Seeing Through Race in French Cinema

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The eminently visual qualities of cinema make it a unique proving ground for speculation situated at the intersection of race, aesthetics, politics, and representation. Critical Race Theory, a legal-based discipline born in the 1980s, has been taken up by a variety of Humanities disciplines in which scholarly inquiry seeks to foreground race. CRT, then, as adopted and naturalized by Humanities discourses—where it often goes by the slightly adjusted title Critical Race Studies—seems an obvious intellectual toolkit for any scholar interested in race-ting film, that is, in attending to the hermeneutics of race in cinematic production. Despite what might look like an obvious pairing—not to mention a plethora of recent scholarship tackling issues of race in cinema and, most notably, blackness in American cinema—CRT, as American film scholar Alessandra Raengo has pointed out, “does not have an established canonical presence” in film, media and visual culture studies, and therefore remains “cautiously adopted.” While deeply engaged with narrative and attentive to cultural issues, CRT has only “occasionally and tangentially” addressed questions of aesthetics, and has had “a very limited engagement with film.”

As a work of scholarship that invites Critical Race Theory and film studies into the same conversation, Raengo’s reading of Spike Lee’s Bamboozled provides not only an illuminating reading of that film, it also lays bare the immanent “whiteness” of film studies. The field,

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1 Acknowledge riff on WJT Mitchell’s title.
2 Define CRT: a movement that took shape in US law schools in response to a dearth of devoted to studying the relationship between race, racism, and power in a broad perspective. See Delgado; Guitierrez-Jones; UCLA Law School’s treatise on CRT and CRS (certificate program in critical race studies).
3 Raengo 1.
4 Raengo, 5
Raengo observes, is “white by default and illusorily self-contained. The implied subject of
cinema is still racially unmarked, ‘black film’ is still handled as a genre apart.” CRT’s limited
engagement with film aesthetics thus necessitates the introduction of a third critical body into the
conversation, a mediating filter that allows for dialogue between what was, on one hand,
especially a legal theory, and, on the other, a hermeneutics of cinema. For this, Raengo turns to
visual culture studies, leaning particularly on WJT Mitchell’s bid to see race as “a medium,” as
“something we see through, like a frame, window, screen or lens, rather than something we look
at.”

Unlike Raengo, my subject here is not American film but contemporary French cinema,
and thus I must navigate an additional critical minefield. To talk about race in French cinema is
to contend with the particular place of race in France; its historical legacy and its links to the
imperial project; and its legal, political, and cultural discourses. It is to wrestle with a mythology
of color-blindness so entrenched that few French thinkers provide us with methodological
models: there are no grilles de lecture that can be mapped onto French film so that we might “see
it through” race. The irony of this critical lacuna is perhaps best encapsulated by Ann Stoler’s
lament that “one of the global heartlands of critical social theory and the philosophies of
difference, has so rarely turned its acute analytic tools to the deep structural coordinates of race
in France.” Whereas Raengo warns us that CRT does not have an “established canonical
presence” in film studies, I must, in turn, warn my reader: CRT has no “established canonical
presence” in France and thus no foothold in French film studies, even if a cadre of scholars
(mostly UK- and US-based) have become interested tracking shifts in the demographics of the

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5 Raengo 8-9
6 WJT Mitchell, Seeing Through Race, Preface (2012). Add something about the idiomatic valences of « seeing through » : to not be duped by, to see clearly for what something is ; also persistence—to see something through to its natural conclusion…
7 Stoler, Colonial Aphasia, 128-9.
French silver screen and analyzing what might be described as a “turn” to greater representation of ethnic minorities in French cinema of the past decade. 

In this essay, I will be pursuing several goals at once. My primary thrust involves using against-the-grain readings of two recent French films (Intouchables, 2011; Entre les murs, 2008) to demonstrate that 1) “race talk” is abundant in contemporary French cinema despite claims to the contrary and 2) that the nature of that race talk—produced through narrative and formal film techniques--is fundamentally ambivalent. A secondary goal is to open a conversation about the portability of Critical Race Theory, about its capacity to function as a “travelling theory.”

Because CRT is deeply and fundamentally rooted in the US context, where it is most often practiced by legal scholars and activists, it seems reasonable to assess the payoffs and pitfalls of smuggling it through French customs into a context frankly hostile to the idea that “racism is engrained in the fabric and system of (French) society.” Finally, a tertiary goal subtends this entire endeavor: I am particular interested in observing how metaphors, particularly the use of the English term “color blind” to describe a race-neutral politics, interact with our considerations of the race-d visual culture, and what is lost when their translation fails to produce an analogous field of signifiers.

Thus, over the course of this essay, we travel back and forth across the Atlantic hauling baggage that, at times, may seem about as useful as a down coat in the tropics. But it is my hypothesis that the mere attempt to make CRT “speak French” will prove a useful endeavor, not only for and that the experience of something with the potential to feed back into its original

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8 Vincendeau, Hargreaves, Higbee. This, of course, does not account for the many good works of colonial film scholarship, Brooks on the colonial documentary; David Henry Slavin, Colonial Cinema and Imperial France; or work on Francophone film (African and otherwise). Also note Belgian article on “whiteness” in Frenh cinema and reception studies.

9 Said, Word, text, critic. But maybe not only its « cultural » portability; how well does it really work when it comes to aesthetics? After all, the CRT focus on narrative is quite particular and tends to view art in service of social change.

10 From UCLA Law Site; see NOTES.
context. Through recontextualization, CRT may come to recognize its own vaguely nativist tendencies, thus encouraging scholars to consider the US-centric nature of this particular field, and to imagine ways in which it might be changed by, and benefit from, “study abroad.”

#Ocarstowne but #Omarpasnoir: who’s colorblind now?

In early 2016, the hashtag “OscarSoWhite” lit up the Twitterverse for the second time in recent memory, causing considerably more uproar than it did in 2015 when it was launched in response to that year’s “lily white” Academy Award short lists. Many perceived the uniformly white coterie of Oscar nominees as just the most visible symptom of a more insidious, systemic politics of exclusion—a culture of “whitewashing” that was, in fact, nothing new. What was new, however, was both the unprecedented fulminations on the part of Hollywood A-listers (in social and other media), and the lucid recognition, on the part of the industry itself, of a serious problem.

At the same time that the US film industry was being exposed for its underrepresentation of minorities and deep structural inequities, a different narrative about representation and race had been emerging in France. Indeed, 2016 looked like a watershed year in terms of inclusivity and diversity. Inaugurated by the interracial bromance Intouchables in 2011, the genre of the “race comedy,” or comedy of “ethnic integration” (as Ginette Vincendeau has dubbed it), had become standard box-office fare, with features such as Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au bon dieu, Samba, Divines, and Cherchez la femme ultimately prompting (predominantly white) audiences

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1. April Reign created the hashtag in January 2015.
2. Cite research study affirming that « whitewashing » is not a question of perspective or anecdotal evidence, but a practice borne out in statistics: see Media, Diversity and Social Change Initiative at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.
3. Cheryl Boone Issacs, president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, announced a concrete plan of attack, including a mission to double the diversity of its membership by 2020.
4. Footnote details such as disproportionate number of white men who are members of the academy?
to laugh at themselves. By 2016, non-white actors had become prominent fixtures on top ten lists of beloved celebrities in France, with performers like Omar Sy, Gad El Maleh, and Jamel Debbouze listed among the 20 best-paid French entertainers.\textsuperscript{15} Sy’s best actor win for \textit{Intouchables} in 2011 had made him the first black actor to garner the coveted César; by 2016 the film had taken 3\textsuperscript{rd} place on the list of 200 largest cinema successes since 1945.\textsuperscript{16}

Sy was also in the news in 2016 for his starring role in \textit{Monsieur Chocolat}, a “biopic” recounting the life and times of France’s first black performer, the freed slave known only posthumously as Rafael Padilla. “Chocolat,” as he was dubbed during his lifetime, was a popular \textit{belle époque} figure who came to fame as part of a two-man slapstick comedy team whose acts at the \textit{Nouveau cirque de Paris} were occasionally filmed by operators working for the Lumières brothers. Indeed, short films of acts dating to 1899—featuring Chocolat as a bumbling, ignorant foil to the authoritarian, white clown Footit and with evocative titles such as \textit{Chaise en bascule}, \textit{Boxeufs}, \textit{Guillaume Tell}, and \textit{La mort de Chocolat}—can be found in the Lumières catalogue.\textsuperscript{17} In bringing Chocolat to the big screen in 2016, \textit{Monsieur Chocolat} purported to “restore the legacy” of this forgotten performer.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition to this anecdotal evidence of a sea change in contemporary French cinema’s representation of minorities, nearly all scholarship points to “diversification” as a significant new trend in the industry.\textsuperscript{19} This trend, if it is indeed one, is likely the outcome of small shifts over time. Nearly 20 years prior, France experienced an analogous—if considerably more analog—“sowhite” moment. In 1999, \textit{Collectif égalité}, an anti-racist association helmed by writer Calixthe Beyala, rose up against imbalances in racial representation on the small screen (“contre

\textsuperscript{15} Vincendeau.
\textsuperscript{16} CNC Report, see pdf.
\textsuperscript{17} Dubois, 15-16. Catalog on line : https://catalogue-lumiere.com/series/foottit-et-chocolat/
\textsuperscript{18} NYtimes article
\textsuperscript{19} See Vincendeau, Hargreaves, the companion with Will Higbee article.
la télé en blanc et blanc”) and in French media in general. Although it is difficult to argue causality, not long after Collectif égalité’s initial call to integrate TV and film, industry-based attempts to diversify the French media landscape began to emerge. In 2007, for example, the Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée (CNC), announced the creation of the an initiative called Images de la diversité, whose goal was to develop and subsidize projects that promoted “une représentation plus fidèle de la réalité française.” Film scholar Will Higbee notes that the beur cinema movement of the 1980s, along with an ongoing process of reckoning with historical entanglements of colonialism and race, has also prompted the creation of new types of film, necessitating non-white actors and thus leading to greater onscreen diversity.

The same scholars who have lauded the trend toward greater inclusivity of black and brown characters as salutary on the whole, have also been critical of the ways in which “ethnic” actors are represented. Here, too, a certain trans-Atlantic comparison is apposite: just as Hollywood opportunities for black actors were often limited to embodiments of racist stereotypes—roles such as the “tom, coon, or mulatto,” typecasting of ethnic actors in France has produced a series of films in which ethnic diversity can be reduced to the representation of terrorists, thugs, and delinquents. To an extent, beur cinema, with its interest in representing the banlieue and the travails of second-generation immigrants, also falls into this category,

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20 Separated by nearly two decades, Collectif’s call and the Hollywoodien uproar share common cause insofar as both movements point to media landscapes that failed to reflect national diversity. Reactions in France, however, were notably slower, owing to factors not limited to timing and medium. Even if a message could have “gone viral” in the early aughts, cultural attitudes and ideological differences between the two nations, particularly where race is concerned, make it tricky to hold up one society as more progressive than the other.

21 CNC, objectifs: [http://www.cnc.fr/web/fr/images-de-la-diversite](http://www.cnc.fr/web/fr/images-de-la-diversite). The mission of CNC “fonds”, is to underwrite media projects (films, multimedia, audiovisual, video games) that promote “une représentation plus fidèle de la réalité française et de ses composantes et à écrire une histoire commune de l'ensemble de la population française autour des valeurs de la République, et favorisant l'émergence de nouvelles formes d'écritures et de nouveaux talents, issus notamment des quartiers prioritaires de la politique de la ville. »

22 Higbee, pages and quote

23 See Bongle, in Vincendeau.

24 Examples: Vincendeau, Hargreaves.
although much of the best scholarship on *beur* and *banlieue* cinema has been attentive to the 
ways in which these films deploy multi-ethnic casts and engage aesthetic questions.\(^{25}\)

Critics have also pointed up the opposite but equally problematic tendency toward 
“colorblind” casting. Vincendeau and Hargreaves both draw on the examples of Sami Naceri as 
Daniel in the *Taxi* films, and Jamel Debbouze as Lucien in *Le fabuleux destin d’Amélie poulain*, 
in which the actors, both of whom are of Maghrebi origin, play characters whose names and 
storylines “evacuate their ethnic origins.” The danger here, for Hargreaves, is that while films 
such as these depend upon minority talent, they give little quarter to “la fracture sociale” or “les 
clivages ethniques,” thus utterly depoliticizing the films’ content.\(^{26}\)

It is worth nothing that such ruminations about the facts and burdens of representation 
placed upon minority ethnic actors in French cinema are largely made by white scholars gazing 
upon French film as an object of scholarly inquiry. Whereas a positive byproduct of 
#OscarSoWhite has been the concrete claim for US film to cultivate not only *more*, but *certain 
kinds* of black and minority roles and stories, and for the promotion of minority producers, 
directors, and actors, the newfound diversity of French cinema has not come with a concomitant 
demand for certain types of representation.\(^{27}\) And if *beur* directors are not a rarity, director and 
production credits especially in France remain “so white.”

These questions circle us back to *Monsieur Chocolat*, a film whose conventional surface, 
when scratched, reveals a multi-layered signifier that seems to both defy and confirm aspects of 
the present narrative about race and French cinema. First, the film marks a moment when a 
minority director (Roshdy Zem) leveraged his substantial star power and resources to tell a story

\(^{25}\) Examples? 
\(^{26}\) Haregeraves, 130. 
\(^{27}\) Although Bouchareb might been seen as creating the conditions for a certain kind of storytelling (*Indiènes, Hors-la-loi*); Chocolat occupies a sterotypical role, *Monsieur Chocolat* proposes a story that historicizes racial diversity in France...
about a minority performer. Second, it provides a springboard for a reflection on the long history
of blacks and French cinema. As one Le Monde cinema critic noted, in reference to Monsieur
Chocolat, “Il n’était pas assuré que le cinéma français s’emparerait de cet Auguste afro-cubain,
tant cette industrie s’est révélée allergique à la question noire en France au fil des siècles.”28 What
Sotinel seems to miss, however, is that French cinema had long ago “gotten hold” of Chocolat:
not only did some of the first cinematic images ever made happen to include footage of a black
performer; France’s first black performer was a subject of early cinema. Monsieur Chocolat,
however subtly, points up the long-standing imbrication of minorities and French film history,
thus suggesting that the ethnic turn heralded by scholars and seemingly celebrated by the movie-
going masses who plebiscited these films by generating box office returns is part of a complex
and problematic history of representation of people of color in French film.

There is one final way that Zem’s film, its epitext, and Sy’s “star text” allow us to think
through French cinema and race as it travels: Omar Sy, the titular Monsieur Chocolat, is a
French-born actor of Senegalese origin who has, even in the heady aftermath of his César win for
Intouchables, scrupulously avoided talking about race. Yet during the publicity campaign for
Monsieur Chocolat in early 2016, which happened to overlap with the “OscarSoWhite” debacle,
Sy—who now lives in Los Angeles—appeared on the cover of Télérama alongside a large pull-
quote that read: “A Hollywood je suis un français, pas un noir.”29 Sy’s ascription of beneficent
color-blindness to Hollywood at a moment when the industry was under siege for its
whitewashing practices likely has more to do with Sy’s positionality than with the realities of the
American motion picture industry. Indeed, Sy seems to ventriloquize a particularly gaulois strain
of race-neutral politics, one that considers the relationship between an individual citizen and the

28 Thomas Sotinel, “Le geste noir de l’Auguste », http://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2016/02/02/chocolat-la-
geste-noire-de-l-auguste_4857784_3476.html#2mxi5ovTaeJAJHJ99
29 Télérama, 26 janvier 2016. Note Monsieur Chocolat released 3 fev 2016
state to be sacrosanct, and views acts particularization as manifestations of communitarianism, as attempts to emerge as “a nation within the nation.”\textsuperscript{30} But Sy’s reading of Hollywood as colorblind is deliciously ironic not only (and not even mostly) in light of the “whitewashing” scandal, but because it is France that has traditionally held itself up (and been held up) as a colorblind haven, most notably for black Americans fleeing Jim Crow America in the midcentury to find themselves “American first” in France.\textsuperscript{31}

**Translating Color-Blindness/Making CRT Speak French**

In his work on anti-racism in France, political scientist Eric Bleich has done a remarkable job both establishing and problematizing that nation’s grand narrative about race. For Bleich, France conceives of its race-neutral politics (and ethics) as concomitant with the modern nation-state: the Revolution instituted equality before the law, “with no intermediate corporate bodies muddying the connection between the individual and the state.” Debates in the National Assembly on Jews and slavery, and the language of the *Declaration of the rights of man and citizen*, underscore the idea of a proto-colorblind nation.\textsuperscript{32} Bleich is quick to point out, however, that any thoroughgoing narrative of a centuries-long colorblindness is not without its significant blind spots, the most significant of which being colonization and the Vichy regime.

Notwithstanding the existence of national mythologies and the relative power of their counter narratives, it remains that policy today in France is indeed considered colorblind. The nation does not “recognize racial or ethnic groups either as legitimate social or political

\textsuperscript{30} Clermont-Tonnere Speech before Assemblée nationale.
\textsuperscript{31} Footnote about complexities of black Americans’ situation in France during Algerian War. WGS *Stone Face*; Tyler Stovall; Alex Weik von Mossner.
\textsuperscript{32} Bleich, 167.
categories or as targets for policy.”" Likewise, no national or government subsidized endeavors are permitted to take ethnic statistics, resulting in a dearth of data about minorities in France. As Bleich goes on to say, “Even using the term race in France makes people shudder.” Color-blindness may have found its logical conclusion in the recent decision to delete the word “race” from all French legislative documents, a bid to rid the nation, once and for all, of racism.

In the US, where quotas and other forms of affirmative action have been inscribed in jurisprudence since the passing of the Civil Rights Act, and where the possibility of self-identifying on employment forms, census, and other applications seems to become increasingly granular, it can be easy to conceive of American policy as diametrically opposed to such notions. Yet, the US also traversed a period of colorblindness; in the supreme court case Plessy vs. Ferguson—whose ruling has been a key pillar of CRT’s critique of systemic American racism—dissenting justice Harlan declared, in a single breath, that the “white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country” and that “our constitution is color blind.” While admitting a certain abstract “admirable” quality to color blindness in theory, CRT’s foundational tenets revolve around the recognition that colorblindness keeps “minorities in a subordinate position” by attending to only the most “egregious” racial harms and ignoring the “ordinary structures” that subtend and promote inequality.

This comparative context is of interest because it prompts us to revisit some of the binary oppositions that have become habitual when comparing French and American attitudes toward race. More to the point, it compels us to consider the way language shapes our habits of mind,

33 Robert C. Liberlman, « A Tale of Two Countries The Politics of Colorblindness in France and the United States, »  
French politics, culture and society, 19.3 (Fall 2001) 32-59 (p32)
34 Bleich 165. Louis-Georges Tin on statistiques ethniques…
35 Footnote about Weil’s TEO project. Bleich, 163.
36 Note here.
37 Civil Rights Act, date, and verify affirmative action date. Brown v. Board of Ed.
38 Plessy v Ferguson, 163 US 537, 545 (1896) Cited in Delgado, Critical Race Theory, an introduction.
39 Delgado 29.
specifically when it comes to the metaphorical valences of the notion of “colorblindness” and their untranslatability. In English, “colorblind” is diagnostic term describing an inherited pathology in which the mechanisms of the eye fail to discriminate between colors. But one needn’t have anything remotely close to a sophisticated understanding of the mechanics of vision to understand the term “colorblind” and to see how easily it is pressed into service as a metaphor for “race neutrality.” To not “see color”—that is, to not recognize/give weight to the different epidermal schema we all carry with us through the world—becomes shorthand for a politics of non-discrimination. To be colorblind, ostensibly, is to treat everyone “the same,” to see beings *qua* beings, not as “race-d” beings.

As a metaphor, the notion has done a good deal of heavy lifting when it comes to talking about race, not only in the US context, but also in Angophone scholarly work on race in France. But where the figure is both efficient and evocative in English, it falls flat in French, where the ocular dysfunction that makes it impossible to discriminate between certain colors is not “aveugle des couleurs” but *daltonisme*—a term that owes its origin to the English chemist, John Dalton, who first discovered the disease (having suffered from it himself). In France, one is not colorblind, one is *daltonien*. To be clear, in underscoring the limits of the metaphor of colorblindness in the French context I am not suggesting that such practices do not exist in France—certainly they do, as already demonstrated. But the language used to discuss “race neutrality” in France resides—conceptually and linguistically—in words that already elide “race,” concepts like *universalisme, les valeurs républicains*, even *laïcité*. And thus, whereas in English a problem with race is inherently yoked, via language, to problems of sight, in French, the very language used to discuss race has no implicit link with questions of vision, to what we
see. Scholars have unproblematically diagnosed a colorblind body politic in France using a semantic field that has little purchase in French soil.

However anecdotally, these considerations trouble a discussion about race in French film, above and beyond the concerns already swirling around the question of critical race theory and film studies. (Articulated earlier.) How can we propose to “see through race” in French film, when discourse in France purports not to see race, in general, and not to see it in film, in particular? As Raengo has suggested, color blindness is “not only a social, formal, or legal problem, but also a visual culture problem.” (21) With all of this in mind, I propose to read two contemporary French films that feature significant roles for minority characters, and yet whose reception in France has been largely colorblind.

**Visible and Invisible Discourses on Race in Intouchables**

The much-heralded arrival of diversity to the French silver screen has been accompanied by a discourse that remains not only largely indifferent to the presence of this diversity, but resolutely unwilling to parse it for any deeper meaning—let alone to “see through” it, that is, to use it as an opportunity. In two recent, highly successful films—*Intouchables* (Nakache and Toledano, 2011) and *Entre les murs* (Cantet, 2008)—racial difference is a significantly visible on-screen factor: Omar Sy is in nearly every frame of the former; the latter features a cast of real-life middle school students whose complexions and stated origins reflect the actual ethnic diversity of 21st-century France. Indeed, the narrative arcs of these two films in particular are fueled by the on-screen presence of “minority” characters, as well as by the interaction of characters from different backgrounds and of visibly different origins. And yet, in the case of *Intouchables*, critics viewed the class difference between the two main characters as the primary
motor of plot conflict, and *Entre les murs* was lauded as a “lovely homage to all teachers of France;” any mentions of the diverse classroom in which the film is set were left unrobed and unproblematized.\(^{40}\)

Loosely based on real people and a true story, *Intouchables* re-creates the genesis of an improbable friendship between Philippe Pozzo di Borgo—a wealthy, white Parisian man confined to a wheelchair (played by François Cluzet), and his unlikely caretaker Driss—a man of significantly humbler origins (interpreted by Sy). To say that the film traffics in cliché and stereotype would be an understatement: a classic Hollywood-style feel-good film with a happy ending, the story has a narratively predictable, classic dramatic arc (exposition-problem-reconciliation) that plays on the tired theme of “opposites attract” and makes topsy turvy ideas about wealth, intelligence, culture, manners, and polite society. Nonetheless, *Intouchables* was an immediate box-office sensation, and its success is undoubtedly linked to its slick production values, its actors’ inspired performances, its keen comedic editing, and a storyline that flirts with, but does not give into, bathos. And at its best moments, *Intouchables* proffers a critique of the establishment elite and a send up of high culture.

Notwithstanding its deliberate juxtaposition of two phenotypically distinct leading actors, *Intouchables* goes to great lengths to establish the initial conflict between the two men as an issue of class rather than race. Certainly, the narrative alone emphasizes Driss’s financial struggle and limited opportunities: he has just gotten out of jail, he steals an expensive art object from Philippe’s villa, and he only interviews for the job of caregiver so that he can fulfill the requirements for unemployment benefits. But it is the film’s formal elements that work to code class difference visually: mise-en-scène and rhyming editing take the viewer back and forth between Philippe’s opulent villa in central Paris and Driss’s bleak HLM *en banlieue*: the glossy

\(^{40}\) Mandelbaum on Intouchables; Ministre de l’éducation X. Darcos on Entre les murs as hommage.
wooden doors and *pierre de taille* grand entry of Philippe’s villa are squarely framed and filmed with a level camera, while a high-angle camera looks down on the asphalt of the grim housing project Driss sometimes calls home, catching only fragments of this built space in its frame and thus metaphorizing the social fragmentation of the “zone.” A scene of Driss bathing in a tub too small for him (in the dingy bathroom of an institutional, overcrowded apartment with no privacy) looks vaguely comic at first, yet turns out to foreshadow and foil the large, luxurious marble *salle de bains* made available to Driss at Philippe’s villa, the sight of which is accompanied by the chorus from “Ave Maria.”

Elements of cinematography also underscore class and generational differences, while actively subordinating race as a secondary consideration. Within the chronology of the narrative, the spectator first encounters Driss as he waits, alongside a dozen other hopeful caregivers, to be interviewed by Philippe. Driss emerges in this sequence through a series of reveals: first, a low-level horizontal tracking shot skims along pairs of well-shod feet resting on a glossy parquet floor. The camera is clearly establishing a *topos*—these shoes belong to people whose presence in this context is visually logical and who are unified by virtue of a lateral, mobile framing that, in film grammar, tends to federate the objects in its field. This statement of sameness is punctuated when the camera comes to rest on a visual difference: a pair of sneakers, worn by someone in baggy jeans rather than slacks. The visual anomaly is both material and symbolic: wearing sneakers and jeans to an interview may not necessarily imply a lower economic situation, but it certainly suggests either a lack of knowledge of social codes or a deliberate flaunting of them. Regardless, the camera has enough information to signal that that these shoes do not belong—they come from outside, they are worrisome exceptions in the mise-en-scène—and it from this still shot that the camera now tracks upward, revealing the odd man out to be
black, a phonotypical difference only further confirmed when the camera cuts abruptly to a wide shot of all the men.

If the opening sequence\(^4\) ends with a kind of “group portrait” in which Driss is remarkable for both his attire and the fact that he is the only black man in a lineup of white men, it is important to remember that the shot order that led to this emblem situates race as a secondary concern, made visible only after other forms of alterity were made visible. The formal establishment of race as secondary is born out repeatedly in the narrative: indeed, Driss’s race is never directly mentioned and only occasionally implied. A well-meaning friend, for example, tries to protect Philippe from Driss by emphasizing the latter’s criminal record and his rough background in the projects (“ces mecs de la banlieue sont sans pitié”), never the fact that Driss is black.

In one scene where Driss dons formal attire for an event at Philippe’s house, a co-worker observes that he looks good in suit—“on dirait Barack Obama,” says the red-headed vixen Driss has pursued relentlessly. Notwithstanding its potential essentialism (ie, that all well-dressed black men look alike), the line is too aware of its implications to be dismissed as racist: on the one hand, Driss looks nothing like Obama and the redhead seems to be poking fun; on the other, even if the quip might imply a form of essentialism, its reference to the “post-racial” president of the United States allows the film to claim territory in the “post-racial moment.” All of these elements, ultimately, combine to produce a film that appears, as many critics and reviewers have agreed, to be about something other than race, or in which racial difference is incidental rather than fundamental. But within the French context, we might also give this an allegorical spin: the film’s discourse about race—like that of the nation—looks distinctly colorblind. In other words,

\(^4\) Need to explain that this is the opening in terms of narrative chronology, but not in terms of how the film is built. (Flashback structure.)
the film’s aesthetic project props up a politics that is in line with republican values, whereby individuals make no demands based on difference and the state sees “men and citizens,” not ethic, religious, or racial difference.

*Intouchables*’ colorblindness is perhaps best encapsulated in the paragliding scene—a literal and visual “high point” in the narrative arc of the film in which Driss and Philippe perform an aerial ballet above the Savoie just before the film’s final moment of conflict (Driss will be called away to deal with family matters and Philippe falls into a depression). The sequence is set against a sonic backdrop of Nina Simone’s iconic “Feelin’ good,” which blots out all diegetic sound as the characters become the “birds” of Simone’s song (“Birds in the sky, you know how I feel... it’s a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life for me, and I’m feelin’ good...”). Simone is, of course, not just a talented signer but a cultural signifier whose transatlantic valences are useful here. Known for her outspoken support of civil rights and an activism that permeated her music, Simone settled in France in 1992, where she lived until her death in 2003. Simone’s decision to leave the US in 1974 was motivated her sense of having reached an impasse in the struggle for civil rights in America; she found herself at home “colorblind” France. Her inclusion on the soundtrack is thus in no way “neutral”—this is not just any song by any singer, but a cultural text with embedded significance, one that comes along at perhaps the only moment in the film when Philippe and Driss are undeniably equal—they are both “flying,” unfettered by the various “handicaps” that hamper their existence on solid ground; at the same time, they are both “assisted”—for different reasons unable to actually direct their parachutes. And as the film celebrates their fleeting equality, we hear the voice of a known activist for desegregation and racial equality, crooning about “feeling good.”

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42 Using Nina Simone’s presence in the film to bridge back across the Atlantic to questions of race/representation in US: scandal surrounding biopic “Nina” (Cynthia Mort, 2016) in which Ms. Simone is interpreted by Zoe Saldana.
One American critic, however, took serious issue with *Intouchables* and in particular with the representation of Driss. Calling the film itself “offensive,” *Variety* reviewer Jay Weisberg accused the directors of “flinging about Uncle Tom racism” and treating Sy’s character as a “performing monkey,” relegated to a role “barely removed from the slave house of yore.” That Weisberg’s critique was taken seriously in Hollywood is not surprising, particularly given that the film had already been optioned for a American re-make. Its impact in France, however, is perhaps unexpected: initially somewhat divided about the film, French critics bristled at Weisberg’s characterizations, banding together to issue refined assessments of the film based on the American critic’s mis-understanding of the French context.

It is possible to see Jay Weisberg’s point about the film: *Intouchables* may subconsciously produce a racist discourse by playing to certain stereotypes, such as the notion that “any well groomed black man in a suit looks like Obama.” And one could almost give Weisberg a point for the dancing scene—which seems to play on a vision of the black man as “having rhythm” and being able to “get down”—if it weren’t for the poignancy of Philippe’s almost loving gaze on his able-bodied friend. But it remains that Weisberg’s vision is terribly Amero-centric, rooted in concepts and tropes of racism that are culturally determined and that do not play in the French context. France, too, has a history of slavery; but the “jolly slave house of yore” is a US convention, not a French one, and “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” gets lost in translation.

I do, however, think that there is a “race-d” discourse hiding in plain sight in the film, one that counters the notion of *Intouchables* as colorblind. The key lies in the directors’ decision to

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44 Note: the film is slated for release in early 2018 under the title « The Upside », starring Bryan Cranston and Kevin Hart.
45 Michael article in *SubStance*. Formerly divided about the film’s « value », French critics federated in the wake of Weisberg’s attack, generally softening any previous critiques about its low-brow nature. One critic: « I can recognize a fairy tale when I see one. »
re-plot the racial coordinates of the “true story” by changing the race or ethnic origin of the caregiver: the “real-life” Driss is Algerian, not Senegalese. Weisberg is aware of this casting decision, and seems to think that the choice of a black actor adds grist to his argument about the film’s racism (as if the directors had chosen a black actor in order to fulfill a racist agenda—more on this in a moment). I tend to disagree; yet this adaptation is not simply cosmetic, nor can it be dismissed as a mere question of Nakache and Toledano’s desire to work with Sy (who has become a “fetish actor” for the duo)—even if that is undoubtedly true.46 Rather, the choice of Sy for the role of Driss has the effect of at once highlighting and hiding racial issues in France. In other words, the choice embodies the very complexity and ambivalence of “colorblind” politics.

Nakache and Toledano certainly could have cast an actor of Algerian or North African origin to play the role of Driss—indeed, as previously mentioned, Zem, Naceri, and Debbouze are amongst the highest paid and most appreciated celebrities in France. But the “optics” of a “bromance” between a Frenchman and an Algerian remain fraught in French culture, even a half-century after Algerian independence (and even considering the fame and fortunes of a handful of Maghrebi-origin actors). Thus, the director’s choice to make the caregiver a man of Senegalese origin steers the film out of potentially turbulent waters by charting a course around France’s long and bitter history with Algeria, and with the large population of Algerians who have now settled in France.47 This point is perhaps most quickly driven home by a 1996 poll in which 35 percent of French people surveyed professed their antipathy toward North Africans and their descendants, while only 8 percent reported negative feelings toward blacks.48 Whereas Weisberg sees in Driss a “dancing monkey”, the directors—and the French public—see in Driss a palatable

46 This has been noted; cite article or Dubois book.
47 Synthetic note about Algerian colonization, war for independence, complicated poco politics of integration…
48 Survey in Bleich article.
form of alterity—one that permits them to buy into and enjoy the fiction of an interracial bromace that resolutely refuses to problematize race.

A more cynical read is also possible here. Cluzet and Sy are of starkly different phenotype, and the contrast in skin tone creates a highly visible coding of their different experiences and aspirations. And while this visible difference requires the film to work harder to downplay racial difference, it also—however subconsciously—functions as a reassuring mechanism, subtly invoking entrenched colonial neuroses about the “un-identifiable” other; the other who “passes” as the “same”; the other whose difference only reveals itself once the perimeter has been breached. Indeed, before and during the Algerian War, one primary colonial anxiety resided in the challenge of “keeping apart” Europeans and indigenous Algerians.49 We see this notion exploited and reversed to great effect in Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers*, where European-looking Algerian women are able to penetrate the *cordon sécuritaire* that surrounds the casbah and thus carry out terror attacks in the European city.50 In *Intouchables*, then, a casting that embraces the black man may read as something less brotherly, and something slightly more sinister: Nakache and Toledano’s Driss is not just visibly different, he is visually identifiable. He can put on a suit, but he cannot pass; ultimately, he poses no threat.

**Diversity as Allegory in *Entre les murs***

Laurent Cantet’s *Entre les murs* rides an ambiguous, blurry line between reality and fiction, between the work of documentary and the work of imagination. The action takes place over the course of a school year but is confined to the space of the school *intra muros* (as the

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49 Also Jews…
50 Other examples in cultural production/theory in which “phenotype” and racial profiling are documented: Faire Face docu from 1961; Panijel docu, 1961; Sidi Mohammed Barkat (and Serge Tevanian) on les corps d’exception/le régime d’exception...
French title suggests and the English title, *The Class*, glosses over). A great number of elements participate in what we might call the film’s “reality effect”: the multi-ethnic cast is portrayed by actual students (not actors), most of whom are identified in the film by their real names; the character of the teacher, François Marin, is portrayed by François Bégaudeau, who is not only a teacher in “real life” but the author of the eponymous memoir upon which the movie is based; and the film was made on site at an actual school—the lycée professionelle Jean Jaurès in Paris’s 19th arrondissement. With the exception of Souleymane’s mother, who is a fiction created for the film, even the parents who appear in the film are the parents of the young people in question, and the professors, administrators and support staff all play themselves; the classroom scenes depict the types of exercises and objects of study one would expect to find a French middle school. The film’s docu-drama hybridity is undoubtedly what made it so compelling to viewers and critics, and what propelled it to the status of an event in French society, creating an opportunity to open a metadialogue about school and politics in France, where school is explicitly conceived as the crucible in which citizens are forged and republican values are inculcated. Notwithstanding the film’s channeling of the aesthetics and techniques of cinéma direct—or perhaps because of it—it is crucial to remember that *Entre les murs* is a tightly scripted and highly constructed work of fiction, a representation of reality, not an indexical record of it.

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51 With the exception of Khoumba, Rachel, and Souleymane, Franck.
52 The name of the school referenced in the film, le collège Françoise Dolto (Paris 20e), is the actual school attended by the students we see on screen, but it did not serve as the physical setting for the filming.
53 Cantet’s style owes quite a bit to a documentary form known as “direct cinema”, which originated in Canada in the 1960s and was very soon thereafter popularized in France (by Jean Rouch; Maitres fous/Chronique d’un été). Direct cinema, which was in part made possible by evolutions in technology in the 1960s, was an ideologically and ethically motivated cinema “school”, interested in simply “capturing life as it unfolded”, unmediated by a director or an interviewer, with a “cast” (of real people) not made self-conscious by the presence of a large technical crew.
54 Note about Ferry, 19th c reforms making public school compulsory, free and secular; focus on schools post-Charlie Hebdo (as lab for laïcité). Mention somewhere Isabelle’s film?
The broad discourse surrounding *Entre les murs*, particularly as it concerned the film’s representation of racial diversity, was similar in tenor to the discourse produced by the reception of *Intouchables*. Across the board, reactions to the film could be qualified as “colorblind,” that is, as not seeing race as an essential component. *Entre les murs* was lauded by the Minister of Education at the time,  and received a great deal of media attention when it won the *palme d’or* at Cannes. Bégaudeau has insisted on the film’s ability to deliver a “the true story about today’s vibrant youth culture.” Director Laurent Cantet views the confrontation (between students and teacher) in the film as moments when the classroom becomes a school in democracy, or even, a school on school. He goes on to say: “Le professeur dit, ‘C’est quand même étrange que, chaque fois qu’on veut vous apprendre quelque chose, vous mettez d’abord en doute la nécessité de l’apprendre. Apprenez-le, et après on en discute.’ C’est le résumé de tout ce que dit le film.”

The success and realism of *Entre les murs* were such that it has become a pedagogical object in and of itself, and for teachers interested in using *Entre les murs* in their classrooms, there are numerous pedagogical materials available on line. One French website that encourages the use of French film in language acquisition courses, sums up the film as depicting “the everyday life of teachers and students in a difficult Parisian middle school (…) Filmed like a documentary (even though it is really a fiction!) the camera follows one particular French professor, François Marin, and his class of 8th graders. Teaching isn’t easy all the time… reality

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56 « Il faut, déclare François Bégaudeau lors de l’annonce de la victoire de la Palme d’or, répondre à « tous ceux qui prétendent connaître la jeunesse et la définissent en trois aphorismes clairs et définitifs. En voyant ce film ils prendront des nouvelles de la jeunesse » *La Croix*, 27 mai 2008, p. 21.[3].
57 Cantet dit « avoir pris plaisir à filmer les joutes verbales » (dossier de presse), ces « moments de confrontation sur lesquels le film est basé, […] moments où la classe se transforme en école de la démocratie, et parfois en école de l’école » éclaire à plusieurs reprises qu’il a voulu exposer une tentative de « débats démocratiques » entre le professeur et les élèves, et que ces débats seraient démocratiques au moins parce que « les élèves et le professeur, durant certains moments dans l’année, en viennent à discuter de manière presque égalitaire. » Dossier de presse.
58 Source
or fiction?"  59 In another online pedagogical dossier, Entre les murs is broken down into keywords and themes: keywords include teaching, education, expulsion, authority, France, and middle school; the themes are ethics, education, society and manners.  60 None of these teaching materials suggest that the ethnic diversity of the class is worth mentioning; the list of keywords and themes seems to sum it up: “race” is neither.  61

If this colorblind reception to a film that seems to produce a colorblind discourse runs parallel with our narrative about Intouchables, it is also the case that one voice emerges with a counter reading. The “Weisberg” moment for Entre les murs, however, features significant differences. In a scholarly essay published in Transition magazine by a French-trained sociologist working in a Canadian university, we find a thoroughgoing Fanonian critique of the representation of race in Entre les murs. Abdoulaye Gueye’s essay, “The Color of Unworthiness,” deconstructs the film’s reality effects by exposing its implied race politics.  62 While Gueye concedes that the film responds to the dearth of black images in the French media landscape by featuring an ethnically diverse cast with a high proportion of blacks, its “making visible” fails because Entre les murs ultimately reifies stereotypes about blacks in France, and thus “validates” a certain vision of a particular group.  63

Gueye is methodical in his deconstruction of Entre les murs, offering three readings of its narrative and aesthetic reifications of stereotype: first, the film un-problematically reconstructs the dominant power structure of society at large within the microcosm of the school, and in this

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60 http://www.grignoux.be/dossiers-pedagogiques-252
61 Perhaps worth noting that, unlike Intouchables, Entre les murs was also received as race-neutral in US press. See Manhola Dargis, NYT review, one of few instances where the heterogeneous make up of the class is highlighted: “The young bodies crowding “The Class,”--an artful, intelligent movie about modern French identity and the attempt to transform those bodies into citizens through talk--come in all sizes, shapes and colors.”
63 Gueye, pg no.
power structure, those at the top of the pyramid are white—the teachers and the school administration, while the population at the base of the pyramid is mixed and even predominantly non-white. (The school’s faculty and staff—who are presented in an early scene at a meeting to open the school year—is in fact more diverse than Gueye’s initial assessment allows for, but it is also true that only the white characters are offered a chance to speak and introduce themselves, and only the white characters have the luxury of a name, a position, or a claim to belonging.)

The second aspect of Gueye’s critique deals with the particularities of on-screen representation of students of color. Within the space of the classroom, while a large proportion of screen time is given over to the various ethnicities represented in the room, and while the black students here have voices and names, Gueye claims that their voices remain “relatively anomic”—characterized by alienation, social disorientation, and purposelessness. While the characters like Souleymane—a key protagonist in the film—may have a voice, that voice is a marginal one, which cannot but disrupt order, and that calls attention to itself only through insolence, aggression, and eventually, violence. In addition, Gueye points out that all of the students reprimanded or punished in the film are black, and the only one to be praised by all of the teachers is Louise, a white girl.

Finally, Gueye observes that the only other black characters in the film are the security guards, who who embody a kind of Fanonian “native patrol.” His conclusion—“Through revealing the especially negative attitudes of black students toward school, and featuring black adults in low-skilled jobs, The Class appears to confirm the popular view according to which blackness is antithetical to the quest for knowledge”—is all the more scathing insofar as he cites statistics that indeed disprove the stereotype represented in the film. By bringing in studies that demonstrate that educational ambitions are more or less the same for students of Subsaharan
origin and for students whose origins are not rooted in recent immigration, Gueye exposes *Entre les murs* as a representation not of reality, but as an ill-informed interpretation of reality.

Notions of reality and of race lead us to a knot of questions about this film. What Gueye observes is true: the black students in the film get into proportionally more trouble than the white students or the students of other minority or ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, the highest point of drama in the film turns on Souleymane’s behavior and his eventual expulsion. Yet it seems worth probing this representation as a representation: if the film is indeed trafficking in stereotype—namely that black students have a harder time making their way through the French school system—is it at all possible that it does so to indict the system rather than affirm it? Or is the film producing a racist discourse—suggesting that black students fail because they are inherently less capable than white students? Or is the film colorblind, a representation of a multi-ethnic classroom as one finds all over France now, in which cause and effect are not linked to race? In other words, are we to understand that Souleymane’s eventual expulsion had nothing to do with race, or perceptions of race, and that the character could have just as easily been white?

While Gueye’s critique offers a necessary counterpoint to the race-neutral readings generated by the film, there are more complex workings afoot in *Entre les murs* than his analysis might allow for. Because regardless of whether or not the film perpetuates stereotypes or reflects a true state of affairs, what is neglected in both colorblind readings and in Gueye’s indictment, is way in which the students themselves are represented as wrestling with and attempting to sort through complex feelings and situations that revolve around race. However partial or elliptical, it is the questions that emerge from these moments that offer the most grist for a robust critique of “race-talk” in *Entre les murs*.
In a scene that takes place in the courtyard of the school, for example, the boys play a pickup game of soccer that is filmed by a high-level camera allowing the viewer to see all of the players at once and producing a surveillance, or carceral effect. Racial and national epithets begin to flow, with Wei called out as “Jackie Chan” and another student referred to as “le Malien.” But when a player trips and tension builds, this mixed group of boys resorts to baldly racist language: one is called a “West Indian faggot;” the label “Malien” is now laced with a scornful tone; and in the end they all hurl around the now-classic and unexamined “banlieue” insult *nique ta race*. Nothing bad happens here; or does it? The bell rings and the kids go back to class, having performed the ways in which everyday racism has been internalized and naturalized.

The soccer sequence is nearly perfectly bookended by twin scenes back in the classroom in which individual students proffer commentary that implicitly point to their awareness of race and racism. After the pick up match, Nessim is called upon to present an exercise in argumentation to the class. On the surface, this seems to be about soccer: Nessim announces that the African Cup is about to start and he’s happy because Morocco, his country of origin, will be playing, but Mali won’t, because the team was too weak to qualify and had been roundly defeated by Morocco. (Souleymane, of Malian origin, is clearly Nessim’s target here.) But Nessim is actually making a point about the possibility of pan African unity: “Dès que le Mali ne joue pas, tous les noirs ici, je veux dire, tous les Africains, on dirait que c’est plus des Africains.” The professor quickly glosses Nessim’s exposé as an editorial comment on Souleymane, but it actually contains a much deeper, implicit reflection on national identity and belonging, not to

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64 Unacknowledged hallmark of the film’s cinematography, downward camera angles, often producing only fragmentary views of what’s below. This is the surveillance angle par excellence, and coupled with the general huis clos effect of the set and mise-en-scène, the general effect is one of claustrophobia, of being « enfermé dedans ». Note that the camera « levels » in the penultimate scene, also in the courtyard, of the teacher-student soccer game: hierarchical leveling of the school’s power structure is doubled by the film grammar.
mention that it triggers a reflection on colonial history while at the same time pointing up the possibility of dual allegiances.

Just prior to the soccer game in the courtyard, Carl (Souleymane’s antagonist on the field) presents his own self-portrait. The sophistication of this self-representation lies in its utter simplicity, its juxtaposition of simple phrases (I like, I don’t like), all of which are grammatically identical: “J’aime mes potes, j’aime faire des nuits blanches... j’aime manger au restau et me taper des délires.” It is the sameness of his syntax that renders his words more weighty, and so when he places his dislike of racists in a series of three that contains both math and Materazzi--

“J’aime pas la Nouvelle star et la Star’ac, j’aime pas les hommes politiques, j’aime pas les profs trop sévères; j’aime pas maths, les racists, et j’aime pas materazzi”--we are jarred first by the juxtaposition between the banality of the phrase’s structure and the implications of its content, and second, by what this construction symbolizes: perhaps, for Carl, racism is just another item on a long list of things that bug him, as regular an event in his life as math homework, or watching Materazzi play soccer.

A sophisticated awareness of space also makes visible the students’ engagement with and awareness of the limits placed upon them by society. Khoomba, the primary female protagonist amongst the students, reveals to her teacher that she travels all over Paris: “Moi je vais partout, le 1er, le 5e, le 20e, le 12e, le 19e... je vais à Luxembourg.” In phrases saturated with sarcasm, Marin expresses his disbelief that she ventures out of her neighborhood, let alone to Paris’s historical center. Yet Khoomba’s innocuous statement of fact (“je vais partout”) recalls and exposes the 19th-century anti-Semitic mantra “ils sont partout,”—in reference to Jews in France—while also re-appropriating and resignifying it. Moreover, the entire exchange seems to

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65 Note: 2016 comedy send up of anti-Semitism in France, « Ils sont partout » directed by Yvan Attal.
wink at a Fanonian critique of the European city and the native quarter, to point up politicized geographies, and to destabilize stereotypes about social and actual mobility.

Ultimately, whether referred to in obvious terms or in implicit commentary, race and ethnic difference are clearly active categories for the students of the film. But if we take a step back from the diegesis, it is also possible to read *Entre les murs* as an allegory for the place and role of diversity (or alterity) within the French nation: just as the students call into question the imperfect subjunctive tense and the various exercises they are compelled to perform in the classroom, the presence of *difference in France* calls into question the existing status quo and the rhetoric that props it up. Just as the students question their teacher and, by extension, the authority of the school, the existence of difference in France questions authority and existing republican institutions. In other words, the film is not colorblind at all, but aware—perhaps on a subconscious level—of ethnic and racial difference as a powerful signifier capable of producing a subtle ideological critique without tipping into dogma.

The allegorical qualities of *Entre les murs* are underscored narratively and cinematically. The film, after all, ends on a representation of Marin as a failure: at the end of the school year, when asked what they have learned, not a single student mentions learning anything in his class. This tends to suggest the failure of authority (be it the teacher in the film or the nation, in reality) to successfully negotiate the gauntlet of education and diversity. Moreover, by representing the teaching corps as engaged with its students yet obsessed with petty concerns (three is a long conversation about the staff coffee machine), *Entre les murs* offers an indictment of the French educational system, or at the very least, a challenge to do better.

Cantet’s cinematography also supports this allegorical reading of the film. On the one hand, a sense of claustrophobia is heightened by Cantet’s fondness for the close up: a large
percentage of the shots are medium close-up, close ups, or extreme close ups. The close up of Marin that opens the film not only posits him as the central character (and perhaps the one with whom the spectator is to identify), but it also serves as a harbinger of an aesthetic to come, one that observes its subjects up close, and relentlessly so. And this relentless observation suggests that the film is trying to winkle something out of this situation, above and beyond the conflict of the plot. Furthermore, Cantet uses a process known as Cinemascope or Panavision, which reduces the depth of field and the height of the images, changing the aspect ratio and giving a “wide screen effect” which also “magnifies the sense of claustrophobia in the class.”66 This technique is best adapted to filming landscapes--wide swaths of relative uncluttered territory—and when used outside it appropriately captures extension and expansiveness. When used indoors, however, this technique has the effect of collapsing space, and producing frames in which one character is in focus and the figures next to her are slightly blurred. In the context of the classroom, this also allows the camera to focus on one student while at the same time capturing a wide range of actions and reactions around her. Cantet has taken a technique indicated for capturing a large entity, a landscape, but we might also say, a nation, and trained it on a microcosm of that entity, thus producing a cinematic synecdoche. With a tool designed to film the nation, Cantet has filmed a diverse body of teenagers: what better way to suggest that we see the nation through race?

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CONCLUSION TO COME

66 James S. Williams points out, see article in French studies. Many of the reviews of the film address Cantet’s choice to use three high-definition cameras. One camera follows the teacher, and two are trained on the class. Having two cameras on the students allows greater freedom for them to improvise and makes the film feel more like a documentary with its long takes. However, much has also been written about the political intentions of this filming style. Rather than shooting for a traditional shot/reverse editing, Cahiers du Cinema describes Cantet’s camera as having a “really neutral position, in the middle of the class.” Although other critics disagree with the claim that the camera placement upsets the power hierarchy, critics generally agree that long takes are less controlling.66