

La Haine



La Haine was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995 to great critical acclaim. Matthew Kassovitz was awarded Best Director and five times as many copies of the film were produced as would normally have been the case, as people flocked to the cinema to see it in their thousands. And yet the film is shot in black and white on an ugly housing estate in Paris with a cast of unknown (as was) actors. In addition, the subject matter of the film was not exactly entertainment – a day in the life of three unemployed youths building anger and resentment as they wait for their friend to die.

Despite all this, audiences loved it and ten years later a special anniversary edition has been released at the cinema.

■ Which of the following words or phrases would you use to describe La Haine?

bleak	pessimistic	exciting
action-packed	real	tense
hopeless	menacing	heroic
sexist	enjoyable	innovative

- For each word chosen, try to explain your reasoning.
- What others can you add to your list?
- Did you enjoy the film? Would you see it again?
- Why do you think La Haine has been so successful?
- Do you think that different international audiences would view it differently?

Heroes or Villains?

The film tells the story of three young men who live on the estate, Vinz, Hubert and Said. The three men all share the same environment and experience the same events but bring different perspectives to bear on their common situation. Vinz is the character who is central to most of the action and comes across as the stereotypical 'angry young man'. He rarely stops to think about what he is doing or saying, and ploughs straight in, often inflaming and infuriating the situation, with disastrous consequences. Hubert is more of an observer, calming the other two when passions rise. He seems older and more sensitive to people and events and acts as the peacemaker. Said is again, like Vinz, quick to respond, but appears to be less motivated by hate and more by what he sees as self-respect. His aggression is less damaging and at times, more humorous.

- Which of the characters do you like, and why?
- Which do you dislike, and why?
- Which of the three characters do you identify with, if any? In what ways?
- The central character in a film is often the hero. Do you see Vinz as a hero? Would you call him an anti-hero?
- What villains do you see in the film? Could you class any of the three central characters as a villain, and why?
- Does the film have a message? If so, what is it? How is this conveyed through the characters?

Representation

Most of the characters we see in the film are young men under the age of twenty-five. We see very few older people, very few women and very few families, yet presumably all these groups must also live on the estate. By focusing almost exclusively on the lives of Vinz, Hubert and Said, the filmmaker is presenting us with a certain perspective; he is choosing to represent life there as seen only through their eyes. The negativity and aggression they encounter is undoubtedly part of daily life on the estate but may not be the whole story. Think about what we see of the families and home life of Vinz and Said. What other family members do we see, what do we see them doing or saying and how do Vinz and Said react to them?

- What women do we see? What do we see them wearing and how do they act? What impression are we given of them?
- How do each of the three characters, Vinz, Said and Hubert react to them? Does the inclusion of these women allow us to see a different side to the men's characters? Is this sustained in any way?

Representation of Youth

We often assume that 'youth' as a group only came into being in the years following the Second World War. It is certainly the case that this group in society became more 'visible' at this time, due to a number of social and cultural factors including the rise of the media and reportage of 'youth' as a group. However, the reality is that as each generation has aged, the thoughts and behaviour of the young that take their place has been seen as 'different' and a threat to the existing social order. Documents recording the behaviour of Tudor apprentices indicate that these perceptions of youth have been around since the beginning of the fifteenth century. As we follow Vinz, Said and Hubert through their daily life we are presented with a very definite perspective of youth culture through what we are, and are not, shown.

- With a partner, make a list of all the activities we see the three characters involved in. Now re-arrange your list to place the most frequently seen activities at the top, down to the least-frequent at the bottom. What impression are we given of youth?
- What positive activities do we see the boys involved in?
- What activities might have taken place throughout the day that we do not see?
- Why do you think the filmmaker chose to represent youth in this way? How do you feel about this?
- What older people do we encounter? How would you describe them? What are the boys' reactions to them? What do the older characters bring to the film?

Extension activities:

- What other films have you seen with similar representations of youth?
- Who do you think are the audiences for these films?
- What commercial advantages are there to representing youth in this way?
- Make a collection of images of youth in film using the internet as a source. Categorise and display your collection. Prepare a PowerPoint presentation for the rest of your group.
- How do you feel about representation of youth as a whole by the media?

Representation of the Police

Filmmaker Matthew Kassovitz stated ‘La Haine is an anti-police film and that is how I meant it to be understood.’ Indeed, when it was premiered at Cannes, the police on security duty there turned their back on the cast and crew of the film. Kassovitz’ portrayal of the French police leaves no doubt as to how he sees them and their role in the violence in La Haine.

- What part do the police play in the overall narrative of the film?
- Think about the scene where Said and Hubert are held by the police:
- What can you say about the appearance of the police?
- What props do we see that help build up our picture of these police?
- What is the recurring point that the officer makes to his colleague? Describe the manner in which he behaves whilst making it.
- What is the effect of having an onlooker at the scene?
- Do you think films like La Haine, which portrays the police in a negative light, should be screened to the general public? Why or why not?

Building the Tension

a) Narrative

Throughout La Haine the tension builds and builds until it explodes in the final scene of the film. There is a kind of inevitability about the violence, taking into account the inactive boredom of life on the estate, the volatile nature of two of the three main characters and the presence of catalysts such as guns and drugs. We, as an audience, are fully aware that it is only a matter of time before the situation is no longer tenable and a tragedy occurs. The question is only a matter of how and when.

- Tension is present right from the very beginning of the film as we wait for news of Abdel’s condition. How does the fact that the action is set across one day only add to expectations?
- How does the constant referral back to the clock add to the tension and what happens to this throughout the day?
- What is the reason for having Vinz fire an imaginary gun several times in the film?
- The final violence at the end is preceded by incidents of lesser violence. How do these affect our perception of events?
- As any good scriptwriter knows, it is impossible to maintain tension for long periods without breaking from time to time for episodes of light relief. Where can these episodes be seen in La Haine?
- Would you call the ending of La Haine a ‘tragedy’?

b) Film Language

It is not only the narrative itself that is responsible for building certain expectations throughout the film. The way in which events are relayed through both sound and vision all contribute, helping to create an atmosphere of uncontrollable tension that leaves us both shocked and yet strangely relieved by the ending. The camera plays an important role by keeping us close into the action; when arguments are taking place we often see only the heads of those who are in conflict filling the screen and we feel physically 'pushed up' against the action. Likewise, the way in which the camera circles around the action when tension is in the air leaves us a little uneasy – we're not sure where it will stop and therefore leave us, the audience, in the action. The circling also has the effect of trapping the conflict in a small space, thus making the whole episode far more claustrophobic and explosive.

- Look again at the scene in the burnt-out gym where Said is arguing with his friend and watch the position and movement of the camera in this scene.
- Now try to find other instances where the camera is behaving in the same way.
- The film is shot in black and white on a very grainy film stock. What effect does this have on how we view what we interpret on screen?
- On occasion the filmmaker presents events on screen in slow motion. What are these events and what effect does this have?

And finally...

La Haine has been compared to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. What similarities and differences can you find?

Author: Anita Abbott

©Film Education 2006