Aesthetics and National Identity in Postmodern French Cinema

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Abstract: This paper examines the contested terrain of French national identity through a comparative analysis of two emblematic postmodern films: Jean-Pierre Jeunet's Amélie (2001) and Mathieu Kassovitz's La Haine (1995). As France grapples with the challenges of postcolonial immigration, neoliberal globalization, and the erosion of its universalist republican ideals, cinema has emerged as a critical battleground where competing visions of French identity are negotiated and contested. Through the theoretical lens of Fredric Jameson's postmodernism — characterized by pastiche, the waning of affect, and simulation — this study explores how these two films employ opposing aesthetic strategies to either conceal or confront France's fractured social landscape. Amélie represents a retreat into nostalgic fantasy, utilizing whimsical stylization, saturated color palettes, and pastiche techniques borrowed from the French New Wave to construct an ethnically homogeneous, depoliticized vision of Paris. Jeunet's Montmartre functions as a hyperreal simulation that actively erases the presence of France's postcolonial tensions, the banlieues, and contemporary social inequalities in favor of sentimental micro-interventions and romantic idealism. The film's spatial logic privileges seamless movement through charming interiors and perfectly manicured streets, creating an enclosed utopia that masks systemic fractures beneath aesthetic harmony. In stark contrast, La Haine employs gritty realism, black-and-white cinematography, and handheld camera work to foreground the brutal realities of France's suburban peripheries. Kassovitz's film refuses the erasure of the banlieues, instead positioning these marginalized spaces as central to understanding France's structural dysfunction. Through circular narrative structure, claustrophobic framing, and the spatial entrapment of its multiethnic protagonists, La Haine exposes the Republic's failure to deliver on its egalitarian promises, depicting a society caught in a downward spiral toward inevitable explosion. This comparative analysis reveals that postmodernism is not inherently apolitical but rather becomes a vehicle for distinct ideological positions. While both films utilize postmodern techniques, their divergent aesthetic choices construct radically different responses to France's identity crisis: Amélie chooses aesthetic escapism and cultural nostalgia, while La Haine demands confrontation with uncomfortable truths. Together, these films illuminate the ongoing struggle between remembering and forgetting, illusion and exposure, in contemporary French society's negotiation of who belongs and who remains excluded from the national imaginary.

***Keywords*:** Postmodern French cinema, national identity crisis, spatial aesthetics, Amélie, La Haine, banlieues representation, Jameson's postmodernism

1. Introduction

The French Republic is a radical experiment, an attempt to create a universalist (and, by extension, color-blind) national polity. Yet, this utopian project increasingly appears tenuous in the face of postcolonial immigration and neoliberal globalization. With the decolonization of Algeria and other former French colonies in the mid-20th century, France opened its frontiers and welcomed immigrants with open arms, but this growing demographic diversity has been met with backlash from the local citizens of the metropole, leading to a new form of right-wing populist rhetoric and organization. Racial discrimination, economic exclusion, and prejudicial policing now define the lives of many immigrant communities, undermining the dream of an inclusive national identity. Cultural and aesthetic responses to this division vary, including in French cinema, where some films confront these tensions in direct, critical terms, while others retreat into nostalgic fantasies of unity. As a result, cinema is a battleground, a site where the narrative war over France's past, present, and future is staged.

Amélie (2001) and La Haine (1995) are emblematic examples of such coinciding yet opposing postmodern cinematic visions[1][2]. While in California, Amélie director Jean-Pierre Jeunet's homesickness motivated him to make a film about Paris at its best, using nostalgic pastiche and stylized cohesion to simulate an apolitical vision of Frenchness; by contrast, Matthieu Kassovitz began drafting La Haine (1995) the day the seventeen-year-old Zairian Makomé M'Bowole was fatally shot, utilizing realism and urban marginality for a visceral depiction of the (in)famous French suburbs, the banlieues. Through space, narrative structure, and visual style, each film reveals (or conceals) how the Republic defines who belongs. Both films incorporate postmodern forms of representation, yet their distinctive motivations construct works of opposite

ideological ends, exemplifying France's internal divide.

This paper draws on Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism to analyze how the two films respond to the fragmentation of France's national identity and unity. Jameson (1991) defines postmodernism as "the cultural expression of late capitalism," one characterized by multifaceted pastiche, the waning of affect, and simulation (p.61,64)[3]. This approach offers a novel lens for understanding how films like Amélie employ whimsical aesthetics and nostalgia to enliven a depoliticized Paris, and how La Haine utilizes spatial fragmentation and affective voids to suggest the impossibility of unity. In addition to Jameson's framework, this paper also engages with James F. Austin's "Destroying the Banlieue," which incorporates urban studies and spatial theory to critique how French cinema shapes the banlieue as a space of invisibility and erasure[4].

2. Postmodern French Cinema and the Crisis of Representation

In Frederic Jameson's telling postmodernism is the aesthetic and ideological expression of a capitalism in which consumer psychology integrates itself ever more pervasively into the art and culture of society. The epilogue of modernism, postmodernism abandons the roots of critique, expressive and emotional depth, belief in progress, and is marked by the collapse of the distinction between high vs. low culture, surface vs. depth, and history vs. simulation. Jameson (1991) mentions the role of pastiche in this context, where the imitation of past styles borrows only the visual representations yet not the meaning it originally embodies or the purpose it attempts to convey, forestalling the critical engagement with history (p.68) [3]. The other defining characteristic of the postmodern trend is what Jameson calls the waning of affect. Emotions in the postmodern works no longer dive into depth or are transformative; instead, they remain surface-level, performative, and disconnected from character (p.64). Simulation replaces the historical purpose to highlight conditions from the past into merely simulating the look or feeling of that history through nostalgic lenses (p.66).

These trends extrapolate into a larger cultural transformation in which style replaces substance. Cultural products are recycled in recognizable forms yet fall short of "meaning" in the traditional context, resulting in a loop of aesthetic references stripped of political or ideological values and critique. Upon examining this in film and cinema, this defines film as no longer a medium for historical or political engagement, only achieving surface-level spectacles and stylistic collages. That said, Jameson's framework is especially useful in this paper when applying to analysis of how postmodern French cinema manage the question of national identity, political divides, and social belongings.

Postmodern French Cinema follows on the heels of its predecessor, the French New Wave, a movement that helped define the subsequent history of film. This revolution embraced cinematic rule-breaking, particularly relishing in its defiance of the "Old Hollywood" style, its creative use of jump cuts, rejection of strict continuity in favor of emotional impact, and its conscious deconstruction and defamiliarization of film production itself. Shaped by global cultural shifts and France's own political and social upheavals, filmmakers began turning away from social realist or more politically driven cinema and turned toward highly stylized, more self-aware forms. While the New Wave embraced certain modernist techniques (notably, nonlinear editing), its luminaries increasingly borrowed from and blended together various genres and periods, such that the political impulse behind this exposure of the production of images gave way to an increasing fixation on, and playing with, the nature of representation itself. In this way, visual innovation began to trump social critique in the postmodern approach, as questions of identity and reality became central for many French filmmakers.

Filmmakers approached these preoccupations in different ways, often exhibiting some of what would later become seen as the hallmarks of postmodernity: fragmented narratives, self-referentiality, aesthetic excess, and nostalgia stripped of historical depth. In the case of directors like Jean-Pierre Jeunet (of Amélie fame), this can be seen in his exclusion of contemporary social issues like immigration, racial tensions, and economic instability, while the world he constructs incorporates stylistic references to older cinematic forms, such as the French New Wave or silent film. By contrast, other postmodern French films like La Haine utilize these techniques while maintaining a substantial political valence. In both cases, style becomes a way to communicate social dislocation, either by masking it through an abundance of backward-looking charm, or by visualizing it in its brutality.

3. Amélie: Paris and the Aesthetics of Erasure

Amélie is set in Paris in the year 1997. In the film, director Jean-Pierre Jeunet responds to the problems of modern society (globalization, loneliness, and unemployment, for instance) by presenting Montmartre as a timeless, idealized village devoid of immigrants, poverty, or politics. Jeunet fed the French audience a sugary mouthful of an almost heavenly Paris, where the angelic Amélie spreads goodness and purity around her. A cinematic world that retreats from realism, this poetic vision of hope and kindness is aided by highly saturated coloring, playful editing, wide-lens closeups, and fantasy-driven mise-en-scène descending from the (now old) French New Wave, as Jeunet's message also defies the telltale stories of hard-

ship that the Hollywood film industry loved producing. The core themes of love, in all its simplicity, becomes a symbolic answer to the socio-cultural anxieties of the time, and all visible signs of the banlieues, state violence, or historical trauma, are excluded from such (Astle 2018)[5].

Postmodern techniques are prevalent all throughout Amélie, as Jeunet borrows them heavily from the French New Wave but recontextualizes its tricks and tropes within a whimsical, and decidedly apolitical, framework. Jeunet's use of jump cuts, fourth wall breaks, surreal montage, and voiceover narrations is a direct allusion to the former innovations from directors like Godard and Truffaut. However, the usage of these techniques serves not to critique but to stylize a sentimental image of Paris. For example, Jeunet utilizes the technique of breaking the fourth wall, where the character directly addresses the audience, a technique also employed in Jean-Paul Belmondo's Pierrot le Fou (1965) and Jean-Luc Godard's Breathless (1960). But, in Amélie, it serves more to establish charm for the character rather than to provoke critical reflection. Similarly, in a scene as Amélie watches a movie, frames of Jules & Jim (1962) and even visual motifs such as a recurring fly flash over the screen, a tribute to classic New Wave films. Voiceover and wide lens close-ups all contribute to the film's "quirkiness"; they are also recognizable signatures of the Nouvelle Vague films.

These characteristics broadly can be described by cultural theorist Fredric Jameson's notion of pastiche. As Jameson writes, unlike parody, "Pastiche is […] a neutral practice of […] mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motive, amputated of the satiric impulse…" (Jameson, 1991, pg. 65)[3]. Amélie fits perfectly into this mold, as it uses diverse forms to construct a nostalgic simulation of Frenchness that masks, rather than critiques, the fracture in the contemporary French society. The New Wave filmmakers embraced their own ideology to produce thoughtful and provocative films, rejecting the conventional and inauthentic mainstream cinema, yet when Amélie borrows these characteristics, they suddenly become devoid of their original meaning, reduced to the status of the purely aesthetic.

The film's narrative is built around a series of whimsical micro-interventions, as the titular Amélie helps the lives of those around her through anonymous and playful acts of kindness. As a response to the common emotions of isolation and desire for connection, Jeunet portrays the significance of an act of kindness as magic that heals the world of its frail and fraying connections. All the characters Amélie helps lack a certain spark igniting their life, and Amélie is the anonymous angel who wordlessly answers the prayers of these individuals and brings them the thing they lack. The message of the film appears to be: Amélie's in her Paris. All's right with the world.

This emphasis on kindly micro-interventions replaces systemic critique. Rather than confronting the common themes of loneliness and the anxieties attending globalization, Jeunet constructs a world of whimsical romanticism that transmutes social anxieties into charming acts of serendipity. The harsh realities are erased beneath a coating of aesthetic harmony, constituting what Jameson defines as "the waning of affect," where emotional gestures are stylized and hollow, where political energies dissolve into mere sentimentality (Jameson 1991, pg 61-64) [3].

Amélie, at least, made its intentions clear in its desire to depict only a utopian Paris. By removing unattractive (to some) aspects of urban life, like graffiti and rubbish cans, in post-production, Amélie quite literally vanished all signs of France's fractured social realities. Regarding this choice, Steinberg (2001) argues that "Jeunet's Paris is a thoroughly sanitized version of the real thing; clean, free from honking cars, tourists, foreigners and other complications[6]. Even the beggars are happy in such an idyllic Paris." Jeunet's version of Paris is an aesthetic simulation, one that is ethnically homogenous, clean, and nostalgic. The deliberate absence of the banlieues functions ideologically to uphold the national myth of harmony and cultural purity, dismissing the places where France's postcolonial tensions are most visibly seen.

Criticized by many, like Kaganski (2001), for propagating a cultural homogeneity and stereotypical "Frenchness," Amélie offers audiences only a phantasmic version of Paris, one out of time with its 1997 setting and more strongly adhering to the "naturalism and lyrical stylization" of 1930s poetic realism (Lanzoni 2002). In this way, Amélie serves as a prime example of a "simulation" in Jean Baudrillard's terms—namely, a representation that not only replaces reality but erases the possibility of accessing it. The film's Paris is not a reinterpretation of the city but a hyperreal fantasy, one that bears little trace of the economic inequality, racial diversity, and urban precarity that define contemporary France.

4. La Haine: The Banlieues as Cinematic Rupture

As we will see, La Haine made a series of very different stylistic and political choices. Most obvious is the choice to convert the color footage to black and white in post-production—a decision done not for nostalgia (far from it) but to narrow the viewer's focus to the fundamental issues presented on screen and, by extension, in French society. In stark contrast to the whimsical stylization of Amélie, La Haine employs a gritty aesthetic realism in order to confront audiences with France's fractured social landscape. The black and white film emphasizes a world drained of romanticism and color, and, through techniques like handheld cameras and diegetic sound, a visceral realism is created to immerse the viewer in the raw, tense

atmosphere of the banlieues. This creates a remarkable contrast with Amélie's stylized warmth, confronting the grayness of the banlieues, and emphasizing the disillusionment, alienation, and youth radicalization. Kassovitz conveys his choice to convert to black and white is to depict this as documentary rather than art, stating "What black and white does is bring poetry into reality" (Aftab 2020), showcasing the aesthetic decision has an intent of foregrounding the brutality, discrimination, and poverty prevalent in its real-world setting[7].

Other decisions, like the use of handheld cameras and intense diegetic sound, further intensify the film's sense of urgency and unrest. The handheld cinematography evokes an authentic documentary style that the black and white offsets, placing the viewer in the middle of the social unrest and in the cracks where tension arises. Used during scenes of police chases and fights in the alleyways, the handheld camera's instability mirrors the volatility of the banlieues themselves and the emotional precarity of the youth. Likewise, the usage of diegetic sound immerses the audience within the messy soundscapes of the suburbs, amplifying the film's realist tensions. From the rumbling surroundings to media outlet reports of riots in the city to the echoes of police sirens in the distance, La Haine's soundscape feels unfiltered, urgent, and real. These aesthetic choices form a cohesive whole, one that Kassovitz uses like a stone lobbed at the injustices of the Republic.

Moreover, La Haine depicts the banlieues as a metaphorical and literal prison constraining the trio's movements in subtle ways. The enclosed architecture of the suburbs, claustrophobic close-ups, and the inaccessible urban center conspire to confine Hubert, Saïd, and Vinz, denying them both social mobility and civic belonging. This can be seen in multiple scenes, for example, the rooftop scene, which isolates the glowing Eiffel Tower in the distance. It's clear, too, that the trio's identities are at play in this spatial enclosure: Saïd is Arab, Hubert is a Black African, and Vinz is Jewish. This exclusion is exemplified by the film's repeated depiction of police brutality, acting as both the enforcer and a symbol of their systemic marginalization. The city's refusal of them, spitting them out and consigning them to the outer darkness, is, of course, a metaphor, but it's also a representation of the very real and tangible acts of exclusion that drive their hatred toward what this social order represents, and it's this symbiotic relationship between exclusion and violence that the narrative seizes on.

La Haine is constructed around a circular narrative that traps its characters in a cycle of hopelessness, underscoring the film's structural pessimism, using the same line to begin and end the film: "Heard about the guy who fell from a skyscraper? On his way past each floor, he says to himself, 'So far, so good.' But what matters is not the fall. It's how you land." This refrain serves as a bookend the film's commentary on social collapse: France is caught in a downward spiral marked by rampant police brutality, social uprisings, economic inequality, and racial divisions that fracture its collective national identity. On its descent, peace is an illusion masking the growing hatred brewing just beneath the surface. For this reason, the film is punctuated by precise time stamps at one-hour intervals, which act like ticking bombs building towards an anticipated explosion. These timestamps deny the viewers any illusion of narrative flexibility, marking instead a countdown towards the ineluctable and inevitable. La Haine asks the audience, "How will France land?" Through these strategic choices, La Haine represents a deadlocked society where there is no obvious redemptive solution, no transformative breakthrough just around the corner, only the countdown until the next explosion.

In James F. Austin's article "Destroying the Banlieue: Reconfigurations of Suburban Space in French Film," the writer explores how many films participate in the erasure or marginalization of the banlieue, and how La Haine refuses this, rendering the suburbs not as a backdrop but the center of the social critique for the French Republic itself[4]. As James F. Austin argues, the banlieue is not simply a physical space, but a constructed and politically charged territory, "generated as a spatial function of some larger system."(pg.82). The political elements of immigration, French demographics, and racial segregation stem from the origins of the banlieue, and mainstream French cinema often reconfigures the banlieue into a space of fear or invisibility (Wakeman 2013)[8]. By contrast, La Haine insists on visualizing it in detail, refusing both its destruction and denial, foregrounding the banlieue as France's structural unconscious. In such, the banlieue becomes what Austin calls "a spatial metaphor for national dysfunction," a zone where France's unresolved postcolonial tensions are most visibly staged (Austin, 2009, pg.92). The act of demanding recognition of the banlieue's sociopolitical centrality is a cinematic reclamation of space, where the margins become the stage for confronting the myth of national cohesion.

5. Comparative Analysis: Space, Style, and Belonging

In Amélie, Paris becomes a utopian world too good to be true, a whimsical, fantastical sanctuary where time slows and conflict dissolves into sentimentality, where social tensions are simply resolved by acts of kindness and genuineness. Jeunet's Montmartre is a meticulously crafted city, free of racial tension, poverty, or political unrest, posing more as a romantic memory than a living realistic setting. This version of Paris provides more than the real thing in terms of comfort, yet this comes at the expense of exclusion; ultimately, it preserves the illusion of harmony by omitting the traces of social rupture and instability. In stark contrast, La Haine presents Paris as the city of exclusion, visible only by far in proximity yet never

able to be fully accessed by its protagonists. The Eiffel Tower glows in the distance, symbolizing a Republic that doesn't live up to its egalitarian creed, and which turns its back on those in need. Instead, it dutifully polices its postcolonial subjects and denies both their freedom and belonging, staging a confrontation that Amélie prefers to erase. In this way, the two films offer starkly different visions of Paris: one as an enclosed dream, Jeunet's personal safe place, and the other as a closed door, reality as Kassovitz sees it.

The spatial logic of Amélie is defined by whimsical interiors, perfectly paved roads, charming alleyways, and seamless movement through the winding city. Amélie flits freely between the café and apartment, between metro stations and grocery stores. There are no structural forces impeding her way, and so this Paris appears cozy, intimate, and welcoming—a signifier of unified France that no longer exists, if it ever did. Conversely, La Haine is spatially claustrophobic, and filled with obstacles that confront our trio as they embark on their journey. The three friends' navigation is met with obstruction and surveillance, ranging from police barricades to malfunctioning cars. Spatial access to the city and its promise of full citizenship is denied, creating a constant tension between movement and entrapment. While Amélie erases the presence of the suburbs entirely, La Haine centralizes the peripheral, showcasing the suburbs' oppressive architecture, unpaved roads, scattered junkyards, and decaying high-rises. Whereas Amélie's architecture and sense of space offer comfort and visual pleasure, La Haine's cinematic architecture confines, creating a sense of entrapment and unease.

The stylistic differences between Amélie and La Haine reinforce the films' opposing ideologies. Amélie simulates affect and community through its skillful deployment of French New Wave and Poetic Realist techniques and tropes, utilizing saturated warm color palettes, whimsical narration, and quirky flashbacks. Yet this stylization overlays a sense of harmony on a fractured social reality, and emotional simulation replaces true engagement with political or historical depth. La Haine's bold stylistic choices belie its filmmaker's desire to make clear the raw cultural and economic tensions of the banlieue. Its style refuses ornamentation and serves to expose rather than conceal, resisting the flattening of emotions and politics. The two styles both serve to be representation of postmodernist approaches to the French internal divides, yet diverge in directions of responses: Amélie retreats; La Haine confronts.

Jameson's "waning of affect" can be seen in both films, and yet is remarkably different in its modes. Whereas Amélie simulates affect, La Haine depicts its impossibility (see Jameson, 15–16). The characters in Amélie find agency through affective fantasy, acts of kindness, imaginative interventions, and romantic longing. Through the intertwining of play and intimacy, Amélie offers the viewer redemptive faith in its dreamy vision of a Paris preserved in amber. By contrast, La Haine critiques the society's destruction of subaltern agency. This film's trio struggles not only against the city's violence and oppression, but also against their own psychological erasure, navigating what is wrong and what is right, struggling between committing to justice or vengeance. Their identities are racialized and criminalized, their desires frustrated, and their lives are shaped by disillusionment and resistance. Jameson's definition of waning of affect applies here, too, as La Haine memorably depicts the impossibility of emotional catharsis and satisfaction in a world of surveillance, oppression, and prejudice.

6. Conclusion

Amélie and La Haine together exemplify the divergent pathways in which postmodern French cinema takes its approach in response to France's status quo. Through their differing takes on spatial and temporal choices, aesthetics, and character subjectivity, the two films construct two radically differing visions of France. Amélie builds an enclosed, idealized, stylized, and nostalgic version of Paris, actively erasing the presence of the banlieue and France's postcolonial realities in favor of the aesthetic warmth and fantastical dreams. Conversely, La Haine strips away illusion, confronting the viewer with a brutally realist portrait of exclusion, surveillance, oppression, isolation, and structural violence. This contrast reveals how, through space and aesthetics, through style and fragmentation, these techniques aid the construction of differing visions of France that either deny or confront the societal fractures.

What is gradually clarified is that postmodernism is not inherently apolitical; rather, it becomes a vehicle for political positionings depending on where and how a film chooses to look. In Amélie, the film chooses to divert its sight, drawing its focus onto personal interactions and simple pleasures in life to distract from demographic tensions. In La Haine, the gaze is relentless and direct, as Kassovitz forces the viewers to confront the "fall" of the Republic, to witness its unhealed postcolonial wounds and widespread systemic disenfranchisement.

Ultimately, Amélie and La Haine offer not only two competing cinematic visions but also competing ethical stances toward the French postcolonial status quo, as both suggest possible ways of responding to nagging questions of national belonging, collective memory, and imagined futures. Through their representation of identity, each film answers the question of who gets to belong, and who remains excluded. Amélie clings to a fantasy of cultural cohesion, while La Haine believes cohesion is nowhere near achieved. Together, the films lay bare the colliding ideologies of contemporary France. Between

remembering and forgetting, illusion and exposure, the two films pose a still timely question as to the future of France — namely, whether it is to be a nation that dreams or a nation that burns.

Reference

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