La Haine

Mathieu Kassovitz on 'La Haine'

La Haine is 25 years old. Since Mathieu Kassovitz's debut first screened there's arguably not been another French film that has had as significant an impact. In the land that gave us champagne, *La Haine* is a Molotov cocktail. It's a movie that sets fire to the comfortable middle-class outings of much French cinema, turning the gaze beyond the Périphérique ring road to the Parisian *banlieues*, where the bright colours of white socialite Paris are scorched to a black-and-white concrete jungle that is home to a mix of black, Arab and Jewish communities.

When the film opened in Competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995, its impact was immediate. Kassovitz, 27 at the time, won the Best Director prize, in recognition of the elements that made the work so explosively new and exciting. For while on the surface the story Kassovitz had written, about the last 24 hours three friends would spend together, might appear to be straight-up social realism, the way he chose to tell it often feels closer to a stylised magic realism, from the opening shot of the Earth from outer space onwards. Such moments of bravura invention occur throughout *La Haine* – as when director of photography Pierre Aïm uses an ultra-wide landscape ratio to film the three central characters in their *banlieue* surroundings, dwarfing them against their neighbourhood and making them seem insignificant, but switches to a long lens to shoot them in close-up once they move to the centre of Paris later in the film, denying the French capital its usual majesty. Or there is the constant return to a ticking clock, which helps to give the narrative a dramatically urgent rhythm and unremitting tension.

Like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *La Haine* was born from real-life injustices – the deaths of young ethnic-minority men at the hands of police. Where *La Haine* is unique is in the way it shows poverty uniting disparate groups, making fast friends of a Jewish man (Vinz, played by Vincent Cassel), a black boxer (Hubert, played by Hubert Koundé) and a young Arab (Saïd, played by Saïd Taghmaoui). The film begins the morning after a riot, when news has come through that one of their friends, Abdel, is in a coma. Will he survive? When Vinz gets hold of a gun stolen from the police, the question soon becomes: will they survive? The sense of unease is heightened by the sound of gunshots accompanying the cuts between shots.

What people often forget about *La Haine* is just how funny it is, in spite of all the confrontations between the police and disenfranchised youth. When the three friends go to Paris seeking justice, having tried and failed to see Abdel in hospital, they find the city is even odder than the *banlieue* they come from, with strange characters reciting poetry and drug dealers playing with nunchucks. But ultimately, *La Haine*'s enduring power lies in its refusal to cosy up to the audience. This is a film that confronts you head-on – one that starts with a joke about a man in freefall from the top of a skyscraper, and ends with a whole society imploding.

Do you recall why you decided to make La Haine*?*

It was a riot in Paris. I heard on the radio that a kid [Makomé M'Bowolé] got shot by police in the 18th arrondissement [on 6 April 1993]. I went there because I used to hang out in that neighbourhood. When I arrived, there were people, not protesting, more like mourning – it was the parents of the victim, of the kid. I began to think about how that cop could get a gun out and shoot a kid in the head while he was handcuffed. He didn't execute him, he tried to scare him, and then the gun went off. But whether it was intentional or not, the cop got so mad that he got the gun out and it ended with him taking the kid's

Fatou Thioune (Hubert's sister)
Thang Long (grocer)
Cut Killer (DJ)
Sabrina Houicha (Saïd's sister)
Sandor Weltmann (Vinz lookalike)
Paris:
François Levantal (Astérix; [ELV]: Snoopy)
Julie Mauduech (gallery girl 1)
Karin Viard (gallery girl 2)
Peter Kassovitz (gallery owner)
Christophe Rossignon (taxi driver)
Vincent Lindon ('very' drunk man)
Mathieu Kassovitz (young skinhead)
Anthony Souter, Florent Lavandeira,
Teddy Marques, Samir Khelif (skinheads)
Tadek Lokcinski (gentleman in public toilets)
Virginie Montel
(homeless woman in the underground)
Andrée Damant (concierge)
Marcel Marondo (club bouncer)
Police:
Karim Belkhadra (Samir)
Marc Duret (Inspector 'Notre Dame')
Éric Pujol (assistant policeman)
Philippe Nahon (police chief on the roof)
France 1995©
98 mins

life. What happened to that kid from the start of the day for it to end up like that? I decided to show the story from the kids' point of view because nobody knew the kids, especially back in 1995 – or '93 as it was. I knew those kids because I used to hang out with them; they have a voice, there is a reason why they're like that, and there is a reason why the interaction with the police is like that. We needed to expose it so that people could understand it.

Was it difficult to write the film, or did it flow?

It flowed because I knew my ending. I based everything on the ending, so I knew all I had to do is find a way to get these kids through 24 hours and just get people to know them. So that when in the news tomorrow they're going to say that a young kid got shot and killed by accident – after watching *La Haine*, you can put a name and a face to the kid.

You wrote the boys to be Jewish, Black and Arabic. Their friendship is the heart of the film. Was that based on people you knew?

It was not based on the projects themselves. However, I did it to create a symbol that all minorities are concerned with the issues in the film. These kids, even if they're from different backgrounds, they are in the same environment, and they're living together, and they know how to live together, it's not just one group suffering. What you show in a movie is one hundred per cent of the reality that you impose on the audience. They cannot imagine anything else, so you have to balance everything.

Was it essential that it was three kids?

I needed a trio because when you're with a friend, you have a discussion, and it ends fast because either you agree, or you don't, but you cannot argue all the time. Three people can disagree all the time because it bounces from one to the other. I wanted one guy that's the funny one in the middle; the political one that wants to get even with the society; and then the other one who's trying to hold it in because he knows what real violence is. It was a trick, like the black and white is a trick too – to make it universal, a story that happens everywhere, so you don't know if it's Paris or Mexico or Brooklyn: it could be anywhere.

How does black and white make it more universal?

What black and white does is bring poetry into reality. That's why when you do a movie about poverty where you don't have control over the environment and things are supposed to be ugly, it's very difficult. It costs a lot of money to make it look good. But it doesn't cost anything to make it look good in black and white. If I showed you *La Haine* in colour, it's horrible.

How did you feel about the reaction to the film?

I was very alarmed by the star-ification of the people who made the movie. I was very worried, and I denounced it. I made a lot of journalists cry because I told them, 'This isn't about us, it's about the subjects of the movie. You should go and interview the kids, and you should go and interview the police and talk to the minister, talk to the people that are responsible for this. You should analyse it and you should give your point of view.' Like, you can say whatever you want about a Ken Loach movie, but he doesn't care. What he wants is to expose something. And he wants journalists not to talk about the quality of the movie, but about the subject. Is it relevant, and what can we do? I wanted the same thing. That was my objective, but now I'm more comfortable to talk about the film 25 years later because I realise that the movie survived by itself.

Mathieu Kassovitz interviewed by Kaleem Aftab, bfi.org.uk, 2 September 2020

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