

## Session Seven Lecture Notes: The Underclass and the Marginalized

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21L.435/CMS.840 - At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation

We turned to our unit on identity and politics—with *Fight Club*, we talked about white masculinity at the end of the century, and the anxiety of a generation of men who felt lost to history and thus attempted to produce a series of traces, scars, destruction as the creation of a kind of material legacy; we also talked in that class about the figure of hitting bottom, of truly losing everything so that personal and national history can start again and start over. This week, we're turning to figures of the underclass and marginalized; and then, after break, we look at sexualities and gender. (Last week was about one's temporal place in and trace on history; this week is about one's place and identity in relation to globalized France.)

I also mentioned last time that in some ways we're turning to less "obvious" forms of violence (opaque violence; structural violence; fantasized violence; violence with undetermined sources and targets; and even violence that does not reveal itself as violence, or is contested or denied as forms of violence).

We'll also continue to talk about the relationship between narratives of violence and formal issues—in particular, sound and editing this week.

**Our films this week are both from France, made in 1995 and 1998, and both about marginalized figures, social outsiders, class and race... both films take place largely in the *banlieues* of Paris (meaning outskirts; edges; far away from fantasy Paris – a Paris that does not belong to these men). They have a lot of similarities:** both are, in some ways, a story that begins: "A man once came upon a gun..." and everything proceeds from that. **But they deal with violence in really different ways; and even on the level of framing – both literal and metaphorical – they are very different: *La Haine* is about the relations within and among groups** (racial and ethnic and political; familial; urban and geographical; us vs. them; and even the baseline community of the three friends)—on the level of literal framing, the film is littered with shots of the three figures interacting, even multiplied in reflective surfaces.

By contrast, the title and the signature shot of *I Stand Alone*—a single person in an asymmetrical shot, to one side of the frame—suggests radical isolation and the breaking of community (until, perhaps, and problematically, the end of the film). Stylistically, they also have some things in common (editing style) but Noé, with his use of written text and verbal language, and his warning to the audience, is very different from Kassovitz's more realist style, epitomized in the choice to film in black and white).

This week is about the marginalized, the underclass, the outsiders on the outskirts of Paris; it is about being left out, left alone, put down, pulled under, falling, or having hit bottom. And then it asks: what next? In some ways, both are picaresques gone wrong/nightmarish: picaresque = form of a novel (from *picaresco* for rogue/rascal); often satirical, often realistic, often humorous, of a roguish hoer (always of low social class) who lives by his wits in a corrupt society. 16<sup>th</sup> c. Spain. E.g. Huck Finn.

## **QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION**

*La Haine* — Relation between **form** and narrative. B&W; quick edits; arbitrary times; realism; Another key trait of the form: role of disseminated American popular culture: *Taxi Driver*; phraseology; rap music

Another comment on form: opening five minute credit sequence/newsreel/surveillance/  
immediacy – documentary – **cinéma vérité** = cinema truth style

Men or types?

A Cop; A Skinhead; A Jew; A Black; An Arab (sometimes called “black-blanc-beur” – beur = colloquial French term for Arab immigrants; contraction of reversed syllabus of word Arab / mix of ethnicities in the banlieues) – **are these characters or figures?**

\* Bonus question: Halfway through the film, a **scene takes place in a restroom** where an elderly man tells the main characters the story of a man who got left behind on a journey to a Siberian work camp. After the old man tells his story and leaves, the protagonists ask "What was the purpose of that story?" I'd like to ask the same question: given the rest of the film, what *is* the purpose of the scene in the restroom?

**SHOW scene in bathroom (50 min. in);**

note the reflective surfaces (pluralizes, multiplies them)

About relations; multiplicities; community; responsibility --

[One way of reading it – reminder of the horrors suffered by Eastern Europeans; everyone has a claim to oppression and victimhood...]

**Froze to death** – narrative about responsibility; failing to take responsibility for the friend. Leaving the friend behind. Shit is a cycle of consumption and production; an exchange; but also a metaphor for waste, for detritus, for every form of abjection. Remember the line that Said keeps repeating, “I’ll waste you for free” –what a great line!” To waste (shit); to waste someone; to waste one’s time... to waste a life.

At the end, in standing up for his friend, Hubert will risk everything – he will be killed or have killed, and in either case, that’s what friendship gets you. It wastes you; but is it about love? Is love, community, loyalty worth killing or being killed for? What does it mean to be your brother’s keeper in a world filled with forms of hate?

**Relation between explosiveness and boredom** – nothing to do; hanging around; unemployment; scenes of waiting – literally: killing time; failed event – can’t drive

link to Roulette: an event in which nothing or something happens; relate to time

Link to narrative about being frozen to death: men with **nowhere to go**, nowhere to be; long shots, long takes of them waiting, lounging, loitering... a **living frozen death**.

End of the film; death of Vinz and Hubert's response. Abruptness and even flatness of death: killing seems almost accidental...

Relate to the **moment of inversion: the policy brutality** in Paris

Vinz: white privilege? Hubert is de-educated; seduced towards hate.

\* Relate to this repeated figuration of a man falling, falling, so good so far – what matters is the landing. Spatial logic of descent inscribed everywhere in the film: Said yells for Vinz to come down; ordered by police to come down off the building's rooftop; have to come down and leave the apartment complex in Paris; yelling from rooftop at skinheads... and of course Vincent's body: falling down.

Long process of continual descent. (Relatedly: ejecting/rejecting: getting kicked out of places. Getting expelled. Being figured as waste. If your ordinary state is of being excluded, where do you go; where can you be?)

→ Is the ending of the film the landing? Is the ending the fall?

**Noé --**

**scene with daughter;** death is revealed over the eye to *not* have taken place.

Gushing: of blood; of words / violence is related to profusion of things spilling

Role of the gun. In each film, is it a metaphor? A catalyst? Passive brute object? Tool? Is violence in it; is it inevitable as a form of "production for use" -- socialism

At the end of *La Haine*, we hear the gun, don't know target or shooter: only its force and sound. When Vinz hands Hubert the gun as a moment of renunciation, it's also a moment of Hubert's inscription: the gun calls/seduces/pulls you towards its use...

Gun does not equal event of violence; but equals condition of possibility (so what is the relation between the gun and these failed/non-events of violence?) In Noé, linked to **CUTS**/editing/composition and structural making of film as material object.

**NB scene with warning; talk about the role of written text.** → You have 30 seconds to leave. What does it mean to give an out; from where does order emanate?

Figure of draining: film absents itself; retraction from itself / from cinematic space – "new European extremism" (see also Breillat)/but what's extreme here?

Relation of stylization to violence  
& Relation of violence to love

Love; responsibility – do I have the right to leave Cynthia? ...but incestuous love (from being radically alone to overly close)/loss of difference

Figuration of **the *Alone*** -- Attempt to connect: to protect daughter, kills innocent man; to comfort or be with the nurse after the death, but accused and ends up killing future child; desire to find community, but it ends up perverted

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