



La Haine

Study Guide **Tony Tracy**

fresh film festival 2005 **1**

La Haine

La Haine

dir. Mathieu Kassovitz/France/96 mins/
1995/B&W

Cast

Vincent Cassel Vinz
Hubert Kound Hubert
Saïd Taghmaoui Saïd
Abdel Ahmed Ghili Abdel
Solo Santo
Joseph Momo Ordinary guy
Héloïse Rauth Sarah
Rywka Wajsbrot Vinz's grandmother
Olga Abrego Vinz's aunt
Laurent Labasse Cook
Choukri Gabteni Saïd's brother
Nabil Ben Mhamed Boy Blague

Production

Makeup Sophie Benaïche
Costume Designer Virginie Montel
Production Designer
Giuseppe Ponturo
Sound Dominique Dalmasso,
Vincent Tulli
Original Music Assassin
Editors Mathieu Kassovitz,
Scott Stevenson
Cinematographer Pierre Aïm
Screenplay Mathieu Kassovitz
Line producer Gilles Sacuto
Associate Producers
Adeline Lecallier, Alain Rocca
Producer Christophe Rossignon
Director Mathieu Kassovitz
Production Companies Cofinergie 6,
Egg Pictures, Kasso Inc.
Productions, La Sept Cinéma,
Le Studio Canal+,
Les Productions Lazennec,
PolyGram Filmed Entertainment,
Studio Image

Introduction

La Haine is an intense urban drama made in France in 1995. Written and directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, it caused a sensation on its release, provoking many articles in French newspapers and magazines as well as extensive debate on radio and television. The President, Jacques Chirac, his Minister for the Interior, Charles Pasqua, and other politicians saw the film as a revelatory insight into problems of violence and urban tension that had plagued French society in recent years. In a short time, the film quickly went from being simply an 'entertainment' to a social document of national interest and importance. It stood in contrast to the big-budget, prestige films of the time – typically star-studded literary adaptations of 'classics' like *Germinal* – and brought about a discussion of French society and identity that went far beyond the limits of its central story.

This response is difficult for a contemporary (Irish) audience to fully grasp but it is of interest in pointing out to us the force and persuasion of the film's story which deals with a tense twenty-four hour period in the lives of three French youths from a public-housing complex on the outskirts of Paris. Inspired by true incidents – including street riots - the atmosphere and tone of the film is one of mounting tension and potentially explosive violence. The film-makers ask the audience: is the fulfillment of this threat inevitable?

Director

Mathieu Kassovitz is the writer/director of *La Haine*. He was only 29 when he made it and it was his second film. His first, *Métisse/Café au Lait* (1994), told the story of a young woman from the Caribbean who

summons her two boyfriends – one African, one Jewish – to announce that she is pregnant. That film was inspired by American director Spike Lee's *She's Got to Have It* and it could be argued that Lee's Brooklyn-set film *Do the Right Thing* is a key influence on *La Haine* with its hip-hop aesthetic and racial tension building to a violent climax over a twenty-four hour period. (Spike Lee recently made *25th Hour* in the aftermath of 9/11). Kassovitz has since made the thrillers *Assassins* and *Crimson Rivers* as well as his first American film, the supernatural thriller, *Gothika*. These films continue to demonstrate his appreciation for edgy drama but have none of the originality or urgency of *La Haine*, which remains his best film. All his films demonstrate a strong visual flair suited to the thriller genre.

Kassovitz has an intermittent but successful parallel career as an actor, memorably playing cowardly Albert Dehousse from the provinces who makes up a glorious war-time past in *A Self-Made Hero* (1996) and as the enigmatic object of romantic attention for *Amélie* (2000). He can be seen briefly in *La Haine* as the skinhead threatened by Vinz.

First Look

Creating expectations are important in the marketing of a film. This is done by a variety of means but amongst the most important – along with the trailer – is the poster. This tries to give a strong, simple and condensed representation of the film's themes using images, and/or words in the form of a 'tagline'.

Questions

Take a look at the poster for **La Haine**. Describe its elements. (images, colours, text). What feeling do you get from the visual elements? Is there any text



(writing) on the poster? How is it presented? (typeface, size etc.) Is there a tagline?

What kind of audience is the poster trying to attract in your opinion? Why? How is this poster similar or dissimilar from other film posters you can recall?

Is this a film you'd be interested in seeing? Why?

A note on the film's title. 'La Haine' literally translates to 'Hate' in English. However the expression 'avoir la haine' roughly translates to something like being fed up or bored stiff to the point of frustration. The title plays on these two meanings.

When you have seen the film discuss which you think is the more accurate.

Synopsis

A Cité (suburban public housing complex) is in a state of shock. It is the morning after riots between teenagers and Police, brought about by the beating of an Arab boy named Abdel, who now lies seriously injured in hospital. Said (a young Arab) and Vinz (a Jewish youth) go in search of Hubert, who is older and more sanguine, and find him working out at what remains of the community boxing club. After aimless wandering and waiting, the trio head into the centre of Paris on a train in search of Astérix who owes them money. In Paris they have a series of misadventures, including a violent attack from skinheads. In a state of exhaustion at the train station early the following morning they learn from

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TV that Abdel has died. Their return to the Cité brings the clock full circle and Vinz's frustrations to a head.

Second Look

Write a short synopsis of the film. Write down your 'first impressions'. What elements stand out – character, story, visuals, and music? How would you rate the film out of ten? What are its strong and weak points? Was it an involving story? Was it a convincing film? How? Compare it to any other films you have seen in terms of similarities or differences. Do the title / poster reflect accurately the content of the film?

Approaches to the film

In contrast to many French films – particularly those which get distributed abroad, or are seen on television, *La Haine* is notable in its foregrounding of people and places which remain untypical. In contrast to well known and commercially successful films like *Amelie*, for instance, it takes a far less glamorous, romantic and nostalgic view of France, and more particularly Paris. Set in a complex of flats (known as a 'Cité' in French), the story's three central characters are identified as having 'foreign' cultural heritages: Hubert is African, Vinz is Jewish, and Saïd an Arab from Northern Africa (the 'Magreb' area which consists of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco). In its setting, characters and themes – 'space,' 'race', and 'place' – the film is provocative and challenging to accepted ideas about France and being French. It proposes that there is an 'unofficial' France on the margins of tourist imagery and official definitions. It thereby questions the achievements and current state of the French Republic (la République Française) – the

political system brought about by the French revolution in 1789 which guarantees 'liberty, equality and fraternity' for all its citizens.

Questions

Quickly write down ten words or ideas you associate with 'Ireland.' Afterwards, discuss how accurate are these association in reflecting your life in Ireland? Where do they come from? What's missing? Why? Now write down ten words or ideas you associate with 'France'. What do you think might be missing here? What is a republic? What are its values? What did the French Revolution set out to achieve?

Place

The film shows us three male characters responding to the death of Abdel in very different ways. Each one is attempting to identify his place in, and his response to, a society which is by turns hostile and indifferent. The characteristic that links all three together is a sense of exclusion. 'Le Monde est a Vous' ('The World is Yours') mocks them from billboards; an advertising slogan which jeers their dispossession.

Question

Make a quick character description of Vinz, Hubert and Saïd. What are the dominant character traits of each?

Each of the three youths are introduced to us in clever ways – Saïd by 'tagging' his name on a Police van; Vinz by his bracelet; Hubert from a poster. Besides introducing each young man to the audience, this approach also foregrounds the theme of identity. Of the three it is Vinz who most aggressively wishes to assert his identity in the Cité.

Question

How does each character try to assert their identity in the story? Where do they find strength and affirmation?

For Vinz, the stolen gun is the totem of strength, independence and manhood. Taken from a policeman, he literally feels that he has taken control ('I've got the power!' in the words of Public Enemy). The gun is a threat; the ultimate threat to order and life from violence. For Vinz it offers the possibility of revolution, tied up in his mind to American movies with which he identifies. In one memorable scene he quotes the psychotic anti-hero Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* – 'are you lookin' at me?'.

Question

Explore the role the gun plays in the film.

Hubert, on the other hand, has genuine power – physically, as a boxer and morally, as a force for calm. He is the least confused and most mature of the three and we often assume his point of view in the story. Yet he is also the film's most fatalistic character, summarized in his story of the falling man – 'it's not the fall, its landing'. Unlike the psychotic Vinz, Hubert does not believe that change is possible, even through violence. For him, they are all the man in the story ...falling towards death.

Question

Do you agree with Hubert's point of view of their situation? Is it possible to find a middle course between Vinz and Hubert?

Saïd, finally, is clearly in between these two extremes. He literally and metaphorically looks up to the other two

and the director frequently places him in between them. He is the easiest character to identify with, and, significantly, is the last one we see in the film's final shot.

Space

The tower blocks where Hubert, Vinz and Saïd live dominate the space of the film. They fill up the frame in many of the shots; the characters live their lives in their shadow; they create a claustrophobic environment among which the inhabitants move like mice in a maze. In the film's first scene we see Saïd yelling up at Vinz's family apartment. (It is noteworthy that each of the three main characters live with their families, emphasizing the crowded nature of the flats as well as the boy's youth and lack of independence). The camera is placed very low to the ground capturing the inhuman scale of the apartment buildings. We immediately understand why Saïd is shouting – he can't be bothered going all the way up. Tired of the racket an older man, who also speaks with a foreign accent, yells down to Saïd from another building to stop shouting. The camera moves around to show him without a cut, making the space we are watching circular, further emphasising the impression of being surrounded.

Question

Having watched the film can you identify any other examples of the way in which the physical environment of the 'Cité' is represented? How important is the use of setting in our understanding of the characters?

What we notice about this world is that it has none of the visual or cultural markers of what we recognize as stereotypically 'French'. There is no Eiffel Tower or Arc de Triumphant. There

are no sophisticated conversations in cafes, no romance between good looking sophisticated (white) couples, no glasses of wine with cheese, no soundtrack with classic *chanteurs* like Jacques Brel or Edith Piaf.

The Cité in the film is outside of Paris, the French capital. The boys travel there by train but it is a world away. Their reaction to being in Paris is one of wonder and surprise; they are tourists in their own country. Stuck in the city because they miss the return train, they wander through a night-town of new experiences – a kind of holiday from the dullness of their daily lives. They meet a polite policeman, crash a posh art gallery event, try to steal a car, sit transfixed by television screens at the train station. But they are also attacked by skinheads – racist thugs which support the FN (Front Nationale – a right wing political party) – changing our response to the boys who act tough but who are in fact frightened and vulnerable in the face of real, violent hatred. In the end they are bound to return home; it is all they know. For all its faults, it is where they are most comfortable.

Moving the action from the cité to the city allows Kassovitz to make a number of contrasts and reveals a different side of his characters.

Question

How do you think our impression of the boys develops with their visit to Paris? Which episodes are particularly important, in your opinion, during this visit?

Race

This encounter with the skinheads raises the theme of race in the film in a way which wasn't overt in the sections in the Cité, where all the characters are from different

backgrounds but no-one is 'native' French. Saïd and Hubert, as Africans, signal France's colonial past on that continent. Colonial invasion and occupation, as engaged in during the 19th century by European powers such as Britain, France, Germany and Belgium, was built on assumptions of cultural and racial superiority. By occupying a country, imposing its legal, educational and administrative systems and controlling its economy for its own ends (rather than those of the occupied), colonial powers brought about profound changes in local cultures. During and particularly after colonization many people from Africa and the Caribbean immigrated to France in search of jobs and better prospects for their children. Although many succeeded in integrating with French society, *La Haine* presents us with a picture of those who live on the margins, cut off from the opportunities of 'white' France (a depiction borne out in official statistics).

Vinz is not African but Jewish (as is Kassovitz). His presence raises two political/historical connections. The first is the ongoing tension between Jews and Arabs in the middle east, largely to do with territory and sovereignty. Bitter and bloody, this conflict is simply irrelevant to the relationship between Saïd and Vinz. In the Cité they are both outsiders living on a 'foreign' soil. Additionally, Vinz's Jewish background is a reminder of France's shameful treatment of Jew during the war – surrendered to the occupying Nazi forces and transported to concentration camps. All three boys are members of races which have been, and in some instances continue to be, discriminated against. Yet they are friends because of their shared class and background. This solidarity, the film suggests, is a more authentic expression of 'fraternité' than that practiced by the state forces of law and order.

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It is the distance between the 'promise' of the republic and the reality of life as a member of a racial minority that is at the centre of the film's drama. In 1993, a 16 year old boy from Zaire named Makome Bowole died in police custody in the largely immigrant 18th Arrondissement of Paris. Failure by the authorities to adequately account for his death led to several days of riots and civil unrest – which is seen in the documentary footage at the film's beginning.

Thus the film grows out of very real events, rooted in questions about race, which remain below the surface of the action.

Question

How important do you think race is as a theme in the film?

Tone

La Haine is touch, tense, hard-hitting. But it also often funny, teasing and tender. Male aggression and disillusionment is undercut by laughter and a sense of vulnerability. This lends the film a more human aspect, adds light to its darkness and ultimately results in a more rounded, more convincing drama.

Questions

How would you describe the overall tone of the film? Describe a scene (or scenes) which support your analysis. What is the importance of the repeated image of the clock in creating the tone of the film? What humorous moments in the film can you recall? How did these moments affect your response to the characters and action?

Along with humour, the terse tone of the film is broken with at least two absurdist episodes – moments which remain difficult to explain or fully comprehend. The first of these is Vinz's sightings of

cows. The second is the story told by the old man in the toilets in Paris concerning deportation to a concentration camp.

Questions

How do you explain these episodes? What effect do they have on the overall drama? Do these scenes distract from or weaken the overall impact of the drama?

Style

A very important element in the analysis of *La Haine* is attention to the way in which the story is told; the director's use of film style. Kassovitz is an extremely cinematic director who borrows as well as innovates in creating a film where story and style become inseparable.

Consider the use of style in the film under the following headings:

Use of camera - zoom, close-up, moving.

Use of black and white photography - why did the director choose to shoot the film in B+W and not colour?

*Use of music - unlike most films **La Haine** does not have a score but uses 'source' music instead. Why? What is the significance of the Bob Marley song over the opening credits? What is the dominant style of music used in the film?*

*References to other films - **Scarface** and **Taxi Driver**, among others, are*

referenced in the film. Can you identify where and suggest reasons why? The film makes many references to American culture – can you remember any?

Conclusion

La Haine remains compelling and provocative 10 years after its initial release. It was part of a brief and small sub-genre of 'ghetto' or 'banlieu' film which emerged in France in the early 1990s which attempted, following the inspiration of American films like *Do the Right Thing* and *Boyz in the Hood*, to give representation to disenfranchised, disenfranchised urban populations and contribute to debates surrounding social unrest among largely male groups. Its fictional story of three young men is largely symbolic in terms of structure and even character but it grew out of very concrete circumstances. Its conclusion suggests that state hostility and media objectification of the racial minorities who populate the Cités will have explosive consequences. If it ends on a note of pessimism, violence begetting violence, it nonetheless leaves us with the image of Saïd. He stands as the most typical of the three characters and as such he is the future. *La Haine* finishes by asking us to imagine that future.

