

(Un)Familiar Spaces: Paris in *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011)

Alex Hastie

Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

Hastie, A., 2021. (Un) Familiar Spaces: paris in *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011). *Transnational Screens*, 12(3), pp.233-248.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/25785273.2021.2012936>

DOI 10.1080/25785273.2021.2012936


ISSN 2578-5273

ESSN 2578-5265

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(Un)Familiar Spaces: paris in *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011)

Alex Hastie 

School of Energy, Construction and Environment, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

ABSTRACT

The Hollywood-inspired Maghrebi-French films *Outside the Law* (Bouchareb, 2010) and *Free Men* (Ferroukhi, 2011) narrate geographies of exclusion and belonging in Paris, France during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) and World War Two (1939–1945) respectively. The films employ space and spatial metaphors to articulate and insist on the place of Maghrebi-French people in France. In doing so, they work to disrupt dominant imaginaries of Paris, whilst also revealing the possibilities for resistance in the city as seen from the point-of-view of North-African immigrants. The films are a significant part of a cultural and commercial ‘shift’ toward more mainstream filmmaking in Maghrebi-French cinema. Through reading some of the spaces in the films, this paper interrogates the ways in which they map new geographies of a (post)colonial Paris reimaged at the intersections of colonialism, beur cinema, and Hollywood. The geographical imaginaries constituted in the films are read as the product of a stylistic aesthetic that helps to locate Maghrebi-French identity beyond the confines of the French banlieue. In doing so, the paper contributes to recent debates around cultural flows and exchanges in transnational cinema by centring the importance of space in the context of an aesthetic shift in Maghrebi-French cinema.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonial;
Maghrebi-French; Paris;
space; genre; Algeria

Introduction

The Hollywood-inspired Maghrebi-French films *Hors la loi/ Outside the Law* (Bouchareb, 2010) and *Les Hommes Libre/: Free Men* (Ferroukhi, 2011) narrate geographies of exclusion and belonging in Paris, France during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) and World War Two (1939–1945) respectively. American gangster inspired *Outside the Law* (2010), tells the story of the Algerian War of Independence from the perspective of three Algerian brothers in Paris, each of whom fight and resist the French in their own way. Much of the film is set in and around the bidonville/shantytown of Nanterre, from which the Algerian Front de libération nationale (FLN) organise against the French police. Ismael Ferroukhi’s *Free Men* (2011) is set in a very different Paris, one that is occupied by Nazi Germany. Much of the action takes place in and around the city’s Grand Mosque, focusing on the Mosque’s efforts towards

CONTACT Alex Hastie  ac9156@coventry.ac.uk  School of Energy, Construction and Environment, Coventry University, Sir John Laing Building, Much Park Street, Coventry, CV1 2LT, UK

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

the rescue of European and North African Jews. First, in borrowing the popular cinematic conventions of gangster and war genre, the films (whether intentionally or not) appeal to broader groups of audiences beyond France, particularly in the Anglosphere (see Hastie 2021). Second, in this context, the films disrupt popular imaginaries of Paris, foregrounding marginal and religious spaces in the city's history. This approach works to tell what are likely to be stories from unfamiliar perspectives to many beyond France, in familiar ways. Put simply, subversive perspectives of Paris are made more broadly accessible using more globally appealing aesthetic conventions.

The films are a significant part of a cultural and commercial shift toward more mainstream filmmaking in Maghrebi-French cinema, a move that has been dubbed 'post-beur' (Higbee 2013) as films made by directors of North African origin are done so with bigger budgets for bigger audiences. Rachid Bouchareb, director of *Outside the Law* (2010), exemplifies this move having made a so-called American trilogy of films: *Just like a Woman* (2012), starring Sienna Miller; *Two Men in Town* (2014) starring Forest Whitaker and Harvey Keitel; and *Belleville Cop* (2018) starring French actor Omar Sy. Through a closer reading of some of the spaces in *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011), this article interrogates the ways in which they map new geographies of a (post) colonial Paris reimagined at the intersections of colonialism, beur cinema, and Hollywood. The geographical imaginaries constituted in the films are read as the product of a stylistic aesthetic that helps to locate Maghrebi-French identity beyond the confines of the French banlieue. In doing so, the paper contributes to recent debates around cultural flows and exchanges in transnational cinema (Higbee 2019b) by centring the importance of space in the context of an aesthetic shift in Maghrebi-French cinema.

This article first of all discusses Maghrebi-French, or beur, cinema focusing on its tradition of subverting dominant ways of representing the city, its concern with themes of belonging, and more recent developments into more mainstream filmmaking. This article will also examine what implications these readings of the films have for how scholars think of concepts and categories of transnational and postcolonial film. It will then discuss in depth the carceral and religious spaces of the films, investigating them for the ways they produce popularly inspired ways of looking at and subverting space in Paris. The spaces at the centre of *Outside the Law* (2010) represent the containment of Algerians in Paris, through the spaces of the prison and shantytown that reflect a colonial desire for both removal and control, depicted using Hollywood gangster aesthetics. Through the representation of Muslim spaces in *Free Men* (2011), Paris is further reimagined through the Algerian immigrant point-of-view, and with the Grand Mosque of Paris situated at the centre of the city. This article argues that the films destabilise familiar imaginaries of Paris (see Amine 2018), representing and centring the alternative carceral and Muslim spaces of the city.

Spaces of Maghrebi-French cinema: Aesthetics, narrative and style

Space has been a key theme for scholars of Maghrebi-French film (Bloom 1999; Levine 2008; Gott 2013), who have thus far focused on the representation of the banlieue, and more recently themes of mobility and borders. At the heart of Maghrebi-French cinema is a drive to create space in the French nation for the 'beur'. The term beur was initially coined in the 1980s, at a time of riots and unrest in French cities, by young descendants of

North African immigrants as a way of both declining and appropriating the negative connotations attached to the racialised label 'Arabe' in French society (Tarr 2005). As a form of Parisian backslang (or 'verlan'), the term 'beur' rearranges and inverts the word 'Arabe' to produce something new from a subject position located in-between France and North Africa. Beur therefore signifies, as Naficy (2001) has noted, a form of 'creolisation' (or hybridisation) which initially symbolised a 'fractured French identity' and pointed towards a powerful 'generational consciousness' (Bloom 1999) of young men of North African origin, who demanded to be recognised as citizens of France.

Beur cinema not only emerged amidst recurrent outbreaks of violence, frustration, racism and political isolation, but in the specific geographical context of the French banlieue and 'projects' (cité), as a manifestation of the French state's 'logic of containment and regulation' (Bloom 1999, 471). For this reason, beur cinema is often conflated with banlieue cinema, due to the shared experiences of unemployment by beur, black, and white youths of French cities (Naficy 2001), something captured powerfully in Matthieu Kassovitz' *La Haine* (1995) (see Higbee 2019a). As scholars have pointed out, in particular Bloom (1999) and Levine (2008), there is a distinct geography to beur cinema that is didactically created on screen, including through spatial metaphors, as the films' central questions are as follows:

fundamentally spatial ones, questions about insiders and outsiders, about boundaries and exclusion, and they are similar to the thematic questions raised by the films about the place of immigrants and their descendants in contemporary French society (Levine 2008, 43).

Beur cinema began to reach wider audiences by the 1990s, which in turn inflected its style and its politics. Departing from the protagonists and style that characterised 1970s émigré film, beur cinema further drew on popular comedy genre and created 'desirable and streetwise male characters' in order to reach a more diverse 'crossover' audience (Tarr 2005). Whilst Bouchareb and Ferroukhi's films reflect a continuation of this popular male-focused style, there has also been an increase in female voices in post-beur cinema on both sides of the camera in films such as *L'honneur de ma famille* (Bouchareb, 1997) and *Inch'Allah Dimanche!* (Benguigui, 2001). In making commercially viable films and achieving popularity beyond minority-ethnic audiences, one of the key challenges for beur filmmakers was the 'delicate negotiation . . . in exposing the negative treatment of Maghrebi-French youth, without adopting an excessively hostile stance towards a French society in which, ultimately, they have a stake' (Higbee 2013, 11). Therefore, the aim of beur cinema was not necessarily to empower the beur (Tarr 1993), but rather by the 1990s the term beur was largely applied by film critics to define a body of film according to its ethnic origins, something many prominent filmmakers, such as Mehdi Charef, were reluctant to endorse. As Carrie Tarr neatly puts it, the term beur became used 'as a sop to the liberal-critical conscience rather than as a productive category for a transgressive political cinema which would call French identity, as well as Beur identity, into question' (Tarr 1993, 342).

What has been referred to as a 'landmark' change post-2000 by Will Higbee (2013) has seen beur, or Maghrebi-French, filmmakers and actors gradually enter the mainstream of French filmmaking. Previously defined by their marginality, films by Maghrebi-French filmmakers have recently achieved access to funding, marketing and distribution networks that were formerly 'reserved for only the most high-profile French mainstream

productions' (Higbee 2013, 1). Access to larger amounts of funding has inevitably led to an increase in volume of films by Maghrebi- French directors, as well as bigger-budget films, whilst increased marketing and distribution both within and beyond France has facilitated the growth in audiences (Durmelat and Swamy 2011), both of which further influence their thematic focus. If the *beur* cinema of the 1980s and 1990s was largely restricted to making films about the claustrophobic and 'delinquent' banlieue, films released since 2000 further question the rigidity of the Republic's borders (Gott 2013) and the safe nostalgia of its past (Higbee 2013). The specific historical trend in what Higbee coins 'post-beur' cinema, has been dubbed by him as counter-heritage (Higbee 2013) for the ways in which Ferroukhi and Bouchareb's films use the representational codes and iconographies of historical reconstruction commonly associated with the French heritage film, in order to challenge the dominant narratives of colonial nostalgia in French films such as *Indochine* (1992).

Contemporary Maghrebi-French cinema takes inspiration from a variety of different places, positioning itself beside other cultural histories and traditions for example, Algerian national cinema, French cinemas (including *beur*), and Hollywood. In doing so, it is informed by the films that preceded it, and borrows from the dominant genre conventions of Hollywood in order to define and construct its own platform, to reflect political concerns, and most importantly, to speak beyond the borders of France to wider audiences. Film genres themselves are not static, emerging at specific moments to reflect contemporary social problems. For example, the American gangster genre emerged amidst societal interest in, and fear of, organised crime in the 1930s, whilst the World War Two combat film genre materialised as America entered the war in 1943 (Bender, 2013). Genre undergoes continual processes of change and revision according to social and political circumstances. Edward Said (1994: 262) is instructive here as he points to the fluidity of culture, arguing that, 'culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures'.

As an increasingly cross-border experience (Bergfelder, 2005), questions about the fluidity of cultural ownership have been at the heart of debates about 'transnational cinema' (in its many guises) for many years (Ezra and Rowden, 2006; Durovicová and Newman, 2010). Higbee and Lim (2010, 8) cite this establishment of the transnational approach to cinema as being part of, 'a wider dissatisfaction expressed by scholars working across the humanities ... with the paradigm of the national as a means of understanding production, consumption and representation of cultural identity ... in an increasingly interconnected, multicultural and polycentric world'.

Recently, scholars have returned to these debates, not least in a 2019 special issue of *Transnational Screens*, to examine the tensions of filmmaking at local and global scales, for example in the case of the Moroccan *cinéastes de passage* (Higbee, 2019a). Martin-Jones (2019) provocatively describes the 'transnational turn' rather as a particular political approach to World Cinema, whilst Lim (2019, 9) reinforces that political position and maintains that the transnational remains a useful lens to interrogate nations and borders at a time in which they are 'crying out to be trespassed and dismantled rather than policed and built'.

Taking popular modes of storytelling seriously, has some implications for how we understand and take these debates about transnational and postcolonial, cinemas forward. Indeed, this has already been recognised in *Transnational Screens* by Ponzanesi and Berger (2016) in which they also recognise the central role of space in postcolonial cinema, and crucially put genre at the centre of a renewed understanding of postcolonial film. They insist on the porousness of film categories (e.g. world, migrant, transnational), as well as borders, nations and identities. This article contributes to these debates in its examination of space in *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011), arguing that the use of gangster and war genre works to make (un)familiar the city of Paris.

Parisian 'zones of indistinction' in *Outside the Law* (2010)

Will Higbee (2001, 201), writing about *La Haine* (1995), describes the techniques used by director Matthieu Kassovitz to alienate the characters from the city, 'increasing focal length in Paris to detach the protagonists from their environment', whilst making every attempt to use a deep focus in the banlieue to 'integrate' them into their surroundings. He also notes that in *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er* (1997), hegemonic central Paris does not feature at all. These technical, aesthetic and narrative decisions made by the directors, work to create an 'other' Paris, Higbee (2001) argues, one that exists at the periphery of the one we all know. In *Outside the Law* (2010), Rachid Bouchareb situates these peripheries in their historical context, representing Paris not as a city of liberty, freedom and romance (see Boukhris 2017), but as one of racialised exclusion and containment, ordered for its undesirable inhabitants. Although largely set in the French capital, *Outside the Law* (2010) is almost completely absent of any iconic images of the city, such as the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe. This is because much of the film is set in and around the bidonville, literally 'tin-can city' but roughly equated to 'shantytown' or 'slum' in English (Rosello 1997), of Nanterre where many Algerian immigrants were informally housed after the Second World War.

The first image that introduces the audience to Paris, relying on intertitles to do so, however, is that of the Prison de la Santé, where protagonist Abdelkader Souni is incarcerated along with other Algerian dissidents for his role in the demonstrations that resulted in the Setif massacre of 1945 at the beginning of the film. Whilst not an iconographic feature of the Parisian skyline, Prison de la Santé is a nationally infamous prison. It was used to incarcerate Algerians during the Algerian War of Independence including Ahmed Ben Bella, the first, and short-lived, President of Algeria (1963–1965). More recently, the former chief of Paris Police and Vichy collaborator Maurice Papon, briefly referenced in, though hauntingly absent from, *Outside the Law* (2010), was imprisoned here for crimes against humanity in 1998, at the same time as prominent Maghrebi-French actor Samy Naceri, who was incarcerated for substance abuse. This site of detention, and execution, anchors the film's narrative in an exclusionary geography of containment (Martin and Mitchelson 2009), not simply as a representation of a historical space of imprisonment, but one which serves as a symbol of continued and contemporary spatial containment and marginalisation in French cities.

What Agamben (2005) refers to as the 'state of exception' is often used to discuss such spaces, particularly when law and order is suspended and military authority is extended into civil life in times of 'crisis' or emergency. This allows the state, Agamben (2005)

argues, to create ‘zones of indistinction’ in which people perceived and racialised as threats can be placed at the limits of the law, yet are simultaneously targeted by the sovereign power of the state. However, whilst the prison seemingly serves as an archetypal example of Agamben’s exception, in which perceived threats to national security are housed and executed, it is also a crucial space in the film’s narrative for the political empowerment and radicalisation of its chief protagonist, Abdelkader, as it is the place he is recruited and educated as an FLN combatant and commander. This introduction to the film also positions the aesthetic and narrative choices alongside popular gangster genre films, both French and American. The prison is of course the central space in which Tahar Rahim’s character transforms from shy petty criminal into underworld boss in Jacques Audiard’s acclaimed French gangster film, *A Prophet* (2009). The prison also features as a prominent space for gangster character development too in archetypes of the American gangster movie such as Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990). In *Outside the Law* (2010), the prison serves to radicalise and toughen up Abdelkader, but also resonates as a metaphor for broader exclusion and political transformation, leaning on gangster spaces and aesthetics to tell a story about the FLN in France.

Furthermore, whilst the Prison de la Santé is Abdelkader’s, and the audience’s, first experience of Paris, the north-western bidonville of Nanterre is the first for his brother Said and his Mother, who have moved to escape the war and poverty of the Algerian city of Setif. The establishing shot of the sprawling shantytown depicts a densely populated and chaotically organised array of informal huts, made harsher by the layers of snow and ice that smother them. Though it might be mistaken for a pylon at first sight, the Eiffel Tower can be made out in the distance of the shot, some seven miles east of Nanterre. ‘Made by everyone and for everyone’, as Gustave Eiffel envisioned it, the symbol of French modernity and achievement is not within the grasp of the Algerian refugees and exiles who dwell in the furthest corners of the Parisian suburbs. And so, in keeping with the work the establishing shot of the prison does, the bidonville further serves as a space through which to disrupt the geographical imagination of Paris, by omitting or at least limiting the famous landmarks of the Parisian skyline, whilst also working to comment on the exclusivity of those spaces.

The French word ‘bidon’ literally translates to tin-can or container, and Rosello (1997) traces the earliest use of the term bidonville to 1950s Morocco, where makeshift houses, constructed from metal fuel containers, began to emerge amidst increasing poverty in Moroccan cities, and later across France. The urgent need for workers after the Second World War meant that France accepted and indeed encouraged thousands of immigrants, mainly from North Africa, though without being able to provide appropriate accommodation, thus bidonvilles sprung up on the edges of French cities close to factories and plants. Rosello (1997) describes the appalling conditions of the French bidonville, as they lacked sanitation, running water, and electricity, and had an overall poor hygiene. This is reflected to some extent in *Outside the Law* (2010), emphasised in a close-up shot of Jamel Debbouze’s character, Said Souni, and his mother as they sleep on pieces of cardboard on the floor of their hut, with Said promising her: ‘don’t worry, it’s temporary’. However, based on Rosello (1997) and McDonnell’s (2013) descriptions of Nanterre, the film offers a somewhat restrained representation. Characterised by a severe lack of clean water, disease (particularly TB, which the Souni matriarch eventually contracts), and mud, the French bidonville was commonly associated with a filth that

invited ‘moral condemnation’ in society (Rosello 1997, 254). Nanterre was seen ‘as a pathological urban disease’, its people ‘treated as a sort of natural emanation of the mud’, for which ‘the only solution was total destruction’ (Rosello 1997, 249–254). Whilst *Outside the Law* (2010) clearly falls short of commenting on this level of spatial violence and containment committed by the French state, the inhabitants of Nanterre *are* represented as expendable.

Officially, the Nanterre bidonville was not on the map, and therefore its people lived in a state of ‘inexistence’ (Rosello 1997). In *Outside the Law* (2010), the FLN’s increasing attacks on French soil, and the Souni brothers’ successful organisation inside the bidonville, results in the formation of the ‘Red Hand’, the covert terrorist group organised by chief antagonist Colonel Faivre and authorised by the state, tasked with eradicating and terrorising the FLN, striking at the heart of its support in the bidonville. The Red Hand and Faivre are colonial versions of antagonistic genre types from the American gangster film, whilst the anti-colonial gangster is characterised, to borrow the words of Italian-American mafia expert Gardaphé (2006, 2), by his ‘humble origins and stylish dress’, wielding his power with ‘sexuality and guns’, and commonly situated in a ‘racially charged context’. The scenes featuring conflict between the Red Hand and FLN are characterised by American gangster genre aesthetics: dark scenes in shady clubs, excessive and unlikely shootouts, period cars pockmarked with bullet holes, stylishly masculine dress, and ‘masculinistic identity-formation that is inspired by the American gangster genre’ (Hastie 2020, 164). Beginning in carceral spaces like the prison and the slum, gangster films commonly feature story-arcs that result in rags to riches rise to power followed by a tragic downfall a la *The Godfather* (1972).

To return to Agamben (2005), the inexistence, or zone of indistinction in which the Souni family live, places the racialised Algerians outside the protection of the law whether they have committed crime or not, allowing the police to act with ‘unlimited authority’ (Ticktin 2005, 348) and in an extra-judicial way. In theory, they can be killed without trial or punishment (Tuastad 2017). In line with Tuastad’s (2017) critique of Agamben, through their example of Palestinian refugee camps, the bidonville further demonstrates that within apparent spaces of exception there are internal power dynamics and opportunities for political empowerment. At the centre of the film’s narrative of resistance and revolution, the bidonville is a space from which the FLN actually draws its political support and power. In refusing to represent the miserable and historical reality of life in the bidonville, and denying the victim status associated with *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998), the film produces a space that allows for the local political agency of the Algerian immigrant (through the three brothers) to emerge in place of the victim, in which racialised spatial segregation and violent tactics deployed by the French actually helped the nationalist cause. Again, the gangster genre is absolutely key here in terms of giving the characters agency. The three brothers are empowered by a gangster-inspired desire for power, rather than being passive victims of colonial violence, drawing their power from these spaces of incarceration and exception where they too can operate ‘outside the law’.

The final sequence of the film sees brothers Abdelkader and Said pursued by Colonel Faivre of the Red Hand, from Said’s boxing match and onto the Paris Metro. The Metro, characteristically a space of mobility for many in Paris, is conditional for Algerians, especially during the hours of curfew during the Algerian War of Independence. Indeed,

the policing of mobility is a crucial tool through which Algerians were contained and killed. A shot of the boxing ring at the beginning of the sequence is accompanied by intertitles that inform the audience of the date: 17 October 1961. This date refers to the massacre of what historians claim to be hundreds of Algerian demonstrators in the centre of Paris by the police acting on the orders of Maurice Papon (see House and MacMaster 2006; Cole 2010). The demonstration was organised in defiance of a strict curfew imposed on Algerians by Papon, designed to determine not just who *lives* where, as seen with the spatial segregation associated with the bidonville, but who can *go* where (House 2017). The demonstration was therefore also in protest of this spatial segregation. In response, the police attempted to deny entry to the city for many Algerians in order to contain the numbers joining the demonstration in Paris. Over 30,000 Algerians took to the streets to ‘invade’ various parts of the city (House and MacMaster 2006), their very visibility in these spaces a direct affront to those who sought to contain them, and resulting in what House and MacMaster (2006: 1) describe as ‘the bloodiest act of state repression of street protest in Western Europe in modern history’. As demonstrated throughout this article so far, the ordering of space is central to France’s colonial power. Rancière’s (1998, 29) thoughts on the 17 October massacre are illuminating in this sense, as he argues that,

the point is that its policemen once more underlined it heavily on that day in October 1961 by meeting out a repression that differentiated between some ‘French people’ and others, and by distinguishing between those who did and did not have the right to appear within the French public space.

The film ends with Abdelkader being assassinated by the police whilst rallying protesters who are being contained on the Paris Metro platform and prevented from entering the central areas of Paris. The film again straddles anti-colonial and gangster aesthetics here, representing an important (post)colonial moment for France and Algeria through the brief *mise-en-scène* of the boxing ring (another common space for gangster film action), and the public assassination of the gangster protagonist, which functions to facilitate a larger goal beyond the rise and fall narrative of the gangster: Algerian independence.

The three Parisian carceral spaces of the prison, the bidonville and the metro station collectively serve as spaces through which Algerians out of place in the metropole are contained and systematically ordered by the French state in *Outside the Law* (2010). In suspending the law, the French produce what Agamben (2005) calls ‘zones of indistinction’, in which Algerians can be dealt with ‘outside the law’, or outside of the democratic political process. As I have tried to demonstrate however, in line with other critics of Agamben’s (2005) state of exception (namely Tuastad 2017), the carceral spaces in *Outside the Law* (2010) must not solely be reduced to or explained by the ‘exception’, in which Algerians might be simplified as victims of France’s attempts to contain and conceal them. Rather, in drawing on gangster genre aesthetics and narratives, these spaces are shown in the film to function as vessels of local political power and resistance, from which the FLN can be seen to successfully draw support and evade capture. The protagonists, as is also common in popular gangster genre films, are instead given agency in and through these spaces. Whilst doing so, these spaces, captured and produced via landscape and establishing shots, as well as some claustrophobic medium to close-ups, go some way to challenge the dominant geographical imaginary of Paris, in foregrounding

spaces of exclusion and marginalisation, and their transgression, in the Parisian skyline. The following section will develop this line of inquiry further through the example of *Free Men* (2011).

Imagining muslim paris in *free men* (2011)

In *Outside the Law* (2010) Paris is a space of exclusion, challenging the audiences' sense of Paris by centring sites of containment such as the prison and bidonville in the city, spaces that work to make the gangster-inspired male characters active agents violently resisting colonialism. In *Free Men* (2011), through the point-of-view of Algerian immigrant Younes, and the foregrounding of its Grand Mosque at the centre of the narrative, Paris is further reimagined and reconfigured with the help of familiar narratives of occupation and rescue associated with Hollywood war films such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993). In *Free Men* (2011), genre is deployed more loosely than in *Outside the Law* (2010), tapping into the narrative conventions of other Jewish rescue, thriller and resistance films. These narrative conventions are somewhat subverted, in order to produce more subversive spaces in Paris that centre Muslims and Islam. As I will question however, rendering the Mosque visible by representing it centrally risks reproducing French colonial discourses that sought to domesticate Islam in France, in order to make it both safe and exotic. It is this tension that I will explore in order to further investigate the ways in which these films challenge (or potentially reproduce) ideas of France's imagined geographic identity.



Figure 1. Paris through the eyes of younes in *free men* © pyramide productions, 2011.

The opening shot of *Free Men* (2011) depicts a small group of middle-aged to elderly North African men sitting around a fire, clearly impoverished, perhaps homeless, in a small-enclosed space at the side of a building. Framed through a small skewed gap in a fence from the point-of-view of protagonist Younes, this shot functions to establish the story of occupied Second World War Paris from the immigrant perspective, and a window onto the world of the under-represented history of the first-generation of North Africans in France. A reverse shot finally reveals the eyes of Younes peering through the gap, further establishing the level of narration from his point in space and literally through his eyes (see [Figure 1](#)). This intimate close-up functions to furthermore foster a connection between the protagonist and the audience, encouraging us to see his world.

What it also does however, through reversing the point-of-view shot and through the presence of a physical barrier between Younes and the other men, is establish a distance. This distance between them is asymmetrical, as Younes is situated in a position of relative power, able to survey his surroundings undetected, whilst they are unable to return his gaze, unaware that he is looking. In some ways, this reflects a common thread throughout the history of beur cinema from the 1980s, in which the younger 'second generation' are alienated from the older 'first generation', their traditions, religion and connection to home. Younes, aided by the popularity of Maghrebi-French actor Tahar Rahim who shot to fame in France for his role in Jacques Audiard's *A Prophet* (2009), works to bridge a gap between the first-generation of North African immigrants which *Free Men* (2011) importantly seeks to represent, and contemporary audiences, including second, third and fourth generations of Maghrebi-French. The distance between Younes and the group is further demonstrated as he actually enters their world, suitcase in hand, to sell clandestine goods such as cigarettes and tea. One of the men however, who is separated from the group to the right of the shot, is unable to afford to buy the cigarettes he so desperately wants, offering Younes his *darbouka* in exchange. A *darbouka* is a chalice-shaped Arabic hand-drum, intricately designed, to which this elderly North African immigrant is clearly attached as the last of his possessions. He is upset and distressed about what Younes gives him in return for it, a couple of packets of cigarettes, as Younes does not appreciate the value of the old instrument. Like the fence that creates a physical barrier between them, Younes' lack of appreciation for the *darbouka* functions to put further distance between the older and the younger generations of North African immigrants. This opening scene then poses many questions about what kinds of spaces Younes, ambiguously a first-generation Algerian immigrant, will have access to in *Free Men's* (2011) occupied Paris and, crucially, what kind of Paris is made visible from his point-of-view.

Younes' relative isolation and detachment from the cultural sphere of his fellow immigrants is important with regards to his relationship and access to the Mosque as a double-agent coerced into spying on its director for the French police. Caught red-handed by the authorities at his apartment, Younes is faced with either losing his business, or working undercover for the police. Somewhat detached from the cultural and religious traditions of Algeria, Younes is able to go undercover at the Mosque with relative ease without the guilt of compromising himself. The Grand Mosque of Paris plays a key role historically and narratively in the rescue of Jews from deportation and execution. Here, I want to first

explore the questions it poses about the (in)visibility of Islam and Muslims in France, and the politics of the film as an endeavour to challenge or comply with France's regulatory power over Islam in France.

Completed in 1926, the Grand Mosque of Paris, located close to the botanical gardens, and the Pantheon, south of the Seine in the 5th arrondissement, was commissioned as a gesture of appreciation to the Muslims that fought for France in the First World War (Bayoumi 2000; Maussen 2007). In contradiction of the laws that separated state from religion, the French government and the city of Paris largely funded the building of the Mosque, contracting two French architects, Robert Fournez and Maurice Mantout who had significant travel and work experience of Morocco, to design it. Designed in the Andalusian style of architecture commonly found in southern Spain and Morocco, as well as following the architectural fashion of the early nineteenth and late twentieth century that saw a Moorish revival across Europe as well as in the USA, the Mosque stands out from its Parisian surroundings (Maussen 2007). In this sense, rather than a simply altruistic movement, the Mosque represented 'colonialism coming home' (Bayoumi 2000; McDougall 2010). In the spirit of colonial exhibitions, which had taken place in Paris for decades, the Mosque invited and allowed the French middle and upper classes to experience its hammams, Moorish cafes and gardens without having to actually visit North Africa (Maussen 2007). Furthermore, despite claiming to be a 'direct payment of a debt for loyal service performed during the war' (Bayoumi 2000, 279), the Mosque's construction relied on the imported labour of North Africans and the application of force (Bayoumi 2000). Many of the city's ordinary Algerian workforce, some of whom helped build the Mosque, were often prevented or discouraged from visiting, for many reasons including their 'shabby clothing' (Maussen 2007). With the help of the Mosque's appointed director, Si Kaddour Ben Ghabrit¹ who is played by Michael Lonsdale in *Free Men* (2011), the Mosque served as a means through which to control the cultural and religious difference that their (at this time 'temporary') presence in France presented. By incorporating that difference into the very fabric of the city, the Mosque,

would serve a function of keeping the idea of Muslim in Paris colonial in essence, since here was a site from which Islam could be produced and appropriated for a colonial project that was more powerful than ever – and at the edge of decline (Bayoumi 2000, 272).

'Official Islam' was managed and enshrined in the city's spatial and symbolic centre (McDougall 2010), in order to both 'define and contain' the 'foreign' religion (Bayoumi 2000, 271). If this is the case, how is the Mosque's centring in the mise-en-scene of *Free Men* (2011) disruptive? At the very least, I would argue the recurring birds-eye-view shots that work to centre the Mosque give a different view of Paris to what viewer's beyond France are accustomed, whilst at best they directly disrupt and decentre their sense of place. As the *Prison de la Santé* in *Outside the Law* (2010) works to disturb the iconographic and romantic representation of Paris that (particularly non-French) audiences are familiar with, the Grand Mosque appears to be the centre of Paris throughout the film, as establishing birds-eye-view shots regularly situate the central narrative in a space of perceived alterity in France (see Figure 2).

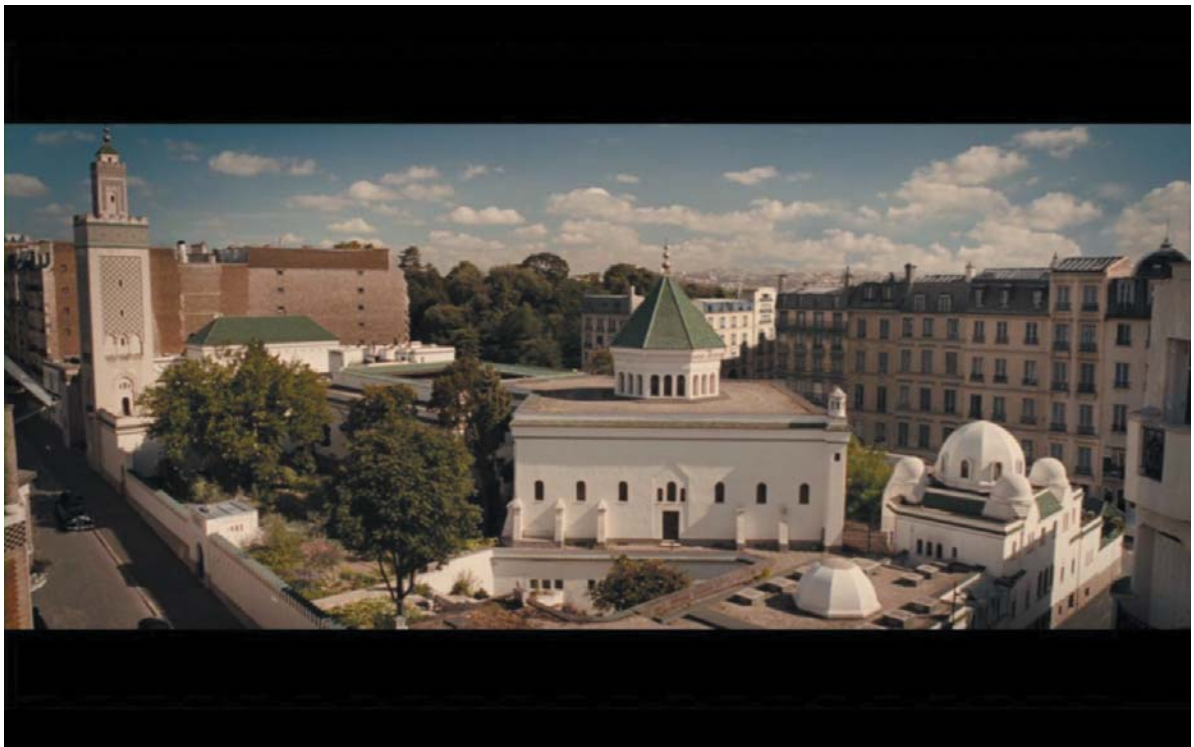


Figure 2. The grand Mosque of Paris in *Free Men* © Pyramide Productions, 2011.

Furthermore, Paris throughout the film is very bright, and even sunny, in stark contrast to other French occupation films such as *Army of Shadows* (1969), which is famed and celebrated for its dark portrayal of a life of fear under Nazi occupation. Paris throughout the film never feels claustrophobic, as it does in *Army of Shadows* (1969), and even in *Outside the Law* (2010) with its gangster-noir settings, but rather open and well-lit. Like *Army of Shadows*, the conventions and narratives of American war and thriller films influence *Free Men*, though in this case we feel like we are watching *Casablanca* (1942) rather than a classic American or French combat or occupation film. Whilst this may indeed be down to the fact that the majority of on-location shooting was conducted in Morocco, along with the scenes set in the grounds of the Mosque being filmed in an abandoned Moroccan Palace, the effect of this is to further represent an alternative, an ‘other’, side to Paris. The city which is universally seen and known via images of the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe and classical architecture, is absent from the film until one of the final sequences.

This produces an ambiguous tension. The Mosque’s director Si Kaddour Ben Ghabrit during World War Two works hard throughout the film to use this position to his and his agenda’s advantage. Ben Ghabrit regularly hosts German occupiers, and Vichy collaborators, at the Mosque in order to convince them of his loyalty, whilst the Germans seek to fashion themselves as friends and liberators of Muslims around the world. In entertaining elite guests at the Mosque, the film opens the doors of the building to its audience, in shots that capture the Mosque’s beauty in ways that could be seen to echo the colonial exhibitions of the late nineteenth Century, in which, ‘a European audience could both admire the accomplishments of French colonialism, and enjoy displays of Islamic architecture and of Muslim religious practice staged as a *tableau vivant*’ (Maussen 2007, 998–999).

Andalusia also figures prominently in the film. It is seen in the architectural design of the Mosque, the style of music sung by Salim, and in the name of the nightclub where Salim and Younes hang out. Andalusia in southern Spain, or al-Andalus as it was known under Muslim rule, has regularly been conjured in the colonial and orientalist imaginary since its 'rediscovery' in the late nineteenth century as a historically perfect and romantic space of harmony and civilisation in which Christians, Jews and Muslims thrived on the medieval peninsula under 'the Moors' (Calderwood, 2014). In the film, the nightclub named 'The Andalusia' in particular functions as a kind of mirror-image space of the Mosque, in that it offers a hedonistic, even profane, space in which Algerian exiles and resistance combatants drink, dance, sing and meet lovers (again, not unlike 'Rick's Café Américain' in *Casablanca*), whilst also largely remaining safe from the prying eyes of the German and French authorities, unlike at the more visible Mosque. It is also particularly key for the development of a somewhat ambiguous relationship between Younes and Salim. In centralising another such place as Andalusia in the film however, as a space that as Calderwood (2014) identifies has been part of the orientalist imagination, what work does it do in the film?

One possibility is that it first of all speaks to the in-betweenness of the 'temporary' immigrant, exemplified by Younes, in France. Andalusia is imagined as a cultural and geographical bridge between worlds, connecting Africa to Europe, and offering a melancholic retreat to a place where difference was celebrated, and so in a film that centres on the relationship between Muslims and Jews, the Iberian haven imaginary captures and symbolises the respect for difference. The effect of the relationship between Younes and Salim, one a Muslim and one a Jew, and the overarching narrative of Jewish rescue by the Mosque, is to correct the omission from history of this real-life story, and to improve both the image of Muslims in France, and the broader perceived relationship between Muslims and Jews. Retreating to the nostalgia of Andalusia works to facilitate this narrative of harmony and conciliation. That is not to say however, that in similar ways to the Mosque, the incorporation of Andalusia does not also reproduce and offer a safer and more digestible version of Islam, based on the romanticised history of Al-Andalus, in which Islam meets Europe and is tamed by hybridisation. As with the Mosque's ambiguous and tense position between its ability to displace Paris' geographic imaginary and reproduce its orientalist spatial ordering, the presence of Andalusia in Paris similarly sits at the thresholds of inclusion and exclusion, by simultaneously inviting audiences of the film into an exoticised and nostalgic exhibition (Maussen 2007). Another possibility is that the Mosque and Andalusia are also representative of the film itself, which sits in-between genres, offering an exotic alternative to the familiar World War Two narratives and perspectives, drawing on traditions of French, beur and American film genres to do so.

Free Men (2011) represents and foregrounds an atypical image of Paris, adding yet another layer to the geography of the city that is collectively imagined by the films. Whilst established as a space of exclusion and incarceration where resistance is made possible in *Outside the Law* (2010), *Free Men* (2011) further reveals Paris from the point-of-view of an Algerian immigrant, and from the point in space of its Grand Mosque. Extending the narrative that displaces the dominant Parisian sense of place in *Outside the Law* (2010), the centring of the Mosque, and the inclusion of Andalusia, opens up other questions about exclusion and the historical regulation of Islam in France. Whilst both the Mosque and Andalusia function as vectors through which a narrative of conciliation between Muslims, Jews and Christians, and between Africa and Europe, is made possible, the

histories of both spaces prompt caution. As I have demonstrated, the history of the Grand Mosque's incorporation into the French colonial project, and the place of Andalusia in the orientalist imaginary, reveal the potential for the film to reproduce colonial fantasies of a safe, domesticated and digestible Islam.

Conclusion

In *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011) we see different relationships between Algerian protagonists and the city of Paris. The city is re-mapped and re-imagined as a space of unequal and racialised containment and, ambiguously, of Islam. This is achieved through the narrative and visual centring of spaces such as the Nanterre bidonville in *Outside the Law* (2010) and the Grand Mosque in *Free Men* (2011). The films invite a broader range of audiences from beyond the Francosphere into the city by drawing on popular cinematic and narrative conventions from American gangster and war films, using familiarity with them to unsettle, challenge and displace popular romantic imaginaries of Paris. In doing so, the films are part of a long trajectory in beur and banlieue filmmaking that focus on distorting and subverting French urban space (Bloom 1999; Levine 2008), whilst also representing a break with tradition in using Hollywood aesthetics to do so.

This article has provided insights for the investigation of spatial politics in Maghrebi-French film. It highlights the ways *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011) locate anxieties over the space and place of Maghrebi-French people in the earliest days of North African immigration to France, and within the context of colonial histories. In doing so, the article encourages reflection about how we understand transnationally influenced aesthetic and narrative choices, and their impact on the representation of space. For example, *Outside the Law* (2010) centres carceral spaces through which gangster-inspired male characters develop to become active and violent agents against French colonialism. In *Free Men* (2011), the city's Grand Mosque is the narrative focal point through which Paris is reimagined as a colonial space in which Muslims rescued thousands of Jews under German occupation. In both cases, these narratives are aided by the aesthetic conventions of globally familiar gangster, thriller and rescue genre films, impacting how unfamiliar (post)colonial stories and perspectives might be circulated and received beyond the Francosphere. Previous work exploring categories of films like postcolonial and transnational insist on the 'porousness' of film categories (e.g. world, migrant), as well as borders, nations and identities (see Ponzanesi and Berger 2016). Yet, popular modes of storytelling are often neglected in favour of a focus on 'specific visual registers and genres' (Ponzanesi and Berger 2016, 112) that better encapsulate and define postcolonial cinema at the margins. In analysing two films that borrow and deploy cinematic aesthetics and narratives from the 'centre', namely American gangster and war/rescue films, this article contributes to a more expansive understanding of postcolonial cinema that is inclusive of popular culture.

Note

1. Ben Ghabrit himself ironically declared the Mosque be free of 'political agitation' when it opened, something which he would later renege on during the city's occupation as represented in the film.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Alex Hastie is a Lecturer in Human Geography at Coventry University, with expertise in film/cinema, audiences, postcolonial and popular culture. Alex has researched and written about the relationship between postcolonial cinema, popular culture and film audiences. His PhD, *Postcolonial Popcorn*, examined contemporary Maghrebi-French film for the ways it uses Hollywood genre to tell unfamiliar stories in familiar ways. Alex is now pursuing new research into how people engage with diverse film cultures through online streaming platforms ranging from Netflix to MUBI.

ORCID

Alex Hastie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1298-142X>

References

- Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Amine, L. 2018. *Postcolonial Paris: Fictions of Intimacy in the City of Light*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bayoumi, M. 2000. "Shadows and Light: Colonial Modernity and the Grand Mosque of Paris." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13 (2): 267–292. doi:10.1353/yale.2000.0015.
- Bender, S., (2013). *Film style and the World War II combat genre*. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bergfelder, T. (2005) "National, transnational or supranational cinema? Rethinking European film studies". *Media, Culture & Society*, 27 (3): 315–331.
- Bloom, P. 1999. "Beur Cinema and the Politics of Location: French Immigration Politics and the Naming of a Film Movement." *Social Identities* 5 (4): 469–487. doi:10.1080/135046399514446.
- Boukhris, L. 2017. "The Black Paris Project: The Production and Reception of a Counter-hegemonic Tourism Narrative in Postcolonial Paris." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 25 (5): 684–702. doi:10.1080/09669582.2017.1291651.
- Calderwood, E. 2014. "The invention of al-Andalus: discovering the past and creating the present in Granada's Islamic tourism sites". *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19 (1): 27–55.
- Cole, J. 2010. "Massacres and Their Historians: Recent Histories of State Violence in France and Algeria in the Twentieth Century." *French Politics and Society* 28 (1): 106–126.
- Durmelat, S., and V. Swamy, eds. 2011. *Screening Integration: Recasting Maghrebi Immigration in Contemporary France*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Durovicová, N., and Newman, K. (2010) *World Cinemas: Transnational Perspectives*. New York and Oxon: Routledge.
- Ezra, E., and Rowden, T. (eds.). (2006). *Transnational cinema: the film reader*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Gardaphé, F. L. 2006. *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities*. London: Routledge.
- Gott, M. 2013. "Traveling beyond the National: Mobile Citizenship, Flexible Identities, and Layered Republicanism in the French Return Road Movie." *Contemporary French Civilization* 38 (1): 73–95. doi:10.3828/cfc.2013.4.

- Hastie, A. 2020. "Popular Postcolonial Masculinities: Gangsters and Soldiers in Maghrebi-French Cinema." *Gender, Place & Culture* 27 (2): 153–174. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2019.1596884.
- Hastie, A. 2021. "Postcolonial Geopolitics: Reading Contemporary Geopolitics in Maghrebi-French War Films." *Geopolitics*, 1–18. 1557–3028. doi:10.1080/14650045.2021.1882426
- Higbee, W. 2001. "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the French Urban Periphery in La Haine and Ma 6-T Va Crack-er." *Modern & Contemporary France* 9 (2): 197–208. doi:10.1080/09639480120040851.
- Higbee, W. 2019a. *Mathieu Kassovitz*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Higbee, W. 2019b. "Moroccan Diasporic Cinema: The 'Rooted Transnationalism' of the Cinéastes de Passage." *Transnational Screens* 10 (2): 75–88. doi:10.1080/25785273.2019.1641285.
- Higbee, W, Lim, S. H. 2013. "Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies." *Transnational Cinemas* 1 (1): 7–21.
- House, J., and MacMaster, N. 2006. *Paris 1961: Algerians, state terror, and memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- House, J., and N. MacMaster. 2006. *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- House, J. 2017. "Colonial Containment? Repression of Pro-independence Street Demonstrations in Algiers, Casablanca and Paris, 1945-1962." *War in History* 24.
- Levine, A. J. M. 2008. "Mapping Beur Cinema in the New Millennium." *Journal of Film and Video* 60 (3–4): 42–59. doi:10.1353/jfv.0.0010.
- Lim, S. H. 2019. "Concepts of Transnational Cinema Revisited." *Transnational Screens* 10 (1): 1–12. doi:10.1080/25785273.2019.1602334.
- Martin-Jones, D. 2019. "Transnational Turn or Turn to World Cinema?" *Transnational Screens* 10 (1): 13–22. doi:10.1080/25785273.2019.1578527.
- Martin, L. L., and M. L. Mitchelson. 2009. "Geographies of Detention and Imprisonment: Interrogating Spatial Practices of Confinement, Discipline, Law, and State Power." *Geography Compass* 3 (1): 459–477. doi:10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00196.x.
- Maussen, M. 2007. "Islamic Presence and Mosque Establishment in France: Colonialism, Arrangements for Guestworkers and Citizenship." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33 (6): 981–1002. doi:10.1080/13691830701432889.
- McDonnell, H. 2013. "Water, North African Immigrants, and the Parisian Bidonvilles, 1950s - 1960s." *Radical History Review* 2013 (116): 31–58. doi:10.1215/01636545-1965684.
- McDougall, J. 2010. "The Secular State's Islamic Empire: Muslim Spaces and Subjects of Jurisdiction in Paris and Algiers, 1905–1957." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (3): 553–580. doi:10.1017/S0010417510000307.
- Naficy, H. 2001. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Ponzanesi, S., and V. Berger. 2016. "Introduction: Genres and Tropes in Postcolonial Cinema (S) in Europe." *Transnational Cinemas* 7 (2): 111–117. doi:10.1080/20403526.2016.1217641.
- Rancière, J. 1998. "The Cause of the Other." *parallax* 4 (2): 25–33. doi:10.1080/135346498250217.
- Rosello, M. 1997. "French Bidonvilles in the 1960s: Urban & Individual Initiatives." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 40 (1): 97–110.
- Said, E. (1994) *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage.
- Tarr, C. 1993. "Questions of Identity in Beur Cinema: From Tea in the Harem to Cheb." *Screen* 34 (4): 321–342. doi:10.1093/screen/34.4.321.
- Tarr, C. 2005. *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ticktin, M. 2005. "Policing and Humanitarianism in France: Immigration and the Turn to Law as State of Exception." *Interventions* 7 (3): 346–368. doi:10.1080/13698010500268148.
- Tuastad, D. 2017. "'State of Exception' or 'State in Exile'? the Fallacy of Appropriating Agamben on Palestinian Refugee Camps." *Third World Quarterly* 38 (9): 2159–2170. doi:10.1080/01436597.2016.1256765.