

# FROM REALISTIC NARRATIVES TO SOCIAL FANTASY: OF NIGHTCLUBS AND SUPERMARKETS IN SOME CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES ON MAGHREBI-FRENCH

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I propose to explore a number of Maghrebi-French fictions and some recent films about the "banlieues"<sup>1</sup> to investigate how ethnically coded appearances are being produced, made visible or invisible, and interpreted. These accounts, whether incidentally or purposefully, implicitly or manifestly, make ethnicity into an operative interpretive category, thus highlighting the discrepancy between the legal codes in sociological research and government policies, from which ethnicity is absent, and everyday life transactions and practices which sanction it as effective.

I use the term "ethnic," not to describe an identity, but rather an unfixed social category, gathering individuals who recognize themselves and are recognized by others as belonging to it. Ethnicity emerges from everyday social interactions and is a function of a process of boundary maintenance between different groups. These boundaries are subject to re-definition depending on the social contexts in which they become significant.<sup>2</sup>

Until recently,<sup>3</sup> ethnicity had been ignored by the State and, consequently, by researchers as well,<sup>4</sup> as a legitimate interpretive model for social relationships and political struggles. According to Pierre-Jean Simon,<sup>5</sup> a sociologist, this blind spot has two main sources. Epistemologically, he underlines the predominance of Marxism and the class question over the ethnic question, as well as the influence of structuralism that led to an organicist vision of societies which tended to ignore the relational quality of the definitions of these societies. Politically, he points at the internalization of the national ideology and the stress put on the republican principle of equality.

As a consequence, the emergence of ethnicities is considered as a symptom of a disease which progressively spreads inside the social "body." Another metaphor compares it to a tear in what Mitterrand termed "the social fabric." This interpretation holds as long as one accepts the assumption underlying the metaphor which depicts civil society as a fabric neatly woven together. If I take, as a preexisting model, a rag made of shreds and patches grossly stitched together, the

interpretation of the tear does not work anymore. Or rather, it becomes one tear among others, in a fabric whose mode of production resembles that of a quilt. This interpretation, which favors social over ethnic interpretations, holds manifestations of ethnicity as the exception rather than the norm, as a form of disease rather than an evidence of vitality.

Ethnicity represents a scarecrow. It is linked to images, or rather specters of American ghettos, which regularly haunt the French media to point at the excess of the ethnic logic. The resort to the American situation as a fixed anti-model of integration through communities contributes to the disqualification of this category as a heuristic and hermeneutic model while it allows for the counter definition of a French model of individual integration.

In this context, ethnicity is nevertheless present and used by both the people who are coded as ethnic and by the State. In "New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall points to the construction of a form of ethnicity that is invisible, because it is hegemonic, namely "Englishness." The same applies to French ethnicity as a form of national identity.

The non-recognition of ethnicity at the level of legal and public policies does not prevent it from working as a decoding tool in the practices of everyday life under the form of ethnic tactics and strategies, to borrow De Certeau's categories. As Patrick Simon puts it:

*Le principe d'égalité qui justifie l'invisibilité des différences est louable. Il assure, dans l'absolu, la non-discrimination. Pourtant, dès que celle-ci s'est développée . . . qu'elle s'est insinuée dans la mentalité des individus à tous les niveaux de responsabilité, le principe d'égalité s'inverse et devient vecteur d'exclusion. (2)*

The fictitious accounts I mentioned earlier are very often presented as realistic comments and representations of the social, economic and cultural realities of the youth born of (North) African Immigrants living in peripheral districts of working class housing projects. I will concentrate on how the category of ethnicity becomes significant in the economy of these representations, since, as Stuart Hall reminds us in his article on "New Ethnicities," ". . . only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do [events,

relations, structures] have or can they be constructed within meaning" (254). My objective is not to erase the boundary between fictions and lived experiences, but to examine how the former makes the latter significant.

In her well known article, "Foundational Fictions: When History Was Romance in Latin America," Doris Sommer emphasizes the "connections between history, politics and fiction in the process of nation building" (111). She shows how Latin American novels were born of the gaps and absences in historical accounts and found their legitimation and origin in their supplementary nature, while increasing and fostering "the legitimacy of the emerging nation," whose (hi)story they were writing.

In the case of Maghrebi-French subjects within the French State, one cannot really speak of an emerging nation, but rather of the redefinition of the French Nation from within.<sup>6</sup> I propose to read the texts, written or filmed, that take them as subjects, as "foundational fictions," for their mere intervention in the cultural field involves a production of meaning which is political, if only in a mediate fashion, as a reading of the positionalities of the characters they depict within the French nation will show. To do so, Sommer's emphasis on the "conjugal rhetoric of national romance" (133) comes in handy in my analysis. Match-makings, in the novels she studies, are a way "to mitigate oppositions across class and regional lines" (139) and offer the possibility to transcend conflicts between classes and races, by figuring a utopian salvation through the foundation of a couple and eventually a family, thus establishing a parallel between nations and families.<sup>7</sup>

The accounts I am interested in might not fit in the paradigm of the "foundational romance" since romance is very often secondary in their plot. But the lack of romance is just as telling and this paradigm nevertheless offers a productive interpretive grid to see how integration, through the formation of potential couples, is portrayed in these representations. Fabrice Pliskin, a movie critic for *Le Nouvel Observateur*<sup>8</sup> remarks that in these movies the same scene returns. The main characters (usually young males of African or North-African descent) are refused entrance to a night club because of their ethnically coded physical appearances. This obsessive scene of exclusion and opposition between an inside and an outside world, comparable to a primal scene, gives these narratives a hallucinatory quality that brings them closer to the fantastic genre. They display the history of a specific

fear, the fear of the colonizer towards the colonized, of those from the inside towards those from the outside. They try to trespass into this world through different stratagems: entering by ruse thanks to the "protection" and intercession of Franco-French women encountered by the door of the night club, in the movie *Rai*; or resorting to violence and revenge as in *La Haine* by Matthieu Kassowitz; or just going away to places where they know they can get in to find youths from the same suburbs, as in *Hexagone*. We find a similar scene in *Béni ou le paradis privé*<sup>9</sup>, a novel for the most part classical and realistic, by Azouz Begag.

The main character, Béni, a French youth of North African descent, is in love with a young classmate who responds to the sweet and symbolic name of France. The book ends with Béni's failed attempt at entering a nightclub, "Le Paradis de la nuit" where he anxiously hoped that he could finally declare his love to France. Béni has painstakingly endeavored to change his image. He has uncurled his hair with an iron and greased it back with olive oil to give it some brilliance. To hide the smell, he has splashed some eau de Cologne on himself. In a sadly ironic reversal, his efforts at literally covering the signs of a potential difference make them stand out even more blatantly and the bouncer spots him immediately as he is climbing up the stairs leading to "le Paradis." The "Paradis" turns out to be private (*privé*) and as a result, Béni is deprived (*privé*) of "Paradis" as the title announced, playing on the word '*privé*' which can mean both 'private' and 'deprived.' Béni's symbolic date with France, for the love of whom he was ready to forget about the Algerian war of Independence and his father's misgivings about France (the country), is impossible. The novel ends on an unusual *deus ex machina*, the intervention of a shadow which calls out to Béni, encouraging him to resist, as they fly away to a "Paradis de lumière" which might very well be Béni's "Paradis privé."<sup>10</sup> The night club scene is the point where the narration slips into hallucination.

The nightclub is a place of consumption for goods and people, where leisure and pleasure can be consumed. It constitutes a nexus where gender, class and ethnic issues are tied since it is a place where transactions could take place across gender, class, and ethnic lines, through encounters with people from different categories. In this sense, the night club could be the laboratory where the ferment and cement of a new nation could be fabricated, since sociologists have shown that mixed marriages are the best indicator of integration. Because it is a

place where romantic economies are managed and economic cells (i.e. couples) are being formed, it is also the crossroad where this process can be disrupted, where boundaries can be crossed but also restated and maintained. Doris Sommer's model of the foundational romances emphasizes the liminality of Maghrebi-French youth's positions in these narratives as well as in the Nation. This liminality is reflected by the dualistic genre of the narratives that depict their positions--realistic yet hallucinatory.

The supermarket is another place where ethnic boundaries are both maintained and questioned, another temple of the consumption society, where goods are offered but not always available. A documentary film by Frédéric Laffont, entitled *Anges et démons de la cité*<sup>11</sup>, depicts internal struggle (as suggested by the title "anges et démons") as well as social and economic conflicts being waged in a housing project or "cité" in Le Havre. There, Frédéric Laffont follows several youths and young adults, and tells the story of a local association, "Trait d'union," created by Faouzi, a young teacher of Algerian descent, and his Franco-French wife. Their aim was to solve the problems existing between the unemployed and economically deprived youth of the cité and the owners of stores around the local supermarket, "Auchan," which the youth compare to a treasure chest and a safe.<sup>12</sup> Thanks to the cooperation between local representatives and residents, ethnic parameters have been used to contain the violence and the thefts in a very efficient manner. The managers of the supermarket and the local stores have decided to employ youths from the housing project as regular employees and security guards, in order to keep the merchandise from other youth who, very often, turn out to be their neighbors, cousins, and even siblings. Integration means participating in and defending the mechanisms of capitalism, and is opposed to a logic of theft that relies on the somewhat exonerating assumption that property is theft. Hiring the "grands frères," the oldest brothers, who, in North African families, are traditionally invested with powers equivalent to those of the fathers, is a way to use ethnic means of control and logics for the purpose of social containment. This type of integration is considered by some as a new form of racial fixation since only security guards of (North) African origin are perceived to be capable of dealing with their alleged peers.

Archival footage of surveillance video recorded by the supermarket cameras is embedded in Frédéric Laffont's documentary. These brief

passages show violent physical confrontations between the guards and the youth at the gates of the supermarket. These scenes are complex for they show a confrontation that is often staged by the younger kids to create a diversion so that others can get in without trouble and go about their business. They reoccur to punctuate and offer a counterpoint to the narrations of the two characters whom we follow throughout the whole movie. The archival footage illustrates their words while also interrupting them, giving a sense of drama and tension to their relations of supermarket tales.

Their very reoccurrence gives these scenes a hallucinatory quality. These confrontational sequences show silent images that are somewhat unclear. They are rather short, not more than a couple of seconds, and the shooting angle, from above, makes it hard to distinguish the fighting bodies. The lack of transition puts the spectator face to face with what seems to be a raw piece of reality. However, this violence is presented without sound, which lends it a dream-like quality, while avoiding a paroxysmic depiction. It disconcerts the spectator used to associating violence on the screen with a busy and loud sound track that helps him or her identify the degree of violence. The fixed shooting angle of the surveillance camera, the absence of "mise en scène" of the event and the absence of editing within the scene contribute to the lack of clarity of this piece of information.

The inclusion of these scenes underlines the illegibility of everyday real life, which borders on hallucination and fantasy, and demonstrates that it requires interpretation. Interpretive comments from both sides in conflict are provided. They impinge on the archival sequences, yet they still leave room and even call for more interpretation, for Frédéric Laffont manages to show us violent scenes while framing them, without fixing their meaning. He does not reproduce the violence they contain by imposing on them and onto us, as spectators, a violating interpretation.

I centered my argument on two social and economic spaces: the nightclub and the supermarket. These spaces are neither closed nor opened, they are the spaces where social, ethnic and economic transactions take place, sites of potential exchange and therefore, infiltration and struggle. As such, they constitute locations where conflicts and confrontation take place, but also sites of increased visibility. They are the scenes where narratives of hallucination and obsessive stories of exclusion are played out. This makes them

instrumental for the recognition of ethnic difference which facilitates what Adil Jazouli calls "conflicting integration" or integration through conflict.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These movies are *Hexagone* by Malik Chibane, *La Haine* by Matthieu Kassowitz, *Rai* by Thomas Gilou, as well as a TV documentary by Frédéric Laffont, *Anges et démons de la cité*.

<sup>2</sup> To a certain extent, ethnically coded identities are comparable to the symbolic goods defined by Pierre Bourdieu. They are goods because they circulate in a cultural, political and economic market and are attributed a value that will determine the position and importance of their holders. They are symbols because they signify, in a polysemous way, and call for interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> Over the last fifteen years or so in France, due, in part, to the process of administrative decentralization started by the Socialist government in 1981, and the increased but still conflictual rise in visibility of "the Arabs from France," and the "Beurs," there has been an increasing interest in the social sciences for theories of ethnicity as a category that could help identify and act on some specific social phenomena.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, since 1992, France has refused to sign the European convention on regional and minority languages, recognizing minorities rights to speak and teach their languages. Another telling example is the fact that official statistics do not take into account ascendancy and ethnic origin. Children of immigrants who are French cannot be singled out, at least for statistics purposes, since they are part of the nation, "une et indivisible". The only two signifying and authorized categories are "French" and "Foreigners," which prevents from taking into account the social trajectories of the French children of these foreigners.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Jean Simon. "L'étude des problèmes de minorités et des relations inter-ethniques dans l'anthropologie et la sociologie françaises." *Pluriel* 32-33 (1982/1983): 13-25.

<sup>6</sup> In this case the absences and gaps of History are what Malik Chibane, director, producer and screen writer of the movie *Hexagone*,

calls "l'invisibilité culturelle de la génération Beur:" "J'ai réalisé ce film pour être fidèle à une manière d'être, pour lutter contre une invisibilité culturelle, celle des beurs dans les banlieues. Faire *Hexagone*, c'était également un moyen de mémoriser ce quartier, ce qui compose la mémoire collective de ce lieu" (Florence Maignan. "Interview avec Malik Chibane" *Macadam* 13 (1994)).

<sup>7</sup> I find an echo of Sommer's emphasis on Romance in Michèle Tribalat groundbreaking demographic study on migrants and their children, appropriately entitled *Faire France* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995) in which the role of mixed unions is considered as: "un point de résistance fort et un enjeu important du processus d'assimilation parce qu'elles impliquent une acculturation extrêmement rapide" (89).

<sup>8</sup> Fabrice Pliskin. "La cité des morts-vivants." *Le Nouvel Observateur* 22-28 June 1995: 112.

<sup>9</sup> Azouz, Begag. *Béni ou le paradis privé*. Paris: Seuil, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> This episode is actually autobiographical and its haunting quality was made even more manifest when Azouz Begag told President Jacques Chirac about it, during his meeting with local officials and representatives of the community in a "banlieue" of Lyon. Jacques Chirac was very surprised, and the following exchange allegedly took place, according to *Le Monde* (14 October 1995): "Mais enfin, aurait dit le président, il y a quelques semaines, j'ai rencontré une soixantaine de jeunes d'origine maghrébine et africaine dans un quartier du Havre. Jamais ils ne m'ont dit qu'ils avaient été mis à la porte d'une boîte de nuit!" "C'est normal, monsieur le président: ils ne peuvent pas être mis à la porte d'une boîte de nuit, puisque, déjà, ils ne peuvent pas y entrer!" a répondu l'écrivain" (6).

<sup>11</sup> Laffont, Frédéric, dir. *Anges et démons de la cité*. FR3, Paris. 24 Aug. 1994.

<sup>12</sup> One of them calls it, in reference to the Arabian nights tale "Ali Baba et les 40 voleurs," la caserne d'Ali Baba, while the original is "La caverne d'Ali Baba". This slight shift from caverne (cave) into caserne (barracks) allies images of wealth and military safekeeping, which shows us that the youth are not fooled by the mechanics of Capitalism.

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