynamic ethnic minority in postcolonial France. As I have argued elsewhere, dominant French cinema has, until relatively recently, tended to suppress or marginalise the voices and narratives of the nation's troubling postcolonial others and (re)produce ethnic hierarchies founded on the assumed supremacy of white metropolitan culture and identity (Tarr 1997). Arguably, then, films by and about the *beurs* offer a touchstone for measuring the extent to which universalist Republican assumptions about Frenchness can be challenged and particular forms of multiculturalism envisaged and valued.

The chapters which follow braid together the double focus on *beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking. On the one hand they trace the history of *beur* filmmaking practices from the margins to the mainstream, from low-budget autobiographically inspired features to commercial filmmaking, and assess their effectiveness in addressing questions of identity and difference. On the other, they attempt to gauge the significance of place in the construction of identity through an analysis of films set in the multi-ethnic *banlieue*.<sup>2</sup> In each case, the representation of ethnicity is linked to questions of gender and authorship through the comparison of male and female, white and *beur*-authored films. In a final chapter, *beur* filmmaking is compared with that of displaced filmmakers from Algeria, who also address questions of place and identity in metropolitan France.

Before elaborating further on the context of *beur* filmmaking in France and the aesthetic and ideological issues raised by *beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking, the word *beur* itself (and its later variant *rebeu*) needs some further explanation. A neologism derived from Parisian backslang (*verlan*) by young second-generation immigrants of Maghrebi descent in the early 1980s (see [chapter 1](#)), its playful inversion and truncation of the syllables of the word for 'Arab' originally denoted both an awareness of the negative meanings of 'Arab' in the French imaginary, and a refusal to be trapped in those meanings. However, since its incorporation into majority French discourses, many of those it refers to have rejected the term,

fearing that it has become simply another way of trapping them in a ghetto.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, second- and third-generation Maghrebis have tended to designate themselves according to their origins (as in ‘d’origine algérienne / marocaine / tunisienne’) or more generally as ‘d’origine maghrébine’ (‘of Maghrebi origin’). The latter is an apparently neutral expression which recognises the possibility of a bicultural identity. Yet it is also problematic, first because the term Maghrebi obscures the historical, geographical and cultural specificity of the origins of those it designates,<sup>4</sup> and secondly because the emphasis on origins risks endorsing an essentialist notion of identity as pre-given, rather than acknowledging that identities, including those of the majority white French population, are constantly in process. The difficulty of naming the *beurs* is clearly indicative of their problematic status within French culture.<sup>5</sup> What is important, however, is that, until and unless the unmarked term ‘French’ is automatically (and visibly) understood to include all France’s citizens, whatever their origins, it should be qualified not just for those who are ‘of Maghrebi origin’, but also for the ‘white’ or ‘majority’ French (many of whom are themselves the descendants of immigrants<sup>6</sup>). This book alternates the term *beur*, maintained because of its historical significance and as a convenient short form, with the term ‘of Maghrebi descent’, which has the virtue of not reifying origins, while acknowledging the shortcomings of both terms.

### ***Beurs, banlieues and the French Republic***

If France has prided itself on being the country of the ‘rights of man’ (*sic*) and a ‘terre d’accueil’, a land hospitable to foreigners, that reputation has been seriously eroded by its treatment of immigrants from the Maghreb and their descendants (Ben Jalloun 1997; Rosello 2001). An understanding of the social and historical context in which *beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking has developed is needed in order to appreciate the significance of their interventions in French culture.

While it is generally assumed that the descendants of immigrants in France eventually become assimilated into French society, there has been resistance to the integration of the *beurs*, due in large measure to the legacy of French colonialism in the Maghreb (Silverman 1992; Stora 1992; Hargreaves 1995). Although the *beurs* themselves were either children at the time of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), or born thereafter, their lives have been deeply affected by hostility in France towards ‘Arabs’<sup>7</sup> and Islam, generated by the bitter conflicts of the war, the enforced ‘return’ of the *pied noirs* (the French settler population) and the visible presence of Arab and Berber immigrants on French soil. The racist policies of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s extreme rightwing Front National gained national prominence during the 1980s,<sup>8</sup> and anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia have been reinforced by worsening relationships between the

West and the Arab world (the oil crises, the Gulf War, the Palestinian conflict and, following 9/11, the 'war on terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq) and by events in Algeria (the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the failure of democracy, and the horror of a decade of terrorism and internal civil war). While various movements in France have attempted to combat racism and Islamophobia – including SOS Racisme and France Plus, created in the 1980s – attempts to promote the participation of the *beurs* (and others) in the democratic life of the nation have been largely ineffectual, and continuing discrimination against the descendants of non-European immigrants, exacerbated by the influence of the Front National, maintains a climate in which the settlement and integration of the *beurs* remains precarious.

It is worth noting that many *beurs* have been brought up in ignorance of their family and community histories. First-generation Algerian immigrants, recruited as cheap, temporary labour to fuel French industry during the 'trentes glorieuses' (the thirty 'glorious' years of postwar economic growth), tended not to transmit their histories to their offspring. Often illiterate men from rural areas, suffering from the trauma of exile, they had expected to return to the newly independent Algeria, and did not envisage putting down roots in France, even when, in the 1970s, immigration for work was suspended and family immigration became the norm. They remained silent, in part through a sense of loss and guilt at not taking part in the rebuilding of Algeria, in part through shame at the invidious treatment they received in France, documented in Yamina Benguigui's *Mémoires d'immigrés* (1997–98).<sup>9</sup> Official histories have been similarly silent both about the contribution of immigrants to the development of French society and, specifically, about France's harsh treatment of the Algerians.<sup>10</sup> Until relatively recently, for example, there has been a collective amnesia about events which took place on or around 17 October 1961, when between 100 and 200 peaceful demonstrators against the curfew imposed on Algerian immigrant workers by the chief of Police, Maurice Papon, were drowned, shot, or beaten to death, and thousands more were arrested, detained or deported (Stora 1992: 306–10). There is no doubt, given the need for memory in the construction of a collective identity, that such silences have been disempowering for the second (and later the third) generation. They have also prevented the majority French from assuming their responsibilities for the development of a democratic, egalitarian postcolonial society.<sup>11</sup>

Economic and urban planning factors have also affected the ability of the descendants of Maghrebi immigrants to integrate into French society. Their coming of age coincided with the period when the economy came under pressure as a result of the oil crises of the 1970s. De-industrialisation and mass unemployment meant that, unlike their fathers, a high proportion of the second generation suffered (and continues to suffer) from exclusion from the job market.

Furthermore, thanks to lower levels of educational achievement and discriminatory practices on the part of employers and employment agencies, they have been affected by unemployment far more seriously than their white peers.<sup>12</sup> Their location in the *banlieue* has been another factor in their exclusion. First-generation immigrants were housed in hostels or lived in the shanty-towns (*bidonvilles*) which grew up on the outskirts of major cities in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the mid-1960s, during de Gaulle's presidency, the shanty-towns were replaced by *grands ensembles*, enormous low-rent high-rise housing estates in the areas now known as the *banlieues*, specifically designed to re-house the families of immigrant workers and displaced workers from the countryside. The spatial and social segregation of their inhabitants, which continues to the present day, effectively recreated the colonial geographic model of a city composed of adjacent but mutually exclusive parts.

The coming to power of François Mitterrand and the Parti Socialiste in 1981 entailed hopes for a more progressive approach to immigration than had been demonstrated by the rightwing administration of the 1970s. The second generation, conventionally represented as a generation which had lost its bearings, with no roots, no hope, no future (Wihtol de Wenden 1999: 233), seized the opportunity to make its presence felt (see chapter 1). The 1983 March for Equality and against Exclusion was renamed the March of the *Beurs* by the media (Bouamama 1994) and, together with other public manifestations, propelled the *beurs* into the public arena as active participants in debates about integration, nationality and citizenship.

However, if the *beur* movement drew attention to the anger and frustration experienced by young people living in the *banlieue* estates, intensified by high levels of unemployment and 'bavures' ('blunders') occasioned by the abuses of police power, the media were more interested in manifestations of violence in the *banlieue*, ranging from *rodeos* (the theft and burning of cars) and drug-dealing to full-scale riots.<sup>13</sup> By the early 1980s, dominant media discourses had begun to consolidate the notion of the *banlieue* as a 'problem', and *banlieue* youths as, for the most part, ethnic minority youths linked to crime and violence. The 1995 bombings orchestrated by Khaled Kelkal (an isolated fundamentalist terrorist from a *banlieue* in Lyons), reinforced the idea that the *banlieue*, home to a large proportion of the Muslim population of France, was also a recruitment ground for terrorists. The association of the *banlieues* with a lack of law and order not only fed the agenda of the Front National and legitimated rightwing policies for heavy-handed policing methods, it also influenced debates on the rights to French nationality for those of immigrant origin, and on policies towards immigration control and the status of immigrants.

Studies of life in the *banlieues* in the 1990s and early 2000s suggest that the social and material conditions necessary for integration have got worse rather

than better, with another generation of young people knowing nothing but unemployment, a phenomenon which is not typical of earlier patterns of immigration (Amara 2003). In addition to problems of degraded housing, poverty, failure at school and the disintegration of the family, the *beurs* have also suffered from increasingly hostile attitudes towards non-European (that is, non-white) immigrants in France and the implementation of tough immigration policies. The return of the Right to power in 1993, followed by Jacques Chirac's election as president in 1995, saw the introduction of a series of laws restricting the rights of immigrants in France, notably the Méhaignerie and Pasqua laws of 1993 and the Debré law of 1997, which were not overturned when Lionel Jospin and the Left came to power in 1998. The restriction of access to French nationality for the French-born children of foreign parents meant that young people of Maghrebi descent whose parents had not claimed French nationality themselves were obliged to apply for it once they reached the age of sixteen (Freedman 2000: 17). One of the results has been 'the destabilitation of young people born or brought up in France but deprived of the assurance that they will be able to live there permanently' (Lochak 1997: 44).<sup>14</sup> Thanks to measures enabling the police to stop and detain individuals suspected of being illegal residents, they also suffer from the invidious *délit du faciès*, the crime of simply looking different, which makes them vulnerable to police harassment. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that young males may express their alienation through undesirable, antisocial and hypermasculine behaviour. The shift of patriarchal authority from the fathers to *les grands frères* ('the older brothers') has also led to a notable regression in the situation of women in the *banlieue*.

*Beur* women (or *beurettes*) came to the attention of the media in particular through their resistance to arranged marriages, mediated through accounts of their *fugues* – running away from home – or of their families tricking them into marriages back in Algeria. Their attempt to negotiate new roles for themselves, often through performing better at school than their male peers, has been deemed to make them potentially more assimilable into Western culture. Indeed, for a number of *beur* women activists, the *beur* movement of the early 1980s also generated a contestation of women's oppression within the patriarchal Arabo-Berber-Islamic sex/gender system. However, though *beur* women may aspire to the freedoms and individualism enjoyed by their white peers, they generally also desire to maintain affective links with their family and culture of origin (Flanquart 2003). This may be one of the factors at play in the '*foulard* affairs', which have revealed how Judeo-Christian ethnocentrism and hostility towards Islam are embedded in the supposedly secular French education system, as well as in elite discourses on laicity across the political spectrum (Nordmann 2004). Although the wearing of the veil can be interpreted in a variety of ways, not least as an effect of fundamentalist oppression, it can also be understood as a way for

young women to express their identity in opposition to dominant norms (Dayan-Herzbrun 2000).<sup>15</sup>

A new phase of activism on the part of *beur* women was initiated in the early 2000s, following the burning to death of a young woman, Sohane, in Vitry-sur-Seine in October 2002, and the publication by Samira Bellil of her first-person account of gang rapes in the *banlieue* (*les tournantes*), which exposed the way young *banlieue* women may be punished by the *grands frères* if their behaviour does not conform to expected norms (Bellil 2002). Using the slogan 'Ni Putes Ni Soumises' (which translates roughly as 'Neither Slags Nor Slaves'), a group of *banlieue* women organised a 'March of Women from the Estates for Equality and against the Ghetto', which ended with a demonstration of 30,000 people in Paris on International Women's Day, 2003. The new movement is at pains to point out that their protest is directed not just against 'the macho behaviour of the men in our estates who deny us our most elementary rights in the name of a "tradition"', but also against 'a society which shuts us away in ghettos dominated by poverty and exclusion' (Amara 2003: 146).<sup>16</sup>

If by the early 2000s first-generation Algerian immigrants have largely abandoned their dreams of a return to Algeria, the relationship of the *beurs* to the French state is still problematic. Celebrations of the French victory at the World Cup in July 1998, with a multi-ethnic football team including star *beur* player Zinedine Zidane, momentarily gave strength to the belief that France had successfully achieved the transition to a multicultural *black-blanc-beur* society. Yet the boing of the Marseillaise and the pitch invasion by youths from the Parisian *banlieues* at the historic, supposedly friendly, match between France and Algeria in 2001 seemed to suggest that, on the contrary, the *beurs* identified more strongly with their Algerian roots. Zaïr Kédadouche (2002: 23) suggests that young people have become so alienated by France and its symbols that Algeria, which is seen as having won against France, politically and morally as well as militarily, now enjoys a mythic status. For Azouz Begag, however, their behaviour can be interpreted rather as a plea for recognition (Begag 2003: 86). The precariousness of their position was underlined by Le Pen's surprise relegation of Jospin into third place during the first round of the presidential elections of 2002. Even though voters anxious to consolidate a plural, multicultural France ensured that Le Pen was subsequently defeated by Chirac, the electoral successes of the Front National are symptomatic of a country still unsure of its identity and riven by racism. Figures published by the Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme in 2000 suggest that 63 per cent of the 'French' think there are too many 'Arabs' in France (Kédadouche 2002: 65).

At the same time, there is no doubt that the socio-cultural integration of the overwhelming majority of French citizens of Maghrebi descent is proceeding apace (Wihtol de Wenden 1999: 236). Many of those referred to as the *beur-*

*geoisie* (as opposed to the *rebeus* of the *banlieue*) have achieved success as writers, musicians, designers, sportspersons, filmmakers and actors, as well as teachers, researchers, social workers, business persons and even MEPs.<sup>17</sup> The *beurs* have been particularly influential in the growth of *banlieue* youth culture in France, successfully appropriating and developing the practices of black American hip-hop culture (Bazin 1995). France also boasts a high rate of mixed marriages (Begag 2003: 33) and, despite the *foulard* affairs, there is evidence to suggest that the practice of Islam in France is not an obstacle to integration (Cesari 1999; Flanquart 2003). Nevertheless, citizens of Maghrebi descent are significantly under-represented in the boardroom, in the conventional political parties and in the national assembly.<sup>18</sup>

As writer-researcher Begag argues, representations play a key role in the struggle for the meaning of Frenchness and the promotion of equality.<sup>19</sup> For Begag, Zidane's image as a French football champion (Zizou) and the warm reception accorded in 2001 to Aziz, a young *beur*, after he had been expelled from *Loft Story*<sup>20</sup> are heartening demonstrations of the principles of Republican integration at work (Begag 2003: 90). At the same time, the subjects of Yamina Benguigui's 2003 TV documentary, *Aïcha, Mohamed, Chaïb . . . Engagés par la France*, recruits of Maghrebi descent in the French army, repeatedly identify themselves not as French, but as Arabs and/or Algerians in France. Arguably, their attitude suggests not that French society has broken down into 'communitarianism', but rather that, by the early 2000s, France has become sufficiently recognisable as a plural society that its citizens of Maghrebi descent no longer feel it necessary to deny their difference. It remains to be seen whether *beur* and *banlieue* filmmaking endorses such a view.

### **Beur filmmaking**

According to Benedict Anderson's formulation (1983), the nation is an imagined community', constructed through the repeated performance of particular narratives and discourses. Mainstream French cinema has been notoriously reluctant to perform a critique of France's role as an exploitative colonial or neo-colonial power but instead has narrated the nation in ways which shore up a monolithic sense of white France's cohesiveness and cultural superiority. Its treatment of decolonisation and immigration has tended to contribute to the stigmatisation and othering of first-generation immigrants from the Maghreb and their descendants. In the 1980s, ethnic minority others feature primarily as marginalised and/or stereotyped characters, contributing to the dominant media construction of immigrants/*beurs* as deviants and/or outsiders (Minces 1989). They appear in *policiers* (crime dramas) such as *Police* (Maurice Pialat, 1985) or *L627* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1992) as criminals or prostitutes (figure 2); or in more concerned, liberal films, such as *Tchao Pantin* (Claude Berri, 1983) or *Train*



2 A policeman (G rard Depardieu) gets embroiled with a young woman of Maghrebi origin (Sophie Marceau) in *Police* (1985).

*d'enfer* (Roger Hanin, 1985), as victims and subsidiary to the central white characters. In each case they are the objects of, and contained within, a white eurocentric gaze and discourse which, as Shohat and Stam argue, 'takes for granted and "normalizes" the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism and imperialism, without necessarily even thematizing those issues directly' (Shohat and Stam 1994: 2). In the 1980s, there was a perceived need for alternative narratives of nation which would challenge hegemonic representations of Frenchness and allow the so-called 'second generation' (the sons and daughters of immigrants from the Maghreb) to emerge as citizens, subjects and agents in their own right.

In the early 1980s, a considerable body of video films and documentaries by filmmakers of Maghrebi descent was produced in artisanal conditions outside normal production and distribution circuits (see *Cin mAction/Tumulte*, 1981, *Cin mAction* 24, 1983, and *Cin mAction/Hommes et Migrations* 56, 1990). Super 8 films by the Mohamed Collective (such as *Le Garage*, *Zone immigr e* and *La Mort de Kader*) played an important role in making the second generation visible as cultural entrepreneurs (Mohamed 1981; Boss no 1983).<sup>21</sup> Short fiction films by Farida Belghoul (*C'est Madame la France que tu pr f res?*, 1981, and *Le D part du p re*, 1983) and A ssa Djabri (*La Vago*, 1983) were critically acclaimed and gave expression to the identity crisis and, in the case of *La Vago*, the socio-economic disadvantages facing the 'second generation'. The breakthrough into full-length feature filmmaking aimed at a mainstream audience came in 1985 with

Costa-Gavras' sponsoring of Mehdi Charef's *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède*, winner of the Jean Vigo Prize, the same year as Rachid Bouchareb made *Baton Rouge*.<sup>22</sup> From 1994 to 1999, eleven other filmmakers of Maghrebi descent wrote and directed their first films (including three women) and nine more made (or co-directed) their first films between 2000 and 2003 (including one woman).<sup>23</sup> By 2003, eight of these had also gone on to make a second film.<sup>24</sup>

In most cases it has not been easy for them to get funding for their films. Several made their first feature films completely outside the conventional film industry circuits, and they took many years to complete, notably *Hexagone* (1994) by Malik Chibane, *Souviens-toi de moi* (1996) by Zaïda Ghorab-Volta, *Cour interdite* (1999) by Djamel Ouahab and *Wesh wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (2002) by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmèche. Others, including Belghoul, Fejria Deliba, Djabri, Youcef Hamidi and Malika Tenfiche, have to date only made short or medium-length films. Those who have been able to obtain funding for a first full-length feature film have usually worked in related aspects of the industry and/or first made a short film – the case of Yamina Benguigui, Djamel Ben-salah, Ahmed Bouchaala, Bouchareb, Lyèce Boukhitine, Chad Chenouga, Karim Dridi<sup>25</sup> and Bourlem Guerdjou – or have already made their names from related professional activities, as with Charef (who had written the novel on which his first film was based), Rachida Krim (a fine artist) and Abdel Kechiche (an actor). Others obtained their first chance through co-directing, Kamel Saleh with well-known rap star Akhenaton, comedian Smaïn with white filmmaker Jean-Marc Longwal, and actress and screenwriter Zakia Bouchaala (formerly Zakia Tahiri) with husband Ahmed Bouchaala. Thus directors of Maghrebi origin operate within a range of filmmaking practices. For the most part, however, they are confined to relatively low budgets, many of their films draw on amateur or unknown actors (often family and friends), and at least five of the films addressed here feature the directors themselves in the principal role. Their desire for self-representation can be seen as symptomatic of their need for self-affirmation as both social and artistic subjects.

One of the key sources of funding for French cinema is the *avance sur recettes* (advance on box office receipts) provided by the CNC (Centre National de la Cinématographie). However, the CNC has no policy for promoting ethnic minority filmmakers, since this would run counter to Republican universalist principles. The *avance sur recettes* is used generously to support first films, but it generally privileges *auteur* cinema or mainstream 'quality' cinema, types of filmmaking which not many first time *keur* filmmakers can aspire to.<sup>26</sup> Television channels are another key source of funding for French filmmakers, and in recent years they have fostered both the work of directors of Maghrebi descent and television films addressing questions of ethnic difference.<sup>27</sup> Other more marginal sources of funding include the FAS (Fonds d'Action Sociale), which assists films

purporting to promote inter-ethnic relations in France, and, more recently, the Conseils Régionaux, which seek to promote representations of particular regions. Given the difficulties of achieving funding, it is significant that a number of filmmakers of Maghrebi origin have themselves moved into film production, notably Aïssa Djabri and Farid Lahoussa<sup>28</sup> at Vertigo Productions, whose output includes Cédric Klapisch's *Chacun cherche son chat* (1996), Christophe Ruggia's *Le Gone du chaâba* (1998) and Mostéfa Djadjam's *Frontières* (2002) as well as Thomas Gilous *Raï* (1995) and hit Jewish comedy *La Vérité si je mens!* (1997). Rachid Bouchareb's 3B Productions (with Jean Bréhat) has produced films such as Bruno Dumont's award-winning *La Vie de Jésus* (1997) and *Humanité* (1999) and Guerdjou's *Vivre au paradis* (1999) alongside Bouchareb's own films. One should also not underestimate the role of other cultural entrepreneurs of Maghrebi origin, such as Nacer Rettane at Radio Beur FM, and television presenter and filmmaker Yamina Benguigui, who is a sponsor of the proposed Beur TV channel.<sup>29</sup>

Although a significant number of filmmakers of Maghrebi descent have put together the funding to make feature films, they still have difficulty in getting them released and in attracting popular or international audiences.<sup>30</sup> As Hamid Naficy argues (Naficy 2001), exilic and diasporic filmmakers have an interstitial relationship to the film industry and, for *beur* filmmakers (who may be perceived as marginal to the French film industry), this often translates into small publicity budgets, very limited distribution and a lack of international sales.<sup>31</sup> As indicated in the filmography, some of their films have attracted fewer than 5000 spectators in France, whereas films on similar topics by majority white filmmakers (with a few exceptions) tend to achieve higher viewing figures. Although some also receive distribution on alternative festival and community circuits, as well as being screened on television, *beur*-authored films have rarely been incorporated into mainstream French filmmaking or invited to represent French filmmaking abroad.<sup>32</sup> To date the only really popular *beur*-authored films (with over a million spectators in France) are comedies, namely *Les Deux Papas et la maman* (1996) co-directed by Smaïn, *Le Ciel, les oiseaux . . . et ta mère* (1999) by Bensalah (a surprise hit starring comedian Jamel Debbouze, now one of France's most popular stars) and Bensalah's follow-up film *Le Raïd* (2002), though Charef and Bouchareb have achieved respectable viewing figures for one or two of their films, as have Dridi and Saleh (the latter in association with Akhenaton).

However, it is also the case that actors of Maghrebi descent have an increasingly active profile in French cinema and that their roles in mainstream cinema are increasingly varied. Although this issue is beyond the scope of this study, it is notable that stars like Jamel, Samy Naceri and Smaïn are able to attract large audiences, particularly through their roles in comedies, while actors like Sami Bouajila, Zinedine Soualem and Roschdy Zem have developed enviable filmographies in the work of a range of directors. Zem suggests that the

possibility of *beur* actors taking on roles without being typecast for films about racism or immigration dates back to around 1993 (Zem 1998: 108). Like mixed-race actor Jalil Lespert, they are increasingly able to move between roles which are marked by ethnic difference and roles which are not. However, the picture seems to be less positive for female actors, despite a range of talented performers such as Fejria Deliba and Nozha Khouadra. Deliba has expressed her dismay at not being offered other unmarked roles like the one she enjoyed in Jacques Rivette's 1989 film, *La Bande des quatre* (Deliba 2003: 45). On the other hand, Rachida Brakni's success in Coline Serreau's *Chaos* (2001), seen by over a million spectators, was quickly followed by an unmarked role opposite Eric Cantona in Thierry Binisti's *L'Outre-mangeur* (2003). It is surely significant in terms of the history of representations that Nacéri, first prominent as a hopeless *beur* drug-dealer in Thomas Gilous *Raï* (1995), is now able to play unmarked roles, as in the *Taxi* series, which place him, if ironically, on the side of the law (figure 3).<sup>33</sup>

What I am most concerned with in this book, however, are films written (for the most part) and directed by *beur* filmmakers, and the extent to which their images and narratives, and the *beur* actors who embody them, can counter or, alternatively, penetrate and influence mainstream discourses on the nature of 'Frenchness'. Clearly this type of grouping runs counter to the desire of the filmmakers themselves who, understandably, do not want to be labelled in terms of their ethnic origins, both for fear of being trapped into expectations of making films only about ethnicity and difference and because they expect their films to be judged according to their intrinsic, aesthetic merits. The label of *beur* filmmaker also risks enshrining an essentialist notion of identity rather than recognising that identities are multiple, relational and shifting. Its validity is thrown into question by the difficulty of classifying directors of mixed-race origins such as Franco-Tunisian Dridi and Franco-Algerian Nicolas Boukrief (best known as a journalist for *Starfix*), who to date has not made films which address questions of ethnicity and identity. It is also challenged by the work of certain white directors like *piéd noir* Philippe Faucon, who has made at least two films, *Les Etrangers* (a 1999 TV film) and *Samia* (2001), which have some claim to being considered *beur* films because of their focus on *beur* characters and their sympathetic understanding of the tensions and anxieties brought about by displacement and exile. I am therefore using the category not on the assumption of any essentialist differences between *beurs* and non-*beurs*, but rather on the supposition that, during the period covered by this book, individuals of Maghrebi descent (a heterogeneous and permeable category) have experienced sets of social relations and discourses which potentially inflect their cinematic production differently from that of their white peers. The grouping of their films not only draws attention to their achievements but provides a perspective on the (changing) significance of ethnic difference at a particular period in French/film history.



3 Samy Naceri on the side of the law as Daniel, a Marseilles taxi driver, in *Taxi 2* (2002).

Hamid Naficy argues that films by deterritorialised people, among whom he includes the *beurs*, share a number of common features which he embraces under the umbrella term of ‘accented cinema’ (Naficy 2001). He, too, argues for the significance of authorship, pointing out that accented filmmakers are also ‘empirical subjects, situated in the interstices of cultures and film practices, who exist outside and prior to their films’, and expresses the view that their films ‘signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorising, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers’ (Naficy 2001: 4). They do so, he suggests, through an ‘accented style’, involving, for example, fragmented, multilingual and critically juxtaposed narrative structures, lost characters, themes involving identity and displacement, and liminal and politicised structures of feeling.<sup>34</sup> Such features would, theoretically, be equally applicable to films by displaced Maghrebi (and other) filmmakers, and [chapter 12](#) tests out this proposition by comparing *beur*-authored films with films by émigré Maghrebi filmmakers working in France. The notion of an ‘accented cinema’ may also help to differentiate between *beur*-authored films which inscribe ‘the biographical, social and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers’ (Naficy 2001: 4) and films by majority white filmmakers, whose treatment of the (dis)location of others may be inflected differently because of their own more assured position in France.

The importance of *beur* filmmaking surely lies primarily in the shift it operates in the position of enunciation from which the dominant majority is addressed, focusing on minority perspectives which bring with them the potential for new strategies of identification and cultural contestation (Bhabha