CINEMATIC REVERBERATIONS OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA: WOMEN’S MEMORIES OF THE HOLOCAUST AND COLONIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH-LANGUAGE CINEMA

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes women’s retelling of history in French-language cinema during the last thirty years. It explores artistic creations by Chantal Akerman, Karin Albou, Martine Dugowson, Yamina Benguigui, Géraldine Nakache, and Hervé Mimran which draw on the memory of the Holocaust or colonialism and reveal how the repressed memories of deportation and colonization concurrently reverberate through generations. These filmmakers also show how the intergenerational transmission of trauma causes dislocations of already internalized images of the past and how women’s coping with historical trauma engenders women’s questioning of their own position in society and contributes to their identity formation.

Using Michael Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory as a point of theoretical departure, my dissertation demonstrates how these artistic creations encourage the remembering of the Holocaust simultaneously with the recollection of colonialism as memories that intersect, enlighten each other, and facilitate intercultural communication. Adopting feminist film theory, I investigate how the six filmmakers assign a central role to personal and collective histories in their works while examining the status of women as agents in making and writing history. I suggest that, by re-appropriating hegemonic discourses, women bring new perspectives, such as gender and ethnicity, to the rewriting
of history and that by retrieving images from the past, they gain agency. My research also reveals innovative cinematic and writing styles created by these film directors in order to represent female subjectivity and desire as tropes through which tensions between past and present are expressed and new spaces for multicultural identity negotiation are constructed.
To my mother and my sister

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In memory of my grandmother
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INTRODUCTION

When one looks at how the past is evoked and remembered in French-language cinema, one aspect which still draws attention and which has not been exhaustively explored by film critics and scholars is the specificity of women’s recollection and reconstruction of the past. Imagining and writing about gendered memories of the Holocaust and colonialism in French-language films has become a topic of interest to a number of filmmakers during the last three decades, as the issue of the preservation and transmission of women survivors’ legacy to future generations has also started to be explored in contemporary French-language films. These films have centered on stories of the Holocaust and colonialism, as events that have been widely recognized as two of the most important traumatic moments in the history of the 20th century which echo throughout the years. In France, in particular, intersecting memories of these two challenging historical moments have constituted a complex background for the construction of a multicultural society.

Remembering the Holocaust and colonialism has become a complex phenomenon which encompasses issues such as motivation, or the willingness to remember, and representation, or the reconstruction of the past. Images of past events offer a moral guide
for the present and future possibility of a multiethnic society. The revolutionary ‘mind-
opening’ spirit of May 1968 brought about a greater openness toward spiritual and
cultural freedom in France during the decades that followed. The 1970s are marked not
only by an active feminist movement but also by a desire to reveal historical truth. For
instance, by uncovering war crime stories, like Maurice Papon’s involvement in the Jews’
deportation in 1942 and in the massacre of Maghrebian demonstrators in Paris on
October 17, 1961, historical trauma resurfaces through personal histories and becomes
the focus of the media. In the 1980s and later, during the 1990s, French intellectuals and
artists, as well as politicians, directed their attention to local problems rather than to
international ones because of the end of the Cold War. France became more aware of its
need to welcome cultural diversity. These tendencies and events are mirrored in the
cinema of the time. A number of films have been made in France that address the
repressed memories of the Holocaust and colonialism from the perspective of ethnic and
gender differences which have been excluded from official discourses. By interrogating
hegemonic historical discourses and questioning already internalized images of the past,
filmmakers today look for various ways to point out discrimination, xenophobia, and
other social problems by reviving the memory of past injustices. These filmmakers find
an unlimited source of inspiration in history as a means to condemn abuses and suggest
solutions to existing inequalities.

With these considerations in mind, I undertake the task of investigating in this
dissertation how the memory and history of the Holocaust and colonialism are
concomitantly reconstructed through film from a female perspective, and to demonstrate that the traumas of the two historical events concurrently reverberate through generations.

The works that will be the subject of my dissertation belong to several contemporary French-speaking directors and focus on the exploration of the relationship between women, personal and collective histories, and official histories: Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1977), *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna (Meetings with Anna* [1978]), *D’Est (From the East)* [1993]), Yamina Bengugui’s *Mémoires d’immigrés, l’héritage maghrébin (Immigrant Memories, the Maghrebian Heritage* [1997]), *Aïcha* (2009), and *Aïcha, job à tout prix (Aïcha, A Job At All Costs* [2010]), Karin Albou’s *La Petite Jérusalem (Little Jerusalem* [2005]) and *Le Chant des mariées (The Wedding Song* [2008]), Martine Dugowson’s *Mina Tannenbaum* (1994) and *Les Fantômes de Louba (Louba’s Ghosts* [2001]), and *Tout ce qui brille* (All That Shines [2010]) by Géraldine Nakache and Hervé Mimran. All these films, documentaries and feature films, draw directly or indirectly on the memory of the Holocaust or/and colonialism and focus on reconstructions of repressed histories and searches for identity. They engage with the re-writing of history from the point of view of the “Other,” which offers a new and demystifying reading of dominant, hegemonic discourses. These discourses, whether historical, political, literary, or cinematic narratives, offer a unilateral view on history from either racial, ethnic, or gender perspectives. The films studied here make known the filmmakers’ desire to reveal truths about women as historical subjects throughout the difficult moments of the Holocaust and colonialism.
In the aforementioned films, the memory of the two traumatic events in the present multicultural French society poses several questions about the function of trauma in the process of remembering. I explore how it is transmitted from one generation to the next, how the repressed past manifests itself, and the way autobiographical elements come to motivate some of the filmmakers’ approaches. I suggest that these works retell history from the point of view of first and second generation survivors in order to create personal and collective memories. The purpose is to overcome the struggle of victimization and to bring reconciliation between present and past and between survivors on different sides of the same traumatic event. More importantly, these artistic creations encourage the remembering of the Holocaust at the same time with the recollection of colonialism as two types of memory that enlighten each other and facilitate intercultural communication.

This dissertation also examines how the filmmakers assign a central role to personal and collective histories in their works while examining the status of women as agents in the process of history-making. It analyzes how they seek to offer agency to their female protagonists as makers of history. The relationship between feminism and the theme of revisiting history (loss, exile, and cultural memory) can also be found in the women’s desire to explore and reveal truths about women as historical subjects throughout challenging historical moments such as the Holocaust and colonialism, to give voice to their experiences.
The contribution that women film directors have brought to French-language cinema by both fiction and documentary films has become incontestable and yet not entirely recognized. Film scholars have written book-length studies dedicated to contemporary French-speaking women filmmakers, as well as articles on Akerman and Benguigui. Akerman’s works and Benuigui’s *Inch ‘Allah Dimanche* have received extensive critical attention (G. A. Foster, Ivone Margulies). Writings on Dugowson, Albou, Nakache, and Mimran have been scarce in general. The purpose of this dissertation is to bring a contribution to this body of work from the point of view of memory/trauma theory in conjunction with feminist and postcolonial theories. More importantly, I would like to address several new research questions by studying in parallel films that share common traits by the above-mentioned filmmakers.

These filmmakers privilege the analysis of female protagonists, of relationships between mother and daughter, and female friendship. In my study, I look at what new images are created by these film directors in order to represent a female universe. How do the female protagonists in these films see themselves and how do they define themselves in relation to others and to the past? How are women empowered through a re-appropriation of history and retrieving of images from the past? And in what way(s) do they gain agency?

One of the purposes of this study centered around the films of the six directors is the exploration of the way(s) in which the themes of history and trauma are addressed and how these themes inform the recovering of the missing links in some of the directors’
personal histories. The idea of recuperating the past is juxtaposed with the idea of reconstructing a past by women. The two dimensions, of retrieving and of inventing, coexist. Another goal of this research is to examine the importance of autobiography in the films of the six film directors for the way(s) in which their personal experiences become representative for entire collectivities and their works become, in their turn, cultural heritage for the generations to come.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I draw three axes of critical analysis based on memory and trauma, feminist, and postcolonial theory. I consider works on trauma theory such as E. Ann Kaplan’s *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, and Marianne Hirsch’s *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* which theorize both first- and second-generation survivors of the Holocaust and colonialism. I also adopt Michael Rothberg’s theory on memory from his book *Multidirectional Memory* which offers a frame of analysis that can explain how the memories of the two historical events have coexisted.

As a second axis of critical analysis, I rely on feminist critical theory from writings such as Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Judith Mayne’s *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema*, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis’s *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, which theorize the look, desire, and female subjectivity. In order to situate the films that I study in this dissertation within a postcolonial context, I appeal to Carrie Tarr’s *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue
Filmmaking in France and Hamid Naficy’s An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking.

The theoretical framework fundamental to this study, Michael Rothberg’s concept of *multidirectional memory*, brings together the Holocaust and colonialism. The author situates the memory of the Holocaust in the context of decolonization and demonstrates that the memory of the Holocaust has galvanized other histories such as the history of colonialism or slavery. Rothberg challenges the concept of *competitive memory* by substituting it with his new idea of the “productive intercultural dynamic” that is multidirectional memory (3). Moreover, according to the author, this type of memory draws attention to “the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance” (11). This theory offers an innovative point of view on the interaction between the different cultures and their histories and the way this interaction is addressed in the films studied in this dissertation. Filmmakers such as Albou, Benguigui, Nakache, and Mimran superimpose the trauma of the Holocaust with the experience of colonialism in order to express the overlapping between the memories of the two historical events and to emphasize the fact that the memory of one event does not overshadow the memory of the other. It also connects the two cultures, Jewish and Arabic in the present French society and offers space for identity negotiation, collective as well as individual.

When depicting traumatic events from the past such as the Holocaust or colonialism, historiography sometimes fails to record or represent events. As Shoshana
Felman and Dori Laub pointed out, the crisis of witnessing the Holocaust has been “the consequent, ongoing, as yet, unresolved crisis of history” (xviii). Literature becomes a witness to the crisis within history which precisely “cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself” (Felman xviii). Felman’s and Laub’s point of view on literature, if applied to film, suggests that cinematic images can witness traumatic events, recount and, more importantly, reconstruct moments in History.¹

A gendered way of rendering trauma consequences of the colonial past relies on picturing women’s ability to adjust to exile and displacement. The traumatized character in this case displays a second aspect brought by women’s resistance to preexisting traditional codes of a patriarchal society in the colonized country. Such concepts can be illustrated by Benguigui’s film Mémoires… in which protagonists living a forced displacement try to adjust to a foreign culture and which focuses on men’s experiences as well as women’s experiences of colonization and immigration.

In order to analyze how postcolonial and post-Holocaust cultures can move from trauma to witnessing, mourning, and reconciliation, E. Ann Kaplan uses models of transcultural exchange. She shows how artistic creations like film constitute means through which the oppressed people can cope with trauma and come to terms with wounds inflicted by oppressors (18). Likewise, film directors such as Bengugui, Albou,

¹ Their theory has been reinforced by Laub’s creation of the Holocaust Trauma Project at Yale University which consists of audio and video testimonies of camp survivors which also reiterates the importance of the visual in remembering.
and Akerman create an entire body of work in order to intervene in the process of recollection and coping with trauma.

As Janet Walker states when referring to the Holocaust, there is a “growing awareness of the second generation” (159), a generation of sons and daughters of trauma survivors. These are children for whom the experience of the past has had a determining effect. These children were given the task of “insuring intergenerational continuity, of safeguarding memories and passing them along” (Walker 160). In the case of the majority of the directors themselves, Akerman, Bengugui, Dugowson, and Albou, the trauma representation is accomplished from a generational distancing. They are all second- or third-generation survivors of either the Holocaust or colonialism. They all return to the past figuratively and to the places of memories physically on their journeys in order to bring unspoken history to life. In this sense, the autobiographical element plays a primordial role in the shaping of their works.

The means by which the process of recollection is achieved are multiple and very different. In the case of Akerman’s films, the link to the past and the Holocaust experience is never clearly stated. Images, voices, sounds, characters, treatments of time and space mediate the retrieving of memories. In Bengugui’s films, in particular in Memoires d’immigrés, the background of colonial trauma sets the tone for the process of remembering. There is a counterpart to recollection, what Walker calls “disremembering” (160) which stresses the difficulties specific to second-generation recollection of trauma.
and which generate a desire of forgetting victimization and of reconciling past and present.

The experience of dealing with trauma suffers a shift with second-generation survivors. Their experiences are detached from the wartime pain of their parents. In their case, the concept of postmemory, created by Marianne Hirsch, will be the starting point. Postmemory “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shattered by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (22). Whether the filmmakers themselves (the case of Akerman, Albou, Benguigui) or the protagonists of their films (Louba in Louba’s Ghosts, Anna in Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, and Mina in Mina Tannenbaum), they have all been confronted with their parents’ trauma and with it, the difficulty of remembering and coping with it. I will therefore examine how the generational gap influences the desire of understanding and reconstituting the past and how second generation survivors express their desire to reconstruct memories through their works, in the case of filmmakers, through their films.

Among the literature that I will be using as a feminist theoretical framework there is Laura Mulvey’s founding theory of the gendered “look.” The film scholar identifies three types of look in cinema. The first "look" is the camera which films. The second "look" represents the voyeuristic act of the spectators who watch the film. The third "look" refers to the characters who look at each other in the film. This framework allows for film interpretations which complicate the framework itself and point to the
complexity of the gendered experience of film watching. For instance, Mulvey notes that in dominant cinema narrative, there is always “a masculinization of the spectator position regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real-life movie goer” (11). The same idea can be found in Flitterman-Lewis’s work. She affirms that “the position of spectatorship privileges the male as both viewer of the woman-spectacle and as controller of the narrative events” (6). In other words, in conventional cinema, subjectivity is masculine. The male holds the power of the look and the female is the object of the look.

Feminist film theoreticians have also underlined the difference between the image of the woman as object of the masculine gaze as it is constructed in the classical Hollywood “woman’s films” and the concept of “women’s films” which refers to the reality of women as historical subjects. This distinction has been made by Judith Mayne (The Woman 5) and it encourages the idea of analyzing these films which adopt a female perspective from the point of view of women expressing themselves as subjects in a historical context, not only by redirecting the gaze but also by gaining agency in history and in the history of cinema.

The six filmmakers studied in this dissertation inscribe their works in this new tendency of renewal in contemporary French-language cinema. By focusing their attention on women’s memories of deportation, exile, and migration, these film directors represent in their works the transmission of trauma from first- to second- and third generations as a difficult process which is expressed through such tropes as desire, female subjectivity, and gaze. Desire in their films embodies a longing for a place, most often a
home, an unspecified location as the object of a continuous wandering and self-exile, a consequence of the need to understand and cope with the repressed past. Illustrative for this approach are Akerman’s *News for Home, Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, Là-bas, D’Est*. In Albou’s *La Petite Jérusalem, La Grande fête*, and Benguigui’s *Aïcha*, the protagonists’ object of desire becomes the city of Paris as a location for the reinvention of the female self to reinvent. The desired place becomes an imagined, constructed cinematic space, representing the in-between space of desire and reality, which allows an identity negotiation and reinvention. This space mediates a communication between past and present and a mapping of the characters’ quest. In these films, the female subject is constructed in or around the city, as a polarizing point of desire.

Desire in these films also represents a yearning for a new identity born out of an awareness of a trauma that has been repressed. The film protagonists wish to construct a new identity which would allow them to either cope better with the trauma or to forget it by identifying with someone else and rejecting their own traumatized self. This idea is represented in films such as Dugowson’s *Les Fantômes de Louba*, Albou’s *Le Chant des mariées*. Desire is also expressed through the gaze, a predominantly female gaze which is constructed in order to facilitate the expression of a female subjectivity, the spectator’s identification with the female protagonists, and the re-appropriation of the conventional film narratives which are based on the male gaze. If one looks at these works from the perspective of the author, one can sense a desire to express one’s self through autobiography in order to identify and reinvent the past and re-appropriate dominant
narratives as modes of female self-expression and agency. As Judith Mayne points out, “there is a connection between the writer’s gender, personhood, and her texts” (The Woman 90). The presence of the female authors within their own works is always salient in the case of the female filmmakers studied in this dissertation.

The research method used in the current study also relies on the identification of other tropes essential to this analysis such as personal/collective history, maternal silence, displacement/rootlessness, memory/postmemory, and language. For instance, I discuss the trope of displacement in Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, and Mémoires d’immigrés and the trope of maternal silence as central to the characters’ construction of identity in Akerman’s News from Home, Là-bas and Albou’s La Petite Jérusalem. In addition, I analyze the ways in which language becomes central to female identity construction, and a way of giving voice to repressed desire.

In my dissertation I also look at the renewal of cinematic techniques brought by these filmmakers in their films. I investigate how documentary becomes more than a form of witnessing, story-telling and autobiography; it becomes a means of writing history and of filling in the gaps of memory. Tarr notes how films in the category of documentaries place themselves apart from dominant cinema. She considers that “documentary and essay films have traditionally been used to challenge mainstream cinematic representations; they have reemerged in the 90s as a significant aspect of “le jeune cinéma français” (Cinema 134). A documentary impulse exists in the majority of the films studied here since each of them, even the fiction films are engaged in one way
or another in telling history or personal histories, and take their sources from reality. Two of the directors discussed in this dissertation, Akerman and Benguigui, have made documentaries that place personal histories in the larger context of collective history. Documentary film has often given voice to marginalized groups. Thus, it can become a way of re-writing history, of reconsidering what has been excluded from official narratives, of re-appropriating the hegemonic discourse.

Besides thematic, genre, and gender approaches to films that center on women as protagonists, another way of studying the specificities of re-writing history through film from a gendered perspective is by analyzing cinematic form. I utilize a stylistic approach based on Hamid Naficy’s concept of accentuated cinema, term born from the analogy with the notion of accented language, describing films that bear traces of the culture and language of the filmmaker’s home country. Within the category of accentuated cinema, Naficy distinguishes two main notions, diasporic films as referring to films made by diasporic filmmakers which have “a vertical relationship with the homeland” and postcolonial ethnic films which focus on “here and now,” on the country in which the diasporic filmmaker resides (25). I analyze the six filmmakers’ texts in order to determine how accentuated cinema constructs a particular style which is employed in such a way as to focus the image on women and gender relations and to create the possibility of a female perspective. I rely on text analysis which reveals specificities of films that focus on women such as duration (long shots, slow camera moves), the construction of a female point of view through gaze and a focus of the camera on the female body and its relation to space, and the use of close-ups, voice-over, and extra-diegetic sound.
The first chapter of this dissertation focuses on four of Chantal Akerman’s films: *News from Home* (1977), *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978), *D’Est* (1993), and *là-bas (Down There)* (2006), while subsequently drawing on the filmmaker’s *Autoportrait* (2004) which sheds a new light on her works. These works are illustrative of the filmmaker’s special attention paid to the reconstruction of the past, of her desire to transform her work into a voicing of her mother’s and grandmother’s silence on their Holocaust trauma, and of her rendering of her family’s repressed past. The connecting thread throughout the four works is the daughter-mother relationship which also represents the vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Akerman’s four films are illustrative of Akerman’s innovative treatment of time and space. It superimposes a time that stands still with a space that is impersonal. I demonstrate how Akerman negotiates a space that mediates a communication between past and present. In her films, displacement and rootlessness are symptoms of an attempt to understand and cope with the trauma.

I dedicate the second chapter to Martine Dugowson’s films, *Mina Tannenbaum* (1994) and *Les Fantômes de Louba* (Louba’s Ghosts [2001]) and I explain the construction of female identity in relation to the trauma of the Holocaust as it is lived out by the second generation. Central to this discussion are female friendship and the mother-daughter relationship. I also explore the way the recollection and reconstruction of the past are accomplished by children of survivors and their identity crisis due to the difficulty to imagine the experiences of war. This idea draws attention to the society’s
crisis of remembering. Taking as a starting point second generation trauma theory as well as feminist theory, I investigate the way in which this film accomplishes a construction of an alternate discourse that brings an alternative to the official historical discourse.

The third chapter focuses on Karine Albou’s *La Petite Jérusalem* (*Little Jerusalem*[2005]) and *Le Chant des mariées* (*The Wedding Song*[2008]). I underline the great contribution that Albou makes to memory studies in bringing together the memory of the Holocaust and colonialism as they were lived in Tunisia during WWII. By appealing to Michael Rothberg’s work, I demonstrate how the remembering of the Holocaust catalyzes the recollection of the experiences of colonialism. I underline the importance of emphasizing the connection between the two historical events which have very seldom been studied by association. I also analyze the construction of the gaze and the relationship between female body and space in Albou’s films. I concentrate on tropes of displacement and femininity while exploring the intersection between questions of religion, ethnicity and gender.

Yamina Bengugui’s films, *Mémoires d’immigrés, l’héritage maghrébin* (*Immigrant Memories*[1997]), *Aïcha* (2009), and *Aïcha, job à tout prix* (*Aïcha, A Job At All Costs*) (2010), as well as *Tout ce qui brille* (*All That Shines*[2010]) by Géraldine Nakache and Hervé Mimran will be the focus of my third chapter. This chapter is consecrated to immigrant collective and individual memory and identity construction as well as to a study of the overlapping of the two types of historical memory, corresponding to the two cultures, Jewish and Arabic. These works center on issues of
difference as a way to investigate matters such as racism and discrimination but also methods to solve them. I examine how within the characters’ identity construction conflicts between feminism and femininity, tradition and modernism, and family and individualism are resolved by envisioning difference as social relation, subjectivity, and identity. I study Benguigui’s project of memory and collective autobiography through Sylvie Dumerlat’s concept of memory entrepreneuse and continue with exploring the films focus on the female beur individual self and its integration within the French society.

In conclusion, I clarify the functions of trauma in the aforementioned films in relation to present individual and collective identity formation. I distinguish between the desire to re-appropriate history in order to construct a past, a home and memories, both personal and collective and the desire to become free, to liberate oneself from the burden of a constricting and repressed past. The six filmmakers in their depiction of female protagonists, of relationships between mother and daughter, and friendship and solidarity among women create new images in order to represent a female universe. Although the majority of these characters define themselves in relation to the past, they struggle to overcome trauma and victimization.
CHAPTER ONE
FROM FORGETTING TO REMEMBERING:
CHANTAL AKERMAN’S JOURNEYS INTO HISTORY

Different forms of consciousness are grounded, to be sure, in one’s personal history; but that history – one’s identity – is interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that also includes modes of political commitment and struggle.

Teresa de Lauretis (13)

Studies of Chantal Akerman’s films have concurred that history and the memory of the Holocaust constitute the core of her inspiration. The weight of history becomes evident in her oeuvre starting with News from Home (1976), Les Rendez-vous d’Anna (Meetings with Anna [1978]), and continuing with D’Est (From the East [1993]) and Là-bas (Down There [2006]). In these films, Akerman approaches a subject linked to her own history, her Jewish identity, and her family who experienced the Holocaust.

In interviews and autobiographical works such as Autoportrait en cinéaste (Selfportrait as a filmmaker [2004]), Akerman talks about her family background, about her parents who are Polish Jews re-settled in Belgium. Her grandmother disappeared in the concentration camps and her mother is a survivor of the Holocaust. Akerman has often pointed out that her mother would never speak about her experiences at Auschwitz.
The presence of the mother’s voice in Akerman’s works doubtlessly conveys the filmmaker’s ardent desire to transform the tacit maternal figure into an articulate witness of her family’s history. The autobiographical dimension of these films resonates through the maternal voice which can be considered an essential point of reference in understanding the missing links in Akerman’s personal history as well as her re-writing of history from the point of view of the second generation survivors. Reverberations of the family’s repressed history and attempts to recuperate the maternal voice can also be sensed in the four films mentioned above.

Akerman succeeds in making known her desire to tell the story of her family from a female perspective as it has been transmitted, although in fragments and with great difficulty from grandmother to mother and daughter. One can notice that an evident autobiographical component, her family’s experience of deportation, was erased from Akerman’s early films such as Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles (1975) and Hotel Monterey (1972). It has been absent from her self-referential works and dialogues until recently when Akerman started making clear references to it during her video installations, in her book Autoportrait, and in a series of interviews. Although she has made films in which the mother’s voice is present and where allusions to the traumatic past are omnipresent such as News from Home, Là-bas, and Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, she hasn’t made clear references to the Auschwitz experience and its consequences. These films elude any remembering in the same way the parents’ memories have been repressed. A new approach and look at her films in the light of her
autobiographical works which unveil her desire to give voice to these traumatic memories constitute a key to her films and to a better understanding and evaluation of their complex meaning.

This chapter analyzes the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust is transmitted between generations, recuperated, and imagined and how the mother-daughter relationship becomes a vehicle for the intergenerational transmission of trauma in the four films (two essay films, a fiction film and an experimental travelogue). More importantly, the way in which Akerman retrieves memories and rebuilds the past is accomplished through a process of artistic creation rather than through remembrance. I also analyze the means by which the filmmaker accomplishes a re-writing of the official narratives found in history books, the mass media, and political discourses by juxtaposing personal narratives to collective history. I examine each of the four films *News from Home*, *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, *D’Est*, and *Là-bas* in relation to the main tropes: memory, the mother-daughter relationship, the construction of identity, and the connection between personal, collective, and official histories. In addition, I look at how *D’Est* operates a superimposition of the remembrance of the Holocaust with the recollection of the Stalinist regime, mediated by individual and collective portraits. I explore the ways in which these themes can be interpreted through the lens of feminist and trauma studies taken as theoretical framework.

*News from Home* combines essay-film, travelogue, and autobiography in an innovative manner without a real plot or characters. The film is composed of long shots,
mostly taken with a fixed camera in New York City. While we see images of streets, buildings, people, cars, and subways passing in front of the camera, we can hear Akerman’s voice reading letters sent by her mother from Belgium. With a maternal affectionate tone, her letters talk about daily life at home, the mother’s and the father’s health, family events such as weddings, and the economic crisis in Europe. The mother talks about how much they miss their daughter and that they think about her all the time. She also gives her advice about how to stay well. The mother expresses her desire for the daughter to return home. We never see Akerman in the film, we never see the mother. Their presence is marked only orally by the voice we hear and the content of the letters.

*Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, a fiction film with a documentary impulse, depicts Anna, a Belgian filmmaker who, like Akerman herself, lives in Paris, on a journey to present her films in various cities in Germany. During her trip, Anna has chance encounters and meetings with different people: Heinrich Schneider (a disillusioned bedmate), Ida (an old family friend), a German man on the train, her mother in Belgium, and her lover Daniel in Paris. The most important sequences are long conversations between Anna and the other protagonists. Several times throughout the film, Anna tries to call to Italy. Anna’s circular journey from Paris to Germany, Belgium, and Paris again frames an artist’s odyssey during which the meeting with the mother, a moment of confession, condenses the essence of the film. The camera follows Anna while she travels by train; she spends nights in hotels, she talks with random people and friends. Very
often, her conversations with them focus on the present – her personal life - and the past, mostly historical events such as the Second World War.

*D’Est* constitutes the first part of a three-gallery museum installation entitled *From the East: Bordering on Fiction*. Eastern Germany becomes the starting point of the filmmaker’s three trips to Eastern Europe in 1992 and 1993, continuing throughout Eastern Europe to Poland and Russia. Following these journeys, *D’Est* concentrates some of Akerman’s autobiographical inspiration: her Eastern-European heritage. The author of numerous films with a post-Holocaust sensitivity, Akerman here visits countries going through the transition from the communist era to democracy. Akerman tells us that she wants to film Europe “while there’s still time, to see these countries that “have shared a common history since the war, and are still deeply marked by that history” (29 On *D’Est*). The film materializes Akerman’s interest in returning to the sites from which her parents came, filming at the moment of the breakup of the Soviet bloc. She finds and records personal and collective experiences that represent outcomes of the recently ended communist regime, not without reminding us of her heritage as a daughter of Polish Jews.

The journey continues on the same West-East axis, with Akerman’s trip to Israel where she films *Là-bas* in 2006. The film becomes later a part of several video installations among which there are the ones exhibited at the Art Museum of the University of Houston, the Miami Art Museum, and the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis. *Là-bas* is based on the filmmaker’s experience while living and teaching in Tel-Aviv. She makes a documentary in the apartment where she lives. In the same way as
**News from Home**, only thirty years later, the film connects Akerman, her mother who calls her a few times, and the city of Tel-Aviv which has such heavy significance in her life and her family history. Besides moving on a few short walks to the grocery store and the beach, the camera shoots almost the entire film from behind a window in the apartment. The daughter of Polish Jews, Akerman takes this trip to Israel and films *Là-bas* at a point in her career when she has already accomplished a considerable number of projects that directly or indirectly make reference to her Jewish heritage. The film appears as a continuation and an accomplishment of an itinerary started early in her life, itinerary configuring a search for memories and roots. The figure of the mother follows her in Tel-Aviv as well, physically absent but present in phone conversations.

As Brenda Longfellow remarks, “if there is a recurring phantasmatic core to the work of Chantal Akerman, it lies in the desire to reconstitute the image of the mother, the voice of the mother” (73). Taking as a starting point Shoshana Felman’s writing on the exploration of trauma that she identifies as representing “an exploration of the depths of history defined precisely as historical unspeakability, to a retrieval of the possibility of speaking and to a recovery and a return of the voice” (4), I distinguish a similar recovery of the maternal voice in *News from Home*.² In the film, a set of letters from the mother are read by the daughter. The daughter’s voice symbolically enables the unseen character to express thoughts about daily life at home and about maternal love. Recognizable here,

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² Felman’s reference to Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah, as accomplishing at once “a journey into history as fall to silence and a triumph, a return and a repossession of the living voice, for which art has now recovered the historically lost power to transmit and to convey” (xviii), can be extended to all artistic creations that achieved a similar “recovery of the voice” (21).
the trope of the maternal silence comes from an unuttered personal history born of untold trauma.

The critical literature analyzing Akerman’s films has mostly focused on non-biographical data and has interpreted them as constructions referring primarily to the present. We know Akerman’s mother’s experience as a victim of the Holocaust from other sources such as interviews with the film director and her autobiographical works among which one can count *Autoportrait en cinéaste*. This filmic transformation of her silent presence into a monologue mediated by the daughter’s voice contributes to a recovery of her history. The mother is the link to the traumatic past that hasn’t been told and the daughter’s sense of uprooted heritage becomes physical rootlessness through her self-exile.\(^3\)

Akerman re-appropriates the maternal voice which becomes omnipresent in the filmed space. By superimposing the reading of the mother’s letters on shots of New York city streets and subways, Akerman operates a transfer of the image of the family home in Brussels onto the public space being filmed, a transfer that becomes meaningful for a new life in the American metropolis. New York thus becomes a possible new home. By filming buildings, streets, cars, trains, and unknown passers-by and by rendering the pulse of the everyday life, Akerman materializes the quest for the possibility of having a normal life as if trying to concretize the idea of the ‘promised land.’ This idea of the promised land was accomplished in her latest film, *Là-bas*.

\(^3\) Akerman left Belgium for the first time to go to the USA in 1971; this trip was followed by several other visits later, before she settled in Paris.
Through her work, Akerman creates a new aesthetic of representing the memory of the Holocaust, not through an amplification of trauma and a perpetuation of victimization but through the framing of a new space that would contain a reinvented identity. Composed of images, voices, sounds, and real-time shots, this space gives the impression of a hyper-reality. The label “nothing happens,” to cite Ivonne Margulies’s book on Akerman’s work, perfectly defines her films’ specificity. The incorporation of “images between images begets a spatio-temporal, as well as moral expansion of cinema. The interest in extending the representation of reality reflects a desire to restore a phenomenological integrity to reality” (22). The descriptive shots and the intensity of drama operate a prolongation of reality into the creation of a cinematic space which sustains a new reality. Akerman negotiates a space that would mediate a communication between past and present. This re-created space ensures the physical connection between people, as well as the reconnection with the mother and the homeland.

People often define themselves as belonging to a place or by the distance from it. In the same way, Akerman’s film News from Home constructs a space while mapping the itinerary that supports a search for identity in a real, new, and unfamiliar place – the city of New York. Wandering through the city acquires the meaning of a quest, the exploration of the city becomes a spatial mapping of the speaker’s identity; the subject is constructed in the city, surrounded by metropolitan life. Repressed history comes to life in the form of an attempt to reinvent an identity, to fill in the gaps of memory. Akerman states that “[t]hese films about a silent everyday life are without any doubt made in order
to get from this silence a little bit of truth. Reinvented truth. A kid with a history full of gaps, can only reinvent a history for herself” (*Autoportrait* 30). The mother’s letters in *News from Home* focus on simple, daily life and elude any potential reference to the past. Terms referring to the Holocaust are never used which reiterates the unspeakable character of this experience and the difficulty to bring to light the repressed elements of the traumatic story.4

The film *News from Home* is based on two main types of filming: long shots taken with a fixed camera which creates the impression of a surveillance camera and tracking shots, present mostly in the second half of the film. The fixed shots show several streets with few people and cars moving or the same street from another angle. During the first half of the film, Akerman shows images of unfamiliar, cold-looking buildings from parts of the city less known to visitors while she reads her mother’s letters. She doesn’t film touristic neighborhoods; her camera visits streets and shows apartment buildings where common people live as if trying to seize moments of everyday life. These descriptive sequences take place at different times of the day: morning, afternoon, dusk, and night.

The film bases its entire soundtrack on diegetic sound and Akerman’s reading of her mother’s letters in voice over. The mother’s letters talk about daily life:

> My dear little girl,

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4 Akerman has commented on this aspect of her work more and more recently in her interviews, written autobiography, and parts of her installations.
I just got your letter and I hope that you’ll continue to write to me often. Anyway, I hope that you’ll come back to me soon. I hope that you’re still well and you’re already working. I see that you like New York and you seem to be happy. We’re very pleased even though we’d like to see you very soon. Tell us when you’re thinking about coming back. At home, it’s the same as ever… I am not too well. My blood pressure is up and I am taking medicine and vitamins. Today is my birthday and I already feel a little bit sad… It’s very quiet and we’re bored. This evening we are going out to a restaurant with friends. That’s all for my birthday. Soon it will be yours and I wish you the very best in the world as you can imagine. Write to me about your work and all about New York. I’m impatient to hear from you. The three of us send you hugs and kisses and think of you all the time.

Your loving mother.

The monotony of the mother’s tone emphasizes the idea of repetitiveness already expressed by the filming style which insists on the same frames showing the same images of the city. The images as well as the soundtrack contribute to the expression of the routine in women’s everyday life as it is regulated in traditional, patriarchal societies.

There are long moments of silence between letters. The camera also films inside the subway while moving from one station to another. When it stops in one station, we can see the “New York” sign through the doors that open for a few seconds. In another underground station the camera frames a photo printing shop, an unexpected element symbolizing memories. During the second half of the film, the tracking shot shows everything at car window level. We begin to see skyscrapers in the background and during short stops the camera insists on shop windows. The frame becomes wider and shows the city skyline in the distance and the water, the bridges, and Manhattan with its towers. Filming from a boat this time, the camera is getting further and further away from the city and the last sequence seems to be a postcard showing a distant skyline, the
waves, and scattered birds flying in a foggy sky. While everything in the film constructs an image of the present moment, the last shot of Manhattan reminds us of Ellis Island and the traces of the immigrant experience which echoes the similar adventure of exile and migration that Akerman’s parents lived.

Akerman reinvents a history for herself and her parents; thus she rewrites official history. Her starting point became her grandmother’s childhood diary passed on from the mother to daughter and translated from Polish into French by the mother. The transmission of memories from one generation to the other is materialized by this precious document. In her book Autoportrait Akerman writes: “My mother gave it to me. […] Instead of talking, she gave me the diary” (65). As a second generation survivor, Akerman ensures the continuity on her female side of the family by decoding memories and giving them voice. The artist is a creator of images and her act of creation gives birth to a history reinvented. In her article The Long Journey Home, Griselda Pollock talks about the presence of the grandmother’s diary and its symbolism in Akerman’s works. References to it reappear in Akerman’s installation from 2004 entitled To Walk Beside One’s Shoelaces in an Empty Fridge.5

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5 Griselda Pollock describes her experience of having seen Akerman’s installation first shown at the Camden Arts center in 2004. She confesses: “When I first saw this work, in Berlin in October 2007, I was entirely undone by this moment of the video, this wordless, pathos-laden gesture that Akerman would introduce into her fiction film, the invented story. It felt to me as if an entire cinematic journey had been undertaken by Akerman, and her viewers, to arrive at that moment with her mother in front of the camera’s discovering gaze. Somehow this work made it necessary to review Akerman’s entire oeuvre within the context of this moment” (2).
Two components of this work of art impress by their frank, autobiographical tone. First, there is a drawing of a young woman’s portrait taken from the grandmother’s diary. A page of handwritten Polish text is superimposed with this image. Second, there is the video of Akerman bringing the diary to her mother and asking her to read it. The mother translates it from Polish (2). The fragment read will be reproduced by Akerman in *Autoportrait*: “Je suis une femme! Je ne peux donc pas dire tous mes désirs et toutes mes pensées à voix haute. Je peux juste souffrir en cachette. Alors, à toi ce journal, le mien, je voudrais au moins pouvoir dire un peu de mes pensées, de mes désirs, de mes souffrances et de mes joies, et je serai sûre que jamais tu ne me trahiras pas parce que tu seras mon seul Confident!” (68). The deep connection that is being established between the daughter, the mother, and the grandmother through their suffering and also through a strong female bond is transmitted from one generation to the next.

Pollock writes about the conversation between daughter and mother that the installation video uncovers: “Afterwards, mother and daughter begin to talk. They discuss her mother’s story, experiences in the camp, making a new life afterwards, and the process which allowed Chantal Akerman to become the artist neither grandmother nor mother had been allowed to become. They talk about her father’s resistance to what he saw as a vulnerable career in film-making for a young woman” (2). This moment can be considered historical in Akerman’s creation in the sense that, for the first time, the mother is given a voice, she recounts the past, and she fills in the gaps of history.
The duty of ensuring the memory continuity also comes from a deeply grounded belief that the Holocaust survivors’ descendants who inherit their parents’ traumatic past have the task of deciphering this heritage. This type of memory, called *postmemory* by Marianne Hirsch, refers to “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shattered by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (22). This very particular form of memory in Akerman’s case is mediated not through recollection but through “an imaginative investment and creation” (22).⁶

Although in *News from Home* terms referring to the Holocaust are never used, to reiterate the unspeakable character of this experience, in *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* war and the past constitute topics of several conversations. In the latter, the protagonist’s journeys symbolize the artist’s quest and thus her travels mark the return to different places reminiscent of past events: Germany and war, Belgium and home and Paris as traditional home for the exiled. The circular trajectory of Anna’s trip, which apparently has a well-defined goal, takes the spectator to European places that bear traces of the war and whose inhabitants talk about the war and remember it: Paris, two German cities, Cologne and Bottrop, Brussels, and back to Paris. Anna encounters different people during her journey and her communication with them consists almost entirely of listening to their monologues: Heinrich, Ida, the German traveler, her mother and Daniel. Her

⁶ Hirsch explains the type of memory “recreation” through works of art, framework that can be applied to Akerman’s films and video installations by analyzing the absence of the mother’s body substituted by images and art objects.
meeting with her mother, structurally and thematically the center of the narration, remains the closest contact she has.

This encounter with the mother is perpetually deferred, although Anna gets phone messages from her. At the hotel, she is told that her mother called. When the meeting finally happens in Brussels, it takes place away from the family home, in a train station, a café, and then a hotel. The topic of the mother’s past silence comes up in their conversation only to reiterate once more the wordless bond between mother and daughter. During their conversation in the café, the mother confesses: “Tu me manques, tu sais? Je n’ai personne à qui parler. Anna responds: “Mais tu ne me parlais jamais.” One can sense a repressed need for communication with the mother which has never been entirely fulfilled.

The connection between the mother and the daughter relies very much on physical closeness and a desire of the daughter to be like the mother. During the same conversation, the mother exclaims: “Tu es devenue une femme, tu as les yeux de ma mère!” Anna replies: “J’aurais aimé être comme toi.” It is clear that the mother has been more than a model for Anna; the protagonist strongly admires and identifies with her mother. At the hotel, Anna recounts her encounter with an Italian woman. This perfect moment of intimacy concentrates the essence of the film in a long shot capturing the cross-generational contact. It is also the only sequence of the film in which Anna is the speaker, not the listener. She asks questions about the mother’s desires and experiences, but they remain more or less unanswered. During this dialogue before going to sleep, the
two women lying in bed close to each other accomplish a long desired moment of perfect connection filled with warmth and affection. The sequence renders the feeling of closeness by the low-key lighting conducive to intimate confessions.

The scene of the reunion with the mother is, at the same time, a break-up, a rupture. Anna embodies the woman who has changed personally and professionally; she has become independent, a filmmaker with a promising career who has long ago left home and has chosen to live in a foreign place, dedicating herself to the films she makes. Thus, she becomes alienated from her family and her country. In Autoportrait, Akerman notes how difficult it is for women to become independent, to accomplish a career in a field that’s considered a “men’s field” (45). She underlines the lack of support that her grandmother and her mother had for doing what they liked and the pressure to marry and have children. The impression that autobiography plays an intentional, enormous role in Akerman’s films is validated by Akerman’s declaration: “Anna, pendant longtemps je l’ai considéré comme mon vrai prénom. Je m’appelle Chantal Anne Akerman et mon arrière grand-mère s’appelait Hanna” (Autoportrait 44). The encounters that Anna has had contribute to the discovery of her identity.

Referring to how film mediates the special daughter-mother relationship, Brenda Longfellow observes that “[i]t is precisely the particular structural articulation of her films which functions as the third term, triangulating the mother and daughter relation and framing the films both as a mode of reparation and as evidence of an irreparable divide” (79). In these characters’ journeys there is an oscillation between nostalgia for the
reunion with the mother and a desire to construct an identity in which the traditional maternal image appears as a conflict entity. Ambivalence exists: the desire to reunite with the mother and the desire for estrangement, a struggle between the duty of reconstructing the past, of reconstituting the parents’ memories and a desire of disremembering, of distancing oneself from tradition and the past. The second generation children have been given the task of insuring intergenerational continuity, of safeguarding memories and passing them along, and sometimes of reconstructing memories, a task which many times conflicts with their life in the present. The difficulties specific to second-generation remembering bring along a desire of “disremembering” (Walker 160), of forgetting victimization and of reconciling past and present. The burden still exists for the second-generation; it is one of the duties of reconstituting the truth about the past, of not being able to revolt against the parents because, as Akerman confesses, “one doesn’t have the right to revolt against the sacrificed generation” (Autoportrait 56).

In the films studied here, the mother embodies the traditional figure that is never separated from her house and family; in Les Rendez-vous d'Anna, she expresses her desire for Anna to get married and have children. Another motherly figure, Ida, the possible mother-in-law, insists that Anna marry her son. Ida reiterates the importance of having children. The sequence that presents the two women’s meeting takes place at the train station. A medium shot taken with a fixed camera shows them sitting on a bench next to each other, almost in the same position, within the same frame, giving the

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7 See E. Ann Kaplan 6.
impression of familiarity with each other. The absence of close-ups and shot-reverse-shots underlines the monologue character of the conversation. Anna listens with no reactions. Almost all of Anna’s replies are very short. Similarly to Anna’s mother, Ida is of Polish origin; she represents the past and, in a way, a repressed history which comes to haunt the protagonist.

Heinrich invites Anna to his house to introduce her to his daughter and to his mother. Anna is filmed only outside the house, before entering and then when saying good-bye. Heinrich’s monologue tells the story of his life and the history of Germany before, during, and after the Second World War in a sad, tone emphasizing his loneliness and his longing for someone with whom to share his life. Heinrich talks about the past, the situation before the war, the Nazis, the Allies, about destruction and reconstruction. Anna listens quietly without any reactions. After the conversation, they enter the house and the scene cuts to a shot already showing Anna leaving. This scene composed of a long shot taken with a fixed camera in which only the character alone can be seen, centrally positioned inside the frame without any shot-reverse-shots is emblematic for the film’s recurrent trope of recollection of history but also for its cinematic style which creates an impression of alienation and hindered communication. The tone of Heinrich’s voice suggests a religious chant. Ivone Margulies compares it to that of a tale. In her opinion, “[t]he poignancy of the speech lies in its reduction of text to tale. In equating real news with generic data, Akerman finds and releases an intensity in redundant
information” (160). These effects only emphasize the duration and repetition and create a sense of a quest with no results. Anna’s destiny is to continue her odyssey.

The films *News from Home* and *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* present the daughter as alienated from the maternal subject, wandering in a space that is opposed to the idea of home. The two protagonists are always displaced in relation to their family and family tradition, their home country, their loved ones or ideal of love. In *D’Est*, the filmmaker is the estranged traveler, profoundly alone and far away from home, who tries to grasp the truth about her past. The mother remains the symbol of home and patriarchal society. The central question still is where is home? It is not in Brussels. Can home be in New York? Can it be in Paris or Germany? Can it be in Poland? In *News from Home* the family house cannot be seen, neither can the mother. They are both almost ephemeral concepts, never visualized. Only the voice-over and the images of the American city are real. In *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* everything takes place in hotel rooms, trains, cafes. The only house in the sense of a home is portrayed when Anna visits Heinrich but only from the outside. The meetings with the mother and Ida in cafes and hotel rooms signify Anna’s estrangement from home and her disconnection from everything that tradition and the patriarchal model of family mean. Her journeys can be interpreted as symbols of exile and self-exile in the sense of the history of Jewish rootlessness.

Germany, and, this time, Eastern Germany will be the starting point of Akerman’s journeys in *D’Est*. Here, in addition to superimposing past and present, Akerman brings together two types of memory: of the Holocaust and the Stalinist regime. Instead of
competing as two opposing sites of remembrance and of overshadowing each other, they form a synergy. In addition, like the concept of multidirectional memory that Michael Rothberg created, bringing together for the first time the memories of the two historical events that have always been in competition with each other, a “competition of victimization” as he describes it, in Akerman’s D’Est, the memory of the Holocaust facilitates the understanding and recollection of the communist persecution. Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory argues that “far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition, the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories – some of them predating the Nazi genocide, such as slavery, and others taking place later, such as the Algerian War of Independence or the genocide in Bosnia during the 1990s” (6). Further, he explains how multidirectional memory as a concept can be extended to other historical events because of “the Holocaust’s salience to the relationship of collective memory, group identity, and violence,” which invites to “an exploration of its ongoing public evocation in multiple national contexts” (6). Thus, by applying Rothberg’s theory, it can be proven that the Holocaust and the Stalinist regime, although politically contrasting and geographically distant, instead of overshadowing each other or competing for historical uniqueness, enlighten each other’s understanding.

While superimposing the two historical traumatic events in D’Est, Akerman edits shots taken exclusively in the present, in a real setting, and in real time. Moreover, the film bases its essence on details of quotidian life of unnamed people. Very often when
filming street passers-by and groups gathered in bus and train stations, the filmmaker insists on their faces using medium and close shots succeeding in rendering their indifference or different reactions to being caught on camera. Alisa Lebow notices that “[y]et even in her resolute refusal to penetrate the façade, the very history she seems assiduously to ignore nonetheless protrudes. For her, there seems to be no eluding the imprint of the past – it is written on the impassive faces and spaces she records” (36). Imagined individual and collective stories transcend from beyond the appearance of images. One can sense flashes of the memory of a traumatized existence under the burden of the communist ideology. This memory is captured as a reiteration of another type of remembrance, the recollection of the Holocaust suffering. “The victims of Stalin are piled on the corpses of the Holocaust, who rest uneasily on the raped and pillaged shtetl villagers of the czarist pogroms” (Lebow 52). Akerman is filming the present of these countries mostly because of the past which has left its imprint on her family’s history and herself.

These images contribute to the recollection of the past; on the other hand, they emphasize the sense of exile and displacement. The trope of rootlessness is common to all the four films studied here. News from Home is illustrative for Akerman’s treatment of time and space in such a way as to underline the slow passage of time and the feeling of being lost in a foreign world. In the film, Akerman superimposes a time that stands still on a space that is impersonal while recounting something very personal: the letters from the mother. In Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, the train journey where time seems to stay still
facilitates encounters with displaced people in the present such as the German man who tries to reconcile past and present, characters symbolizing the past such as the mother, and some voices from the possible future such as the Italian woman.

When presenting her film, *Histoires d'Amérique*, Akerman talks about the sense of rootlessness and she confesses:

> When I look at my parents, I see that they are very well integrated here. They have strong ties to Belgium. For them, coming here represented an extraordinary opportunity. They don’t have this feeling of exile. In a way, they have made a break with their past. They have found a place here. They have found something more easily than I have. I think that we represent the generation in which the repressed comes back. That’s why we have problems. Instead of asking questions about the past, they had to rebuild their lives. And because they didn’t tell us about that past, because they didn’t pass it down to us, what they did pass down was precisely this sense of uprootedness (6).

It wasn’t until recently that Akerman started to talk openly about her family history and her personal story as a source of inspiration in her works. Her films *News from Home*, *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, and *D’Est* comprise only allusive comments, symbolic images, and references to the Holocaust, Jewishness, and Eastern Europe. Her later works such as *Là-bas*, *Histoires d’Amérique*, her video installations, and, to a much greater extent, her *Autoportrait* and interviews unveil details about directions in her work that she had foreseen in order to contribute to maintaining the memory of the past events that her family has witnessed. The entire work constitutes a personal and collective search for identity. The parents’ move to Belgium represented a break-up with their past. Dealing with this almost haunting question of the repressed, the children try to reconstitute the ties with this past, not only from a feeling of duty but from their own
desire to know their identity, their roots, and the place that the memory of the past occupies in their lives. Akerman suggests that the second generation has, more than a duty, an unspoken desire to solve this riddle of the past, to “deal with” the repressed trauma, and to come to terms with the painful memory of events that the first generation felt the need to forget and not to pass on.

The fact of superimposing words read from the Old Testament Book of Exodus and Akerman’s own voice reading a synopsis of the film on the screening of the film *D’Est* creates the impression of a confession. Akerman reads:”whether from long ago or still to come, old images that are barely concealed by other more luminous, even radiant ones: old images of evacuation, of people with packages marching in the snow toward an unknown place, of faces and bodies placed side by side, faces that vacillate between a strong life and the possibility of a death that would come to strike them without their having asked for anything” (*Autoportrait* 102).

The descriptive character of the film, the images of men and women with luggage in bus stations and train terminals allude to deportation images and forced displacement. Their silence symbolizes the pact of silence that survivors’ families made in to protect the children. In terms of trauma theory, according to Ann Kaplan, “[w]hen catastrophe affects a group of people, as in the case of the holocaust, slavery or colonization, one can perhaps talk of ‘collective’ or ‘shared’ trauma. If the events are overwhelming, groups may forget horrendous actions from the past, and simply split them off from daily consciousness” (46). The process of forgetting or disremembering and of keeping silent
in the first generation can be voluntary or unconscious. The ways in which Akerman renders collective trauma consist of juxtaposing personal and collective stories and, in particular in D’Est, of associating two types of trauma that result from two historical events, the Holocaust and communism. Akerman’s technique stands out through her mode of rendering portraits of anonymous, random people as part of a group while giving each of them certain individuality by the way they are filmed and by their relation with the camera. The camera moves linearly while filming the crowd from one person to another insisting on each of them for a few seconds. The long shots also give the impression of making some images of individuals more salient from the masses of people by the close-ups and the special angles that the camera sometimes takes. For instance, when filming the woman who appeared on the film poster in D’Est, the camera captures her in a medium, low angle shot.

Similarly to realist painting, Chantal Akerman’s films, in particular D’Est, capture images of people in such a way that they become cinematic portraits. Very often, the camera in this film insists on random people during everyday activities. These static shots impress the spectator by their power to express details and to transform the absence of plot into an interrogation on personal narratives, their place within collective history, and the means of expressing them.

Akerman’s voiceless individual portraits of men and women are created either by tracking shots or fixed-camera takes and serve the purpose of facilitating the creation of imagined stories for each of them which would mediate their transcendence from the
anonymity in which they are being filmed. Women’s silent portraits appear to be extremely salient and to bear a trace of an autobiographical, personal motivation as if Akerman looked for her own personal story and the one lived by her female side of her family in their silences. In an interview taken by Miriam Rosen, Akerman confesses that for people of my mother's generation, they recognize themselves in the film; for example, in D'Est she recognizes clothes she used to wear, she recognizes faces. These images exist in her already. When I made the film I - who was born after the war - often wondered why I shot this and not that. I didn't know. But afterward, when the film was finished, I understood that those particular images were already in my head, and I was looking for them. (7)

As she mentioned later in her book Autoportrait, the filmmaker went back to the footage she took and tried to assign significance to the images of randomly filmed protagonists. One of them, a woman in the crowd waiting for the bus to go to work, captured by the tracking shot in a medium frame, takes glimpses at the camera, aware that she’s being filmed. Her gaze stands out from the crowd seeming to signify almost a desire of dialogue, of confession. The captured photograph of this woman became a poster and an icon of the film D'Est and of the installation Bordering on Fiction. Its reproduction appears in the filmmaker’s book Autoportrait, accompanied by Akerman’s comments: “D’Est, une femme attendant le bus à Moscou vers six heures du matin. Elle ne sait pas qu’elle est devenue une affiche, une première page de couverture d’un livre et bien d’autres choses… J’aimerais un jour essayer de la retrouver. J’imagine qu’elle prend toujours le bus à la même heure” (Autoportrait 54). One can sense Akerman’s desire to bring in front of the camera women who have stories to tell and she expresses them in a
non-verbal way, through film. The camera tries to seize their images in order to make it possible for the spectator to grasp semiotic, non-linguistic means of expression.  

Another séquence-portrait in D’Est shows a woman standing by the kitchen sink, listening to music and holding a coffee cup and drinking from it, with gestures expressing uneasiness, the anxiety of being filmed, and, most of all, the temptation to tell a story. When talking about this scene, Akerman later reasserts: “Dans une cuisine, à Moscou, il y a une femme debout qui boit une tasse de thé, avec un drôle de petit sourire, en écoutant de la musique en silence. Elle aussi, elle en aurait à raconter” (Autoportrait 45).

Akerman’s camera turns to a woman dressed in pink sitting on a green couch, with a serene look in her eyes, and holding a letter in her hand. She seems to be waiting for someone or something but also trying to reach beyond the camera, to communicate with the spectators. The audio track made of a song in Russian emphasizes her silence. She is almost motionless, giving the impression of a character looking straight into the camera before a monologue. The absence of shot/reverse-shots in this scene as in other sequences of the film gives the impression of the filmmaker’s deep connection with the protagonist, we sense a silent dialogue and a silent common trauma that motivates both of them. The special focus is placed on one silent character who in this travelogue is not an actor but an individual whose personal history is being unveiled through gestures and images which take the place of words. Time seems still and one cannot help thinking

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8 In Akerman’s D’Est there seems to be a renunciation to language as the primal instrument of communication. Verbal communication is being replaced by images and objects. As Tijana Mamula observed, the signifier no longer has the power of expression, there is “an increased reliance on ‘semiotic’ as opposed to symbolic signification” (265).
about the figure of the mother having written or received a letter from a child. The
evident intertextuality of the scene with *News from Home* creates a sense of familiarity
with the anonymous woman filmed and suggests a repetition of the trope of maternal
silence. Interestingly, the spectator identifies here not with the person filmed but with
Akerman herself trying to grasp some truth from the woman’s silence. Considered an
indirect autobiography by Lebow, *D’Est* constitutes a narrative of past, present and future
lives, “lived vicariously through her mother’s memories and revealed indirectly through
the face(s) of others. This face of the other, it turns out, may indeed stand in for the face
of the mother, who in turn stands in for Akerman herself” (Lebow 47). Faces play in this
travelogue the role of maps, maps of the past and present. They are marked by a history
which hasn’t been told and needs to be narrated.

Although Akerman has stated before that the political and the economic have not
been the main goals of this film, these coordinates are omnipresent in *D’Est* and cannot
be ignored. The repercussions of so many years of communist oppression have marked
peoples’ lives. The filmmaker succeeds in recounting through images and diegetic sound,
without any voice over or comments, what oppressed individuals experienced, from a
woman’s perspective. Official history and the woman’s silent voice are two
superimposed discourses.

Naturally and without any planned goal, the image of the mother invades the
visited space and becomes the primordial connection and medium for remembering. In
another sequence of *D’Est*, an older woman sitting by the TV, turned away from it, facing
the camera, listens to news on the political and economic situation in Russia after the fall of communism in 1991. The news speaker talks about the necessity of a new law about property ownership. This shot is made of an extremely long take, characteristic of Akerman’s style, with a fixed camera. More interestingly, it is a third sequence in a succession of shots in which the main motifs are food, the kitchen, and the mother. The first one shows people standing in a queue trying to sell food, mostly non-local products (Pepsi, imported food – as signs of a society that becomes capitalist and globalized); a jump cut takes us to the next sequence in which a woman in the living room is trying to play music on a record-player; a female voice can be heard. The woman in the kitchen listens to a song by the Russian singer Alla Pugacheva, The Grapeseed, an old melancholic folk Russian song about loneliness and friendship. The third shot cuts to the kitchen space where the same woman is preparing sandwiches cutting bread and salami and eating.

Akerman’s preoccupation with food, the everyday, and the kitchen as a space of confinement for women brings to mind the fiction film Jeanne Dielman in which a certain anxiety is unconsciously transmitted from mother to child, through her repeated, automatic gestures in the kitchen. This feeling of tension is explained by Akerman as

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9 In a recent interview, Akerman talks about how trauma is transmitted and felt within the space of the home unconsciously:
“AVC: It’s interesting you mention Jeanne Dielman coming from the perspective of a child. But when a child watches her mother or her aunts making dinner, that usually provides a sense of security, and a structured environment. But in the few movies of yours where the characters actually do stay in one place—Jeanne Dielman; Tomorrow We Move; The Man With A Suitcase; Je, Tu, Il, Elle—the home is a source of anxiety. It’s not a place where people go to rest. 

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coming from her past, her experience as a child of the second generation Auschwitz survivors. Very early in her career, in her first film, *Saute ma ville*, the kitchen becomes the main setting for the action and, at the same time, the space for the expression of repressed trauma. Akerman herself explains that “[i]t was winter and I was far from home in a strange land where I didn’t speak the language. […] And the way people lived, their way of thinking, was all too familiar to me. I would find the same food on the table that my mother always made, even after fifty years of living in Belgium” (*On D’Est* 21). Akerman finds herself alone in a foreign land and what she sees around her inspires her nostalgia after her parents’ way of living, especially the food that her mother used to make. It is always through the maternal image that memories are reconstituted, and vice-versa, the image of the mother takes contour at the sight of the things she sees.

There is no doubt that the connection between the filmmaker and the women being filmed goes beyond words. As she has stated several times, Akerman doesn’t speak Polish or Russian since the language is not the primary means of communication in the film, it cannot constitute a barrier. The strength of this special bond undoubtedly generates from the facts of having parents who were born in Eastern Europe and of both her grand-mother and mother having lived a story similar to these women’s stories. The

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CA: That’s because it’s me. I’m speaking about me all the time. I’m my main interest—I’m joking. I’m joking. You have to understand that I’m a child of the second generation, which means my mother was in Auschwitz, and the aunt of my mother was in Auschwitz with her; my grandmother and grandfather died there. So yes. All of those gestures they work for you, or for them, to fill their time or not feel their anxiety. But the child feels everything. It doesn’t make the child secure. You put the child in a jail” (Adams 7).
story of the female side of her family becomes real during the moments when Akerman films women in Moscow. Her efforts to bring to light moments in their anodyne, unknown lives emphasize the gender component in History writing and History making.

Positing gender as an important variable in studying the Shoah, Ronit Lentin explores the gender angle of the existing literature on children of survivors. She notes Epstein’s observations of men and women children of survivors which correspond to the narrator’s tendency to homogenize and essentialize women as “connected” and men as centered on issues of heroics. “My general feeling about gender differences applies also to men and women and their relation to the Holocaust, here and in Israel – that is, women connect, men don’t, unless it’s around issues of courage and valor and pride, with which they can identify” (Epstein cited in Lentin 56). If one discusses this approach in relation to the role that women play in Chantal Akerman’s films one cannot overlook this desire of insuring the continuity of memory from one generation to the next which is presented as being more prominent on the female side of the family. Thus we can argue that when talking about repressed memory and trauma, the gender component plays a certain role in defining the tendency of transmission of trauma from one generation to the next or simply between individuals.

Described in terms of a “transitive autobiography” by Alisa Lebow who considers D’Est a “wandering Jewish road movie in search of its autobiographical subject” (39), Akerman’s work is based on a series of inclusions of allusions to her family’s and her own personal stories. Her strong autobiographical motivation for taking the trip “back
home”, to Eastern Europe, where her parents come from, transforms into an interrogation on her (and her generation’s) post-Holocaust Jewish identity as well as on the possible life she would have had if she had lived here. While recording moments in the lives of people in these regions, Akerman deconstructs clichés and western stereotypes of this world and offers us alternative images. Her personal history as a filmmaker and European Jew looking back to Eastern Europe helps create “the possibility of seeing something else” (Margulies 203). In her own special way, Akerman inspires the spectator to meditate and imagine narratives that go beyond the daily routine and normality of the filmed subjects.

The real and the invented merge in the essay film Là-bas in which Tel Aviv and Akerman’s apartment become the stage for an open-ended story in which the spectator never sees the main protagonist, the filmmaker, we only hear her voice and her later comments in the voice-over. Her exploration of the place takes shape through a subjective lens: her camera and her window. This conscious limiting of the filmed landscape expresses disconnectedness and non-belonging. Being in Israel has a double meaning for Akerman: she finds herself, at the same time, in a double exile (from her family and her country) and in her ancestors’ homeland. This ambivalence echoes the estrangement of the exiled Jew and constructs a metaphor of the uprootedness of the diaspora.

There is no clear explanation in the film about why she films there. It can be interpreted as the end of the long journey home. One clarification of the film title can be
found in *Autoportrait*: “ma mère dit toujours qu’en revenant de là-bas, elle dit toujours ‘là-bas,’ elle ne dit pas ‘les camps,’ qu’en revenant de là-bas, c’est avec mon arrière grand-mère qu’elle a vécu” (27). Akerman’s journey to Israel also recalls her mother’s return home from the camps, to her homeland. The fact of having given the film the title *Là-bas* expresses Akerman’s complex relationship with her family history. The film represents an image of the connection between Akerman and the Jewish diaspora; it is a film about herself and her family history but also about collective history of the thousands of people who suffered because of the Holocaust and their children. The tropes of exile, wandering, and foreignness in *Là-bas* build on the themes approached by Akerman in *News from Home*, film that she had made thirty years before. While in *News from Home* she films the city of New York and her mother’s silent voice is mediated by the filmmaker’s own voice, now, years later in Israel, we accompany Akerman again on an intimate journey in which the mother’s voice becomes real, this time we hear her voice on the phone talking with Akerman.

The cinematographic form of *Là-bas* is very different from the rest of Akerman’s films mentioned in this chapter by the fact that she films almost exclusively interiors and images of the outside taken through the window. One radical difference between *News from Home* and her most recent film, *Down There*, consists of the filmmaker’s physical presence (still scarce) within the frame in the latter. For instance, while *News from Home*, *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, and *D’Est* present journeys to places by filming exteriors, vast spaces, landscapes, entire cities and in which the director’s relationship with the space
and the people being filmed has no restrictions, Là-bas frames a closed space, the screened window here being less an opening toward the world and more a frontier that separates the inside from the outside. Là-bas is composed of static scenes and the long shots, characteristic of Akerman’s style, seem to measure the time spent in Israel. The absence of plot, another trait of the director’s filmmaking, in addition to other elements that give the film a documentary aura, inscribes it in the essay film category. Although Akerman is the one filming all the time, she is always off screen, mostly observing and watching. We can hear her voice during conversations with her mother and her friend on the phone or very briefly interacting with people in the street. This filming style reinforces the idea of entrapment in the space of the apartment but also in the bigger picture of the city and country. In her film, Akerman very subtly conveys the message that she feels in exile even in Israel, as she has declared in an interview:

AVC: A lot of people make art to get out of the place where they grew up, but so many of your films have to do with travel and moving from place to place—
CA: You mean nomadisme. Well, I’m Jewish. That’s all. So I am in exile all the time. Wherever we go, we are in exile. Even in Israel, we are in exile.
AVC: That idea of the jail, that confined space—
CA: It’s the same thing as... I don’t know if you saw the film Là-bas, Down There. It is the same thing. (Adams 3)

The idea of migrancy is conveyed by the way space is filmed through the window which represents a threshold between the familiar and the foreign, the intimate and the unknown. The confined interior of the room and the self-imposed border with the exterior express the transient character of Akerman’s stay in Israel, similarly to her other
journeys. The feeling of imprisonment evokes the constrictive Nazi camp spaces and the sentiment of forced dwelling as they were lived and felt by her parents. The trauma of captivity has been transmitted although no obvious references to it are being made in the films. In spite of the fact that she films people in the street and in the apartments across the street from her, Akerman doesn’t undertake any evident analysis of the reality of the present Israel and its conflicts. The film avoids anchoring itself in the social and political reality of the country, thus remaining within the sphere of the essay film with nuances of personal history and autobiography.

In Là-bas, to an even greater extent than in her other films analyzed here, D’Est, News from Home or Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, the sense of real time is ingeniously converted to a subjective impression of a slow movement of time. Duration seems to be constructed as a bitterly felt endless passage of time which reminds us of her earlier films Jeanne Dielman and Saute ma ville in which space and duration concur in order to render the filmmaker’s own pensive state of mind and also to create a subjective, almost painful sensation of a deep reflection on the working of woman’s body and mind. Thus Akerman blends fiction and personal statement in order to offer spectators her insight into the female experience and understanding of a traumatizing reality.

In films with such an awareness of the existence of the spectator, the question of how spectators relate to Akerman’s film brings inevitably into discussion the question of identification. When analyzing Akerman’s earlier films among which Jeanne Dielmann, Annette Kuhn asserts in her book Women’s Pictures that “the combination of
autobiographical material with documentary codes permitted identification on the part of female spectators with the women in the films” (171). Thus, the four films analyzed in this chapter offer the opportunity to female spectators to see and meditate on a different, non-conventional, and counter-dominant type of cinema which shows women as historical subjects. In the classical conventional cinema system, the woman is the object of the gaze, the man is the subject, the spectator is always compelled to identify with the male protagonist in these “masculine structures of seeing” (Flitterman 17). Akerman has succeeded in reversing this dynamic.

One of Akerman’s major contributions to the field of French-language cinema is the fact that she brings alternatives to the woman’s image in cinema. As Judith Mayne states, there is an important distinction to be made between the image of the woman as object of the masculine gaze as it is constructed in the classical Hollywood “woman’s films” and the concept of “women’s films” which refers to the reality of women as historical subjects (The Woman 5). This distinction encourages the idea of analyzing Akerman’s works from the point of view of how women express themselves as subjects capable of re-appropriating the gaze and rewriting the hegemonic historical and cinematic narratives. By this process of redirecting the gaze, women gain agency in history and in the history of cinema. Akerman succeeds in performing an analysis of the complexity of female subjectivity while avoiding stereotypes. As Teresa De Lauretis remarks, in women’s films the text constructs “discursive spaces in which not woman but women are represented and addressed as subjects, possessed of both a specificity (gender) and a

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history, is an original ‘cultural creation’ of feminism; more, perhaps, than a new genre of (critical/fictional) creative expression, it can be thought of as a new aesthetic, a rewriting of culture” (De Lauretis 10). The same way, Akerman’s films underline the need of a historical context for the representation of women and female agency. They bring new valences to the women’s position in History and the history of cinema by giving them voice and the possibility of making their experiences known. Unlike in mainstream cinema, in Akerman’s films women represent historical subjects taking part in the process of constructing and rewriting History.

In addition to the thematic approach, her films bring a renewal of cinematic techniques. Akerman’s D’Est clearly constitutes a historical document itself and places itself between documentary and essay film, thus innovating the genre. In particular in D’Est, the documentary form doesn’t eliminate the symbolic level of the film. As Akerman herself asserts, “in all these so-called documentary films, there are always different layers. These are just people waiting for a bus, but they still evoke other things. They may evoke the lines in the camps or in wartime” (Rosen 11). Images of people involved in quotidian activities, of bodies and faces, individually or in groups, have the power to remind us of the past. They bear the traces of stories that haven’t been told. A documentary impulse exists in the majority of the films studied here since each of them, even the fiction films are engaged in a way or another in telling History and personal histories and take their sources from reality.
As Carrie Tarr states, “since the women’s movement of the 1970s women have traditionally communicated their concern for others and their desire to change the world through documentary” (7). The documentary as an informative and reality-based type of film par excellence facilitates the exploration and reviewing of History. It becomes more than a form of witnessing, story-telling and autobiography; it becomes a means of constructing History and of filling in the gaps of memory. Although most of Akerman’s films are in general essay films with a documentary feel they are also ‘bordering on fiction’, as the title of her installation suggests. This constitutes another way of opposing traditional cinema.

The question of gendered subjectivity raises related questions such as the specifically female film language and its deconstruction of dominant cinema. The four films discussed here may be regarded as relevant for a certain female filming style. Female film discourse is constructed through the numerous particularities of Akerman’s films which in turn can suggest the specificity of women’s films. Numerous aspects are significant in demonstrating the existence of a female writing in the filmmaker’s cinema. Of primal importance is the very fact that the films privilege images of women in relations with other characters. In D’Est, although Akerman is only present in her film through her camera and her editing, we can sense her moves through her peculiar and innovative filming techniques. Voice-over, dialogue, interviews, and extra-diegetic sound are absent. Duration is emphasized by fixed shots, long tracking shots, repetitions and ellipsis. The filmmaker utilizes very rarely close-ups and point-of-view shots. When
talking about this aspect of Akerman’s work, Kuhn cites Akerman who said that “the relatively low mounting of the camera corresponds with her own height and thus constructs a ‘woman’s eye-view’ on the action” (41). The camera keeps a certain distance from the protagonists thus creating distance between them and spectators and also giving them space for imagination and self-reflection.

As Margulies observes in relation to Akerman’s filming technique in *D’Est*, Akerman “creates formal and narrative tensions through a layering of oppositions – between representation and abstraction, structure and event, surface and depth – that articulate and obscure the various fictions woven throughout the film” (13). Almost all Akerman’s films have no closure. Observing how this is marked at the formal level, Sultan asserts that “[t]he continuous movement of the camera reinforces the impression of inconclusiveness and the opacity of their goings and waiting as they anticipate another narrative outside the frame” (15). The filmmaker’s self-interrogation on stories that haven’t been told is juxtaposed with her desire to offer a sort of imaginative support for possible narratives that can be created, for her own personal story and her family’s history as well, as history told by women as they live it and see it. One point to which attention needs to be brought when analyzing Akerman’s films is the constructed character of the stories told – the second generation’s desire to create a past to which they don’t have access (because their parents are sometimes unable to recount it). The desire exists to invent a past that remained taboo, in the case of both the Holocaust and communism.
In the majority of Akerman’s films, the languages used are very diverse. For instance, in *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna*, characters express their thoughts in French and German and we see street signs in several languages. In *D’Est* we hear music and dialogues in Russian. In her autobiographic book, *Autoportrait en cinéaste*, Akerman explained her use of English in a conversation in French: “Pourquoi en anglais? […] L’anglais me donnait-il plus de liberté ? L’anglais était-il plus proche d’un semblant de langue maternelle ? Du yiddish peut-être” (27). This represents a way of recuperating the mother’s language and of getting closer to her roots, but also of discovering her identity because, on the other hand, she explains later, her mother “connaissait mal le yiddish” (27). English would also become the language of freedom which would help build a discourse of her own and give voice to repressed stories. In *News from Home* Akerman translates her mother’s letters from French into English.

In addition to the semiotic level, the linguistic level expresses the same oscillation between the reconstitution of the mother’s image and the desire to free oneself from her protective, possessive embrace, to break up with the haunting, repressed family history. The survivors’ families kept the silence in order to protect the children but the repressed stories have never disappeared. As Tijana Mamula asserts, “[t]o translate the mother is to agree to lose her: the literal translation of the mother’s letters attests to a desire to betray, cast out, finally and forever lose the mother” (270). Language is another element of Akerman’s films which expresses the oscillation between getting closer to/distancing oneself from the mother. For instance, English, as Akerman states, functions as a voluntarily-set barrier with the mother in order to help gain more independence. On the
other hand, Yiddish and Polish serve the strengthening of the ties with the inherited culture but also the reiteration of the repressed past traumatic events.

The titles of Akerman’s films are either in English, French, or both. In Les Rendez-vous d’Anna, the language used throughout the film is French although some German can be heard. When Anna is in the train compartment going to Brussels then Paris, a man from outside the frame recites in German the interdiction to smoke when she lights a cigarette. Anna doesn’t speak German but she understands the train announcements in German when she stops in Cologne to meet with Ida. We witness a conversation about the German language between the two characters. Anna says: “Je ne croyais pas que tu parles si bien l’allemand. Je pensais que tu venais de Pologne” (Les Rendez-vous d’Anna). In this film, German remains the formal, official, and non-affective language. Thus, even the two German men, Heinrich and the traveler on the train, speak French. Although their monologues provide the protagonist as well as the spectator with redundant personal information, French facilitates communication. It is also a symbol of a language of freedom as the man on the train explains. He tells Anna that he has travelled a lot in order to find a place where he can live and that he decided to settle in France because “c’est le pays de la liberté” (Les Rendez-vous d’Anna).

During her journeys in Eastern Europe, Akerman is surrounded by the sound of Polish and Russian. The entire audio track in D’Est is made of diegetic sound that comprises random conversations, scattered replies, and songs in Polish and Russian. The filmmaker explains how even if these languages are foreign to her, their musicality was
familiar and they enhanced the process of remembering.\textsuperscript{10} She confesses that when she heard Polish, she felt “at once a little lost, without really being so, troubled without knowing why, and in a foreign country that was not altogether foreign. It was a strange language, to be sure, but one whose musicality and resonance were so familiar that words and even whole sentences came back to me in the midst of my incomprehension as if I were an amnesiac suddenly remembering” (\textit{On ‘D’Est’} 21).

In Chantal Akerman’s four films, \textit{News from Home}, \textit{Les Rendez-vous d’Anna}, \textit{D’Est}, and \textit{Là-bas}, one can see a constant preoccupation of the author with the reconstruction of the past, of a personal and a collective history and, at the same time, with the reconstruction of a dreamed homeland that her parents lost. The trips to places bearing traces of history could be seen as the filmmaker’s symbols of countering the displacement of her mother who, as we know from other sources, was a victim of the Holocaust. At the same time, the protagonists’ journeys and their wanderings stand for a search of the self, of an identity. And this quest is accomplished through a revisiting of the maternal image and its meanings within the characters’ personal histories. At present, Akerman’s “journeys into history” have resumed in Israel while making her film. The

\textsuperscript{10} In the interview taken by Rosen, the filmmaker comments on the languages used:
“Rosen: Another characteristic of your films lies in the musicality of the languages. Not simply the reading of letters, say, or the very written dialogues, but the sound of your voice. In French, in English, in Hebrew with the installation \textit{Bordering on Fiction: D’Est} [1995], and now in Spanish with \textit{From the Other Side}. I get the impression there's a whole story there as well.
Akerman: Well, this is the story of the mother tongue, which one either has or doesn't have. I'm first-generation Belgian. My mother arrived from Poland when she was ten. There's a certain music in the Polish language that lurks behind her French--increasingly so, as she gets older. She drops articles like le and la. For example, she now says, "I am going to doctor," as you would in Polish. I was also raised with Hebrew, with the songs and prayers, and when I write, there's something of a chant about it” (8).
film succeeds in achieving a travel to a final destination of the “home” that has been searched for a long time but also a confrontation with a place expected to have the key to numerous unanswered questions and repressed memories.

The means by which Akerman succeeds in rendering the tension and anxiety of the absence of a voiced testimony of her family’s past and her desire to bring to light some of the memories untold are highly artistic and profoundly motivated by her personal story. She reconstructs a hidden history through her films and her autobiographical works, works which in addition to films convey her determination and personal need to give voice to trauma and, at the same time, to find a way in which to deal with the repressed past. Film becomes more than a medium and a means of expression, it represents the product itself of a reconstituted past, a key to the present, and an artistic creation in which personal expression, history, and memory are intertwined.
CHAPTER TWO

IMAGINED FLASHBACKS:
(RE)CONSTRUCTING THE PAST IN MARTINE DUGOWSON’S FILMS

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again [...] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

Walter Benjamin (3)

Martine Dugowson is among the later generation of Jewish women filmmakers in France who are the children or survivors of Jewish families who immigrated to France. In her films, *Mina Tannenbaum* (1994) and *Les Fantômes de Louba* (*Louba’s Ghosts* [2001]), Dugowson approaches themes such as women’s friendship, family history, and cultural heritage. In both films, the young protagonists are born into families of Holocaust survivors. Whether first- or second-generation, the trauma of their family history affects their lives and the way they see the world. It is these protagonists’ struggles with their families’ legacies that the films depict.
After graduating from the Faculty of Letters, Martine Dugowson studied directing and filmmaking at the Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies in Paris between 1980 and 1983. Here she made several short films such as: *A bout de nerf* (*On the Verge of Hysterics* [1981]) and *Les cactus* (*The Cacti* [1982]). In 1983 she made *Circuit fermé* (*Closed circuit*), her first feature-length film followed by the comedy *En faisant le ménage, j'ai retrouvé Albert* (*While Doing Housework, I found Albert*), in 1986.

Dugowson has also worked on the film set as a camera operator and screenwriter. In 1992 she was awarded the Grand Prix for best script for *Mina Tannenbaum* that she directed the following year. The resulting film received a Cesar Award nomination for "Best First Film." She made *Portraits chinois* (*Chinese Portraits*) in 1996 and *Les Fantômes de Louba* (*Louba's Ghosts*) in 2000. Dugowson has also worked in television on series such as *Marc et Sophie* (*Marc and Sophie* [1987]) and *La Famille Ramdame* (*The Ramdame Family* [1988]).

Film scholars and critics who have approached Dugowson’s films *Mina Tannenbaum* and *Les Fantômes de Louba* from the perspective of their representation of female friendship have commented less on how this theme is connected with the remembrance of the Holocaust. On the other hand, critical studies dedicated to the latter theme have explored female identity construction in Dugowson’s films without paying close attention to the repressed history that is the background against which the film plots are constructed. The present chapter demonstrates how the two themes, female friendship and remembering the Holocaust, are interwoven in *Mina Tannenbaum* and *Les Fantômes*
In addition, it explores the mother-daughter relationship in the context of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, a relationship that is fundamental to the female characters’ evolution, especially in *Mina Tannenbaum*.

The remembrance and representation of the Holocaust are central to female identity construction in Dugowson’s films. While it has been demonstrated that the two themes can constitute two independent topics of analysis, I undertake the study of both tropes arguing that they are inseparable in a discussion of female identity construction in these films. I demonstrate that both protagonists’ identity crises come from a deep awareness of the immanent presence of the past in the protagonists’ lives and their difficulty to understand and relive the memory of the Holocaust. The films studied in the present chapter illustrate how trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next and how children of survivors connect with their parents and understand their war experiences. The second generation’s childhood is sacrificed, they are not spared of the suffering that the Holocaust caused and the recollection of the past is a fundamental part of their identity construction.

Central to female identity construction in Dugowson’s films, the theme of female friendship has been recurrent in French-language cinema of the last three decades. Only to mention a few representative film titles, one can go back to Jacques Rivette’s *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974), Agnès Varda’s *L’Une chante l’autre pas* (1976), Diane Kurys’ *Coup de foudre* (1983), works which explore the feminist hopes and expectations of women in a changing society. This preoccupation continues with Noémie Lvovsky’s
La vie ne me fait pas peur (1999) and in contemporary filmmaking, with Géraldine Nakache’s and Hervé Mimram’s Tout ce qui brille (2009). These films go beyond the stereotyped model of female friendship present in the early films of the 1940s and 1950s, where the two female friends most often embody the two opposite antagonistic characteristics within female nature – ‘the good and the bad girl’ – one characterized by excessive femininity, emotionality, and innocence, the other by masculinity, intelligence, and evil, such as A Stolen Life by Curtis Bernhart (1946), and Les Diaboliques (Diabolique [1955]) by Henri-Georges Clouzot.\(^{11}\)

Female friendship and the repressed past are recurrent themes in Dugowson’s Mina Tannenbaum and Les Fantômes de Louba. Both films present female identity crises and strong identification with being someone else. The identity crises go hand in hand with the protagonists’ drama of self-isolation from society and awareness of their Jewish identity, defining them as outsiders.

The film Mina Tannenbaum tells the story of Mina (Romane Bohringer) and her childhood friend, Ethel (Elsa Zylberstein). Although Mina and Ethel are born the same day, in the same hospital, into Jewish families in France, they meet seven years later, in a ballet class. They become close friends due in part to their awkwardness and clumsiness as children. Later on, the two teenagers share the same feeling of being different and

\(^{11}\) In her book, In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films, Karen Hollinger notes that there has been a progression in the representation of the theme of female friendship in cinema from classical films to a modern rejection of traditional images of women (31).
shyness in approaching boys. They have in common their families’ pressure to follow Jewish tradition and marry someone from their own culture. As Mina and Ethel mature, their friendship evolves into a relationship based on jealousy and conflicts of power. Mina becomes a successful painter, and the rupture between the two friends takes place when Ethel, pushed by her desire to succeed professionally, uses Mina’s name in order to obtain an interview from a famous painter. This act which propels Ethel’s career, and other events such as Mina’s disfigurement following a car accident and Ethel’s marriage to Jacques Dana, the man with whom Mina is secretly in love, lead to a psychological and professional decline in Mina’s life and finally, to her suicide. As a second main element in the film’s narrative thread, Mina’s Jewishness becomes a preexisting condition conducive to her downfall when her difficulty in coping with her parents’ trauma estranges and isolates her from her family. Mina experiences a compelling responsibility to understand and remember the trauma of deportation as her mother, a Holocaust survivor, constantly brings up the suffering which has marked her existence. This adds tension to Mina’s already troubled existence.

Through Mina and Ethel, Dugowson creates two opposite female characters, both of Jewish origin, one of Eastern European roots, Mina, the other of North African origins, Ethel. The fact that they come from different cultures, their ‘outsiderness,’ unites them and brings them closer. Their friendship evolves from an innocent childish bond strengthened by the two girls’ awareness of being different. Ever since the first day of school, Mina feels excluded due to her non-glamorous appearance, wearing glasses and
not-so-fashionable clothes. Children avoid playing with her: “Serpent à lunettes, serpent à lunettes! Va-t-en ! Va-t-en ! On ne veux pas jouer avec toi !” This and other comments and jokes such as her classmates’ laughter because of her awkwardness and lack of grace during a dance lesson lead to her self-isolation. In her turn, Ethel suffers boys’ rejection during a party when all the girls are invited to dance except her and spectators are made to understand that this occurs because of her plumpness. Later, while teenagers, the two best friends encounter the difficulty of communicating with boys of their age. All these and more unfortunate incidents in some attempted and failed relationships with boys contribute to a solidarity and strong connection between Mina and Ethel.

Mina’s transformation takes place when she begins to be successful as a painter and changes her appearance by wearing contact lenses and more stylish clothes. She thus is transformed into what society acknowledges as a noticeable, desirable young woman. The break-up between Mina and Ethel begins with Ethel’s growing jealousy over Mina’s success. Ethel begins to envy Mina, to identify with her, and to desire to be like her. Starting at this moment, the two young women’s friendship begins to decline. Emma Wilson notes that “the film addresses the impossibility and regret of a friendship whose roots lie in identification” (260). Unfortunately, Ethel’s identification with Mina becomes fatal to their relationship. Sophie Bélot tackles the theme of female friendship in Mina Tannenbaum through the prism of Simone de Beauvoir’s work, The Second Sex, arguing that their friendship is a destructive one based on jealousy and rivalry: “Identification with a female friend driven by jealousy corresponds to a Beauvoirian conception of
female friendship, conforming, as it does to De Beauvoir’s use of negative cultural stereotypes to characterize women’s relationships as rivalry and betrayal” (69). Belot reinforces and illustrates De Beauvoir’s idea of the rupture between female friends that occurs at the stage of their first love. Indeed, Mina and Ethel’s friendship illustrates De Beauvoir’s theory, although, in the case of Mina and Ethel, the break occurs because of a man-related envy as well as a professional rivalry.

Mina’s life story is seen retrospectively and narrated to the camera mainly by her cousin, a young woman whose name is not revealed, who is in charge of selling Mina’s paintings, as well as other characters from the film such as her mother, Ethel, and Jacques Dana. The opening sequence of the film shows different persons who knew Mina. The film that is being made about Mina’s life, addressing an audience which includes us, the viewers, is another way of conveying a gap between Mina and the people who knew her. Mina’s mother also talks about Mina. Her tone sets the stage for a disconnection between mother and daughter and an irremediable break with family tradition and the past: “Elle a toujours été contre le mariage. […] D’ailleurs il est écrit dans le Talmud, celui qui ne se marie pas n’est pas un être humain.” The mother’s words and quote of a contestable accuracy, taken from the fundamental Jewish laws and ethics, come as an epilogue to a life which did not follow prescribed, preconceived rules, and prefigure the story of Mina’s doomed destiny. This narrative technique underscores the false impressions that people around Mina have of her, the fact that they did not know her, and how they became infatuated with her story without having sincerely cared about her. It conveys
the idea that people and modern society encounter difficulties in preserving the memory of a person and points to the limitations of collective memory. This ‘film within a film’ technique plays the role of inspiring self-reflexivity, of distancing the spectators from Mina’s story. It also contributes to the victimization and mystification of Mina’s story.

The overall dramatic tone of the film portrays Mina’s mother as a figure whose life has been irreversibly marked by the memory of the concentration camps and the reminiscence of the phobia of everything that is German. She subconsciously tries to impress her fears upon Mina. When Mina’s friends want to come to visit, her mother does not allow them to come inside their apartment. The mother’s war trauma and its impenetrability cause a painful disconnection between her and Mina, and translate into a tense dialogue between them:

The Mother: Il y a des Allemands qui montent chez moi?
Mina: Ce sont des amis d’Elisabeth.
The Mother: Je ne veux pas ! Tu vas leur dire d’attendre en bas.
Mina : Je peux savoir pourquoi ils n’ont pas le droit de monter ?
The Mother: Tu sais très bien !
Mina : Mais non, je ne sais pas ! Tu fais toujours une scène. Tu ne les connais même pas, ces mecs. S’il se trouve qu’ils sont bien ? Tu sais au moins quel âge ils ont?
The Mother: Je m’en fous!
Mina: Bien sûr, tu ne peux pas répondre à ça.
The Mother: [She turns into a little girl wearing David’s star and talks to Mina’s father.] Dis-lui de se taire ! Dis-lui ! Elle m’énerve, espèce de petite salope !
[To Mina] Tu fais exprès pour m’énerver! Je ne veux pas d’Allemands chez moi! C’est clair?

Mina: Vous êtes des cons, je vous déteste!

The intergenerational conflict between mother and daughter stems from the difficulty on both sides to understand and cope with the pain of remembering, understanding, and passing on the memory of the past to the next generation. This leads spectators to believe that the idea conveyed by the film is one of an existing crisis of remembering, which irremediably marks the protagonist’s identity formation.

Cinematically, the scene is accomplished through a destabilizing casting technique. The return into the past is marked by substituting the woman playing the role of the mother with a little girl to suggest the persistence of the trauma that she has been living since then and also, more importantly, the transfer of trauma to the daughter. This replacement brings the mother and the daughter to the same age level. While having this change of actresses for the same role within the same scene, the other actors/characters remain the same. This could be Mina’s point of view but at the same time, it could be the mother’s point of view or, naturally, the spectator’s perspective. This three-fold perspective expresses the complexity of the recollection and transmission of trauma which are accomplished consciously and unconsciously, from first- to second generation, and through the film medium, to spectators. The effect is striking, bringing together past and present within the same shot without the use of the classical technique, the flashback.
The significance of this scene is twofold: while emphasizing the prevalence of memory as a trope already from the beginning of the film, by centering the plot on the retelling of Mina’s dramatic story, Dugowson evokes another memory, that of the Holocaust victims. In her study of the representations of the Shoah in *Mina Tannenbaum*, Meghan Emery analyzes Dugowson’s construction of Jewish stereotypes. She shows that they illustrate the risks of the Shoah’s mystification and point to an existing breach in the memory of European Judaism. For instance, Emery believes that “Mina’s mother remains this frightened, little Jewish girl, orphaned and alone, and as such personifies the Shoah as it was crystallized in Jewish memory – the Jew as victim” (56). This victimization results in an alienation from society.

One can affirm that remembering is depicted by Dugowson as a very difficult process. Mina struggles with contradictory emotions of love and aversion in her relationship with her parents, especially with her mother, in her attempt to make sense of the trauma that affected her family. In relation to the differences between the way first- and second-generation Holocaust survivors deal with the trauma, Janet Walker notes “the difficulties peculiar to second-generation disremembering rather than what the survivors themselves faced and are left with” (29). The point that she makes brings light to the conflict between Mina’s desires of forgetting and understanding the memory of WWII that her mother has preserved and attempted to pass on to her.

Mina’s Jewishness also metaphorically poses the question of Jews’ problematic integration in post-war France. The memory of Mina is an inexact one and reflects the
incapacity of people to see the tragedy, to remember a personal history which, taken to a larger scale, signifies their inability to transmit any sort of memory, including collective memory as a way of filling in the gap between memory and history. Is Mina an embodiment of the post-Holocaust denial of the trauma which results in her shocking and unnecessary death, as a way of raising the question of how far forgetfulness goes and of the moral responsibility that modern society has to pass on the memory from one generation to another?

Dugowson stresses *Mina Tannenbaum*’s value as a historical document, prompting consciousness to recollect dates of events in an effort to reconstruct collective memory. For instance, the dates that repeatedly appear on the screen as prompts to episodes in the protagonists’ lives coincide with dates of significant historical events or remind spectators of their importance. Thus, April 5, 1958 is the date of Mina’s birth. On May 2 1968, Mina and Ethel meet for the first time. This is also the month and the year of students’ uprisings in France, events which signaled the need for a change. As Sarah Hammerschlag notes, the figure of the Jew appears in the middle of these riots evoking the solidarity of French citizens with Dreyfus’ famous case, a century earlier.

Hammerschlag notes on the incidents in May 1968 in France that amidst the French student protests of May 1968, there was a moment when the figure of the Jew made an unforgettable appearance on the public scene. In the third week of May, during a lull in unrest, radio broadcasts reported that Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the young German Jewish strike leader, had been denied reentry into France after a brief trip to Germany. The government decision, clearly meant to diffuse the protest, had the opposite effect. Crowds poured into the streets without directive,
organization, or planning and united in the following chant: “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands.” (1)

The film timeline continues with April 7, 1974, the date of Mina’s first love, April 15, 1989, the day when Mina exhibits her artwork for the first time, and April 2, 1991, the date of Mina’s suicide. These calendar details and the fact that Dugowson inscribes the same month, April, next to every date which appears on the screen, as well as the marking of all actions in the film as taking place in April, with the exception of May 1968 which has its own motivation, represent a forced reiteration in order to evoke April 1942, the time when Mina’s grandparents were evacuated from their home and deported. The significance of these repetitions points to the successors’ duty to remember and the danger of repeating this human catastrophe. It also prolongs the victimization. Mina’s death comes as a continuation of the human destruction that the Holocaust caused, this time as a result of the perpetuation of trauma and its consequences.

The flashback to the moment in April 1942, when Mina’s mother remained alone after her parents’ deportation, in an empty house, operates a return in time, to the same, only darker, emptier apartment. The camera’s movement through the deserted interior evokes the loneliness, sadness, and suffering of the children left behind. Dugowson’s filming style renders the pain inflicted by the war atrocities, not by showing the actual deportation, but by a silent reconstruction of the same space, showing desolate objects, a calendar of the month of April 1942 on a table, and the same little girl, Mina’s mother: she is sitting on a chair by herself in a sad, waiting posture, while Nina Ketty’s voice can be heard singing: “J’attendrai, le jour et la nuit, j’attendrai, toujours, ton retour.” This
song is a French popular song recorded by Ketty in 1938. Translated into many languages and performed by the French singer Dalida in 1975, the song has become emblematic for the start of the WWII.

The flashback represents a way of reconstructing a past which haunts the present as a means to understand and confront the past. One point to which attention needs to be brought is the constructed character of the history that is recreated. Dugowson uses a form of art, the fiction film, in order to recreate the events which took place during WWII and to represent and mediate the transmission of trauma. This is rendered through the desire to recreate the image of a past which is very painful to recount and remember (and a similar, even stronger desire will be noticed in Dugowson’s other film, Les Fantômes de Louba), a desire to invent/imagine a past that remained taboo, in the case of the Holocaust. The autobiographical element can be seized behind the story told: the filmmaker herself comes from a family with a history that bears traces of the Holocaust.

In one of the last sequences of Mina Tannenbaum, Mina’s mother’s intervention on TV about her Holocaust experience plays the role of overture to the epilogue, prefiguring Mina’s death. At the moderator’s question: “Maintenant que le temps a passé, il est de notre devoir de parler, pour que le monde n’oublie pas,” Mina’s mother replies: “Je suis tout à fait d’accord. Moi, je n’ai jamais fait porter ce poids à mes enfants. On ne peut pas me reprocher cette plainte. Et pourtant, quel résultat j’ai eu avec eux ? Nous étions malheureux, si malheureux… Mais ma fille, regardez : elle a tout pour être heureuse. Pourtant, elle n’est pas mariée, elle n’a pas de situation. Est-ce que vous
comprenez ça ? Nous étions malheureux mais eux, ils ne veulent pas être heureux.’’ Mina turns off the TV and decides to accept the offer to make copies of famous paintings for a living which is a sign of her self-isolation as an artist and acceptance of her alienation as a human being. Although she resists her mother’s desire to relive the painful past, Mina’s identity quest symbolizes the identity search of Jews everywhere. Mina’s suicide allegorically signifies a perpetuation of the victimization that Jews still identify with in the present time. This sequence also expresses the disapproval of the overexploitation of trauma and the testimony of the Holocaust survivors by the media.

The difficulty of understanding her mother’s desire to transmit the legacy of the Holocaust is made clear in this scene where the miscommunication between generations is evident. Besides presenting the mother as the continuation of a tradition which sees marriage as the key to happiness, Dugowson stresses the still existing problem of a difficult transmission of the trauma and disconnection between generations. The question is whether the mother understands the fact that Mina has inherited the legacy of the Holocaust from her and that Mina’s troubled life is due to that. The difficulties specific to second-generation remembering bring along a desire of “disremembering” (Walker, 160), of forgetting victimization and of reconciling past and present. The burden and the pain of the repressed past exists for the second-generation as well.

Mina is an artist. Ever since her childhood, Mina is attracted to painting. The moment when she and Ethel start to become aware of the deep connection between them is symbolic of the importance of art in their relationship and in the film. Mina’s
reproduction of the eighteenth century British painter Thomas Gainsborough’s painting of his two daughters is found by Ethel after Mina’s schoolbag is rummaged by her mean and inquiring schoolmates. With curiosity and protective intentions, Ethel picks up Mina’s work in which she slightly changed Gainsborough’s painting by showing one of the two sisters whispering in the other’s ear. This sisterly bond and closeness depicted in the painting prefigure the two friends’ relationship. It is the same image of Mina’s painting which closes the film, while the spectators hear the girls’ whispers and laughs in the background. This ending suggests very dramatically Mina’s continuous, repeated betrayal by Ethel and how fatal to Mina their friendship became.

The character of Mina is constructed as a feminist figure in Dugowson’s film. During a scene depicting a painting course that Mina is taking, the protagonist is seen as a promising, unconventional student who contradicts her teacher and brings a feminist point of view to the discussion on a nineteenth-century painting. Mina is also always afraid of becoming the object of male desire. Mina’s dramatic life is very closely interconnected with her artwork, a relation suggested throughout the entire film. Although Mina does not approach themes of the past in her paintings, her works often represent characters in a chaotic, troubled space and distorted faces, expressing suffering. And very often, her paintings center on female representations in different contexts, allusions to Mina’s attempts to finding her identity. Not only is Mina an independent artist, but she also believes in her friendship with Ethel as an affectionate camaraderie.
based on common affinities and the confidence in success, although later this relationship proves to be destructive for Mina.

Ethel’s jealousy and her desire to become professionally as successful as Mina by any means lead her to actions that later bring an end to their friendship. When Ethel confesses to Mina that she used Mina’s name in order to obtain an interview from a famous painter, Mina is shocked and very disappointed. She replies: “J’ai cru qu’on est similaires mais on est différentes. Cette amitié finit par me peser.” Ethel and Mina are both Jews and this motivated in part their solidarity. Ethel’s gesture is a betrayal of their friendship. On another, more personal level, Ethel feels an obligation towards her dying mother to find a Jewish husband. Ethel meets Jacques Dana, the man with whom Mina is secretly in love, and marries him. This event brings a separation which is, this time, irreversible. During their conversation, Ethel tells Mina: “Tu n’es plus un modèle pour moi.” If before the two friends had arguments, now the argument became a reason for a real break-up.

One of the key scenes of the film which shows Mina and Ethel during one of their confrontations depicts the two girls while talking in a restaurant. They listen to Dalida’s song, *Il venait d’avoir 18 ans* and Mina sings along passionately, miming the artist. The controversy between the two friends starts when they express different opinions vis-à-vis Dalida’s song and its message. Ethel admires the glamorous, feminine side of the singer. The conversation evolves into a serious quarrel when Mina disagrees with Ethel’s non-feminist position. Their doubles or shadows enter the scene, disguised as a rabbi (Mina),
in a black suit and hat, and Brigitte Bardot (Ethel), in a fashionable, glamorous, red evening dress. The camera moves between the two stages, from the real Mina and Ethel to the imagined ones. This duality, in its turn, is double: each of the two female characters is dual in their desire to live the life they want and to obey their parents’ wish, and their relationship is also dual encompassing devotion and betrayal. This key dialogue represents a stage in the two characters’ search for identity. While both young girls face the same rigidity in the way they were raised, Mina’s imagined Jewish identity (she sees herself as a male Jew) comes as a counterpoint to her mother’s desire to see her married while Ethel’s attempt is to accomplish her mother’s wish by finding a Jewish man to marry. Their fight ends when Ethel (followed by her shadow) leaves the café and her disappointed friend. The two friends’ common cultural heritage unites them but is also a reason for their misunderstanding.

Dalida’s song, *Il venait d’avoir 18 ans*, heard in the café, reappears again at the end of the film, when Mina, after trying to reconnect with Ethel, is neglectfully rejected by her. Mina watches the song on TV, and then commits suicide. Guy Austin sees the song as a ‘melodramatic symbol, as their tune’” (97). It is the theme song of Mina and Ethel’s friendship and of their incompatibility and separation. The general tone of the film is melodramatic, being a mélange of humor and drama. In her review of *Mina Tannenbaum*, Ginette Vincendeau comments on the genre of melodrama and the way Dugowson balances humor and drama in her film: “Whereas the genre leads us to expect both women to grow (as in Kurys’ *Diabolo Menthe* or *Coup de foudre*) through their
various traumas, Mina’s tragic ending is not redeemed and her suicide is truly shocking” (50). The irony with which everything is presented belongs to a sense of the tragic taken with seriousness but also with realism, with a type of self-derision that people in problem situations display in order to be able to cope with their pain. This also constitutes a postmodern manner of representing the trauma of the Holocaust.

The denouement changes its tone in Dugowson’s most recent film, Les Fantômes de Louba. Here, Louba, the protagonist, who is a second-generation survivor of the Holocaust, experiences the effects of a trauma that is transmitted mostly visually, through photography, and orally, through her aunt’s voice. However, unlike Mina, Louba succeeds in overcoming the past and her suffering which cause her continuous crisis of identity and finds a family and a place in society.

The film Les Fantômes de Louba used to have as working title Les Enfants des photos (The Children from the Photographs), as a reference to the important part that photographs and childhood war memories play in the film. The film centers on the story of Louba in post-war France, a little Jewish girl who lives in an orphanage and whose parents disappeared during the Nazi occupation. Louba’s parents are only present in her dreams and imagination as phantoms of a traumatic past. The two main parts of the film have as a connecting thread Louba’s voice-over. The first half is a first-person narration in which Louba remembers her childhood and adolescence until the moment when she is an adult in Paris and has an accident in the park where she falls into an unconscious, delirious state during which she remembers and relives her past.
Louba finds out details about her parents’ experience during her regular visits to her aunt’s house. Her aunt recounts how she and Louba’s mother and father went through the deportation experience. This past comes back to haunt Louba who has nightmares and cries often during the night. The little girl becomes best friends with Jeannie, a former orphanage mate who betrays her by setting up a false date for Louba and a boy who pretends to be Charlie, whom both Jeannie and Louba like, in order to make her sleep with him. Twenty years later, Louba becomes a babysitter in Jeannie’s house in Paris, although Jeannie does not recognize her. Louba grows very fond of Jeannie’s little son, Alexandre. While battling with ghosts from the past, Louba reconnects with her father who returned to Paris from Israel. She falsely takes the identity of Jeannie and steals Jeannie’s lover, Charlie, with whom Louba has been in love since her teenage years. This puts an end to Louba’s babysitting experience in Jeannie’s house. The film concludes with a shot showing Louba who is now reunited with her father, has a husband and a daughter, and is part of a Jewish community.

The opening sequence of the film introduces us to the historical atmosphere of the 1940s in France through a black-and-white video clip of Charles Trenet, a very popular French singer, singing *Douce France* alternating with photographs of Paris under Nazi occupation and footage of women and children being put on deportation trains. The melancholic tone of the song and its lyrics, such as “Douce France, le pays de mon enfance,” contrast sharply and ironically with the tragic images shown. Moreover, Trenet himself is known to have performed in front of a public consisting of German officers
and soldiers. The antithesis between the images shown and the lyrics comes to underline the existence of a public memory that suppresses personal memories of Holocaust survivors in the present by ignoring individual suffering and recollection.

The difficulty and impossibility of representing the Holocaust by the later generations are suggested by Louba’s secretive way of keeping the photographs in a box hidden in her closet which stands as a metaphor for the trauma of the Holocaust and the taboo surrounding it until recent times. There is continuous conflict between Louba’s desire to assume her origins and find out more about her parents’ traumatic past and her fear of isolating herself from the other children and her friends because of her realization that she is different. In spite of the strong bond between Louba and Jeannie, one can notice Louba’s difficulty of confessing to her best friend who discovers only after many years that Louba is Jewish.

Louba’s awareness of being ‘the other’ engenders her desire to be like Jeannie, a desire which becomes overwhelming. Her childhood friend is a carefree, self-confident person, conscious of the attraction she exerts on boys of her age and knowing how to use her personal charm to succeed. The affective and physical closeness between the two friends during childhood and adolescence and Jeannie’s superiority over Louba given by Jeannie’s physical attributes and determination place the former on a position of domination and situate Louba in a state of alienation and longing to be another. In her attempt to look like Jeannie, Louba wears Jeannie’s cloths and arranges her hair exactly like that of her friend. Louba’s identification with Jeannie develops to such an extent that,
later in life when their paths cross again, Louba is driven to steal Jeannie’s identity. Moreover, she pretends to be part of Jeannie’s family because of her strong yearning to build a family that she herself never had. Louba is continuously looking for her family and she pretends to be Jeannie not only because she longs to have a family but also because she, in a way, takes back what Jeannie stole from her: love, affection, and friendship.

The friendship between Louba and Jeannie and the power that Jeannie has over Louba combine only to culminate with their deep fall into the abyss of hate and jealousy. Their differences and the existence of Charlie, a young man with whom Louba falls in love and whom Jeannie wants as a boyfriend, transform their sisterly connection into a relationship based on envy leading to betrayal. The scene which demonstrates Jeannie’s duplicity and disloyalty in her friendship with Louba represents the moment of destruction of their bond and of Louba’s ideals of fulfillment through friendship and love. Knowing that Louba loves and desires Charlie but is too shy to act or respond to his calls, during her stay at the foster family where they both live, Jeannie plots with some of her friends from the village to set up a trap for Louba. One evening, she tells Louba that Charlie is waiting for her in a barn. Louba goes to meet Charlie and because of the darkness of the place chosen on purpose by Jeannie, she only realizes at the end that the young man with whom she is making love is not Charlie but someone who pretends to be him, playing Jeannie’s game of mockery. When Louba, half naked, realizes that the young man is not Charlie, she finds herself surrounded by Jeannie and her friends who
laugh and ridicule her. Jeannie proclaims: “Tu ne voleras pas mon Charlie.” Losing what she holds most dear, her honor and Charlie’s, and realizing Jeannie’s perfidy, Louba decides to leave the foster home and goes back to the orphanage the following day.

This scene made of several very different shots represents one of the key moments of the film and of the narrative, which encompasses betrayal, separation, and Louba’s isolation. The shot which depicts the love-making scene between Louba and Jeannie’s friend is filmed in a completely dark space, a hay barn. It is one of the few sequences of the film in low light, emphasizing Louba’s illusion and loss. The camera moves in a panoramic shot from showing the bodies in a close-up to a medium shot capturing the spectators of the love-making scene: Jeannie and her friends. This set-up creates the impression of a theater stage. The gaze in this scene reinforces the dramatic sense of Louba’s experience. Her humiliation transgresses any limits when she sees that she is being watched by the group of friends. This scene engages the spectator in a voyeuristic gaze as well as a gaze engendering the desire of identification with either Louba or Jeannie or her friends. The possibility of identification with Jeannie or her friends would transfer the guilt of inducing the suffering to the spectator. Symbolically, it would be a way of raising awareness of the dangers of perpetuating certain dominant ideologies.

When the light is on again, at Jeannie’s signal, Louba finds herself dishonored and embarrassed. The shock of finding out the truth is marked by the transition to a hysterical argument between Louba and Jeannie which means psychological aggression.
for Louba. The theatricality of the scene is rendered by the fact that there is no shot/reverse-shot until the end of the scene. All the characters are visible within the frame during the girls’ discussion. This also has the effect of a breach of intimacy for Louba and a trauma which will add to, and amplify, the already existing war trauma inherited from her mother.

The sequence analyzed above demonstrates how the film accomplishes, through the reiteration of physical and psychological pain inflicted onto the female body, a reliving of the war trauma by Louba. By having someone else pretend to be Charlie during the love-making scene, as a way of exercising her power and superiority, Jeannie disposes of Louba’s body as she pleases. This form of aggression is added to the trauma that has been transmitted to Louba from her mother, a trauma of the suffering and frustration of camp prisoners who are subordinated to oppressive rules, losing their rights over their own bodies. Moreover, Jeannie betrays Louba’s trust and makes her a victim of humiliation. Louba’s alienation and marginalization results in her consciously taking someone else’s identity, thus rejecting her own body and identity. She repeatedly leaves the orphanage with the hope to find a family and an identity. Her displacement and her continuous returns suggest as many renunciations, metaphors for death, which she acknowledges: “A chaque fois que je suis morte. J’ai répété ma vie.”

The moment when Louba, as adult, starts to remember her past, becomes in the film a graphic image of the physical and psychological pain and alienation that was transmitted to her. The sequence shows Louba fallen on the ground, in a state of semi-
unconsciousness, while she forces herself to remember. We hear her thoughts through the voice-over which explains: “Il faut que je me dépêche de me souvenir. Cette fois, ce n’est plus une blague, c’est ma vie.” The split between her consciousness and her ill body which lies on the ground signifies a wounded, defeated body and mind. Louba’s powerlessness in front of the haunting past invokes the importance of the body and physical endurance in surviving the hardships of war. It also represents the agonizing effort needed in order for one to remember and the sacrifice without which the preservation of memory would not be possible. Louba’s stubbornness to construct the past and her refusal to forget represents a form of resistance, similar to the Resistance during the war.

Louba, as well as Mina in *Mina Tannenbaum*, struggles in her relationship with the past. Both characters are haunted by their mothers’ traumas, mothers who are represented in the films as children battling with the pain inflicted by the Nazi regime and their psychological scars from the war. Although Louba has not experienced the war as her mother did, she is haunted by the ghosts of the past because,

[U]nless trauma is worked through and integrated, it will be passed on to the next generation. If this happens, the next generation will inherit the psychic substance of the previous generation and display symptoms that do not emerge from their own individual experience but from a parent’s, relative’s or community’s psychic conflicts, traumata, or secrets. This process is experienced as if an individual were haunted by the ghosts, that is, the unfinished business, of a previous generation. (Schwab 49)

Louba’s connection with her mother is very strong. Very often she relives moments from the past, when she was little, and we see black-and-white images of a
young mother holding a little girl by her hand. Other representations of the relationship between Louba and her mother are the ones in which Louba’s mother appears as a little girl, always seen in a context of war. Louba recreates a reality that existed that she can hardly remember and a reality that she never lived. She gives voice to her mother’s trauma which is transposed into the present. The first-hand account of the experiences of deportation and occupation are translated into memory through Louba’s mediation. Thus Louba establishes a strong connection to her female identity, an identity that is being formed by the suffering that the women in her family experienced. Louba is given identity and memories and this way, she is also given agency as a woman to take part in reconstructing the past and women’s history.

While giving Louba a ride back to the orphanage, a man from the family where Louba has lived offers her a little sack with earth from his farm as a souvenir, reassuring her that she is welcome back any time. Louba’s adult voice in the voice-over describes her state of mind, her disappointment and feelings of displacement and non-belonging: ‘‘[J]e n’étais pas habituée à la bonté des étrangers. Parce que depuis mon enfance, et je savais que ça ne s’arrangerait pas, j’ai été élevée comme un animal, sans jamais regarder quelqu’un dans les yeux, sans une caresse amie, sans un moment de rêve. Au centre, on m’appelait ‘le petit soldat.’ [The sequence showing Louba in the car on her way back to the orphanage cuts to a shot made of several repeated takes filming Louba entering the orphanage door with her luggage in her hand.] Combien de fois j’ai fait ces gestes ? A chaque fois que je suis morte. J’ai répété ma vie.’’ Louba’s crisis following Jeannie’s
betrayal and the lack of confidence in her best friend, as well as her awareness of her rootlessness plunges her into a state of reflection on her lonely life and predestined wandering and her anger at her own powerlessness to change her destiny.

Louba struggles to integrate her Jewish heritage and her family war legacy into her childhood memories. The two contrasting desires, to uncover the truth about her family’s past and the instinct to protect herself from this self-destructive personal history, coexist in Louba and torment her existence. Louba’s suffering is caused by the war and anti-Semitism. It is a double torment because of her Jewishness and her responsibility to decipher and carry on her family legacy. While at the orphanage, she wakes up during the night crying and calling for her mother. She covers her ears when her aunt talks about deportation. Her distress represents her reaction to an overwhelming pain. Her refusal comes from her subconscious, she wishes to participate in the remembrance but the memories are too powerful for her.

Dugowson uses photographs as a way to transcend time and to bring children of Holocaust survivors closer to their past and to a better understanding of it. In photographs of Louba’s parents that Louba keeps in a secret box hidden in her closet and the ones that her aunt shows her during her visits, she depicts the loss of a family history that comes back to haunt the protagonist. The photographs and the aunt’s stories create a traumatic imagined world where characters from the past, especially the image of Louba’s mother when she was a little girl during the Nazi occupation, come to life. In Les Fantômes de Louba, the same building is filmed, the one in which sequences from Mina Tannenbaum
showing Mina’s parents’ apartment are shot. It is a haunted house, similar to Mina’s family apartment. This connection goes beyond the technicality on the film set; it connects meaningfully the two films which communicate the same idea of the haunting past to their audiences.

Against the background of a difficult childhood and adolescence spent away from home which also affected her later as an adult, Louba has flashbacks of moments that she imagines from her family tragic history, based on photographs that she has seen and stories she has heard. The images that Dugowson places in front of the camera through Louba’s eyes are charged with heavy signification for her as well as for the spectators. Very often her flashbacks are connected to imagery of people and places that she has never seen or known before in reality. She looks at photographs of her mother as a child wearing the yellow Star of David as well as other photographs of children in a camp or signs with interdictions for Jews to enter public places such as parks and restaurants (the requirement to wear a yellow Star of David was imposed in June 1942).

These graphic representations of the afflictions endured by Louba’s family reflect an excruciating reality that existed in History and they appeal to the spectators’ capacity to recall and reconstruct the memory of those times. It is the personal as well as collective memory of first-, second- and later generations that this imagery is meant to activate.

According to Andrea Liss, “[…] the use of photography as historical document, and the translation of traumatic memory into postmemories are some of the most perplexing
issues that confront the representation of history" (85). It is precisely photography which is used by Dugowson in order to convey the historical truth that should be kept alive.

Louba’s photographs represent the repressed/suppressed past. They are specters of the past coming to haunt the present. Dugowson admirably succeeds in creating special effects in order to represent Louba’s battle with the ‘ghosts of her past.’ When Louba watches Alexandre play with the other children in the park, the real image is replaced by a black-and-white photograph representing a similar scene from one of Louba’s photographs showing children in the concentration camps, which is superimposed on the actual film frame. The same situation occurs when a signboard that signals the entrance of the park where Alexandre plays appears, in Louba’s imagination, as a sign that she had seen in a picture taken in her mother’s childhood that reads: “Interdit aux enfants juifs.” This interplay between photography and film constructs an in-between world of reality and imagination which is where Louba lives and tries to decipher her past.

The working title of the film, The Children from the Photographs, clearly expresses the filmmaker’s intention to rely on photography as an additional medium in combination with film in order to emphasize the fundamental role of the visual in the Holocaust recollection. Photographs function as a catalyst in remembering and recollection; moreover, they reinforce the pain. The film shows how Louba feels trauma

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12 Postmemory is a term also used by Marianne Hirsch in order to refer to memories that the first generation survivors transmit to the second generation (Hirsch 6).
almost as strongly as her aunt and father. Photographs play the role of immortalizing, bringing closer the past, and making it stay permanently in the present. Like film footage, newsreels, and texts, they serve as evidence that the suffering provoked by the Nazis existed and was real, and as a reminder that the present has the responsibility to make all the efforts possible to prevent such atrocities from happening again. Photographs are vehicles for the transmission of memory and help to fill in the gap between history and memory. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, “one must be open to experiencing a textually mediated form of trauma” (107). If in Mina Tannenbaum Dugowson employs art, specifically painting, in order to suggest the power of the artistic creation to engage with, evoke, and transmit memories, in Les Fantômes de Louba the filmmaker uses photography, which was at the origin of the ‘moving picture,’ of film, to trigger, mediate, and preserve remembrance.

Dugowson’s Les Fantômes de Louba constitutes a re-reading of history, an important message for the present and future generations which suggests new ways of looking at the injustices of the past and offering hope in the present time. By exposing the crimes that took place in France under the Nazi occupation, the film contributes to the denunciation of injustices and the preservation of memory which serve an accurate writing of history. The violent stories of persecution and deportation are hurtful memories which come back to haunt the present. However, Louba’s life becomes in the end of the film an example of a resolved identity crisis, in spite of her having experienced a violent past. Dugowson admirably succeeds in rendering clear the ideas of her films
which accomplish their aims of intervening in public history, of preventing memory from being lost, forgotten, and left prey to amnesia.

Dugowson’s films inscribe themselves in a tendency of the French cinema of the last decades to intervene in the recollection of the war experiences and atrocities of the Occupation. For instance, in the form of a documentary, Marcel Ophüls’ *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity* [1969]) was made of interviews with war veterans and former members of the Resistance in France during World War II. The film attempts to shed a new light on the Resistance fighters as well as the collaborationists in order to come to terms with the sense of guilt that has existed in France after the war. The filmmaker interviewed Pierre Mendès-France, former president of the State Council during 1939-1940, depute, and lieutenant in the French army, who talks about his feelings toward the former collaborationists in France:

> Ca a été pour moi une expérience que je ne peux pas oublier. Et éventuellement je vais peut-être en tenir compte. Je ne crois pas que ça ait modifié mes jugements ou mon comportement. […] Ca m’a montré que certaines tendances, certaines démagogies, quand on les fouette, quand on les alimente, quand on les stimule, elles se rallument et qu’il faut toujours être en état de défense et il faut préparer la jeunesse contre ces propagandes, qu’il faut leur en parler peut-être plus que nous le faisions il y a une ou deux générations.

Mendès-France, who is Jewish, fought in the Resistance next to non-Jewish French people and suffered because of the persecutions of the Occupation and the Vichy government. His testimony demonstrates one more time that history is still being written through individual memories, through personal memory. Mendès-France feels no resentment toward people who let themselves lead by wrong ideologies but believes that
the memory of these injustices needs to be transmitted throughout generations in order to prevent other acts of violence from happening. What is absent from Ophüls’s film is the gender perspective on the experience of the Occupation which is not considered at all by the filmmaker. The film succeeds in rendering the testimonies of resistance fighters and army members but none of the war experiences as they had been seen and experienced by women.

Similarly to *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, but stressing the female constituents of the war experience, Dugowson’s films play the role of challenging forgetfulness and inspiring a sense of responsibility to the spectators. The fact that Louba sees images of the past everywhere she goes transmits the message of a present which still has not resolved its conflicts with the past, of a world which has not come to terms yet with the painful historical past. Friendship fails to bring fulfillment and to save the young women from a troubled existence: Mina commits suicide while Louba wanders and lives in loneliness. In *Mina Tannenbaum* the past reinforces a strong bond between the two friends, although their relationship evolves from solidarity to jealousy and conflict. In *Les Fantômes de Louba*, the characters’ repressed past causes disconnection and difficulty to live in the present. Mina and Louba embody the tensions between past and present, recollection and disremembering, first- and second-generation survivors.

By fictionalizing and personalizing history, Dugowson’s films show the agony that the first- and second-generation survivors experienced while trying to understand and preserve the memory of the Holocaust. Ophüls’ film and other similar cinematic works
such as Claude Lanzmann’s extraordinary documentary, *Shoah* (1985), base their concepts on stories and points of view of male Resistance fighters, army leaders, politicians, and former prisoners and victims. Dugowson offers a new perspective on the Holocaust and the resistance to memory amnesia by bringing to the screen women’s voices and experiences. She does so from a female perspective, exploring the WWII history as it was lived, remembered, and recounted by women. The director places a special emphasis on female protagonists, on the depiction of female friendship and women’s experiences of war, deportation, and memory transmission as ways to express the efforts that women made in order to cope with trauma and the resistance to memory amnesia.

Through her two films, *Mina Tannenbaum* and *Les Fantômes de Louba*, Dugowson brings enormous contribution to French-language cinema by representing the way the memory of the Holocaust has been transmitted by women from one generation to another and how women filmmakers succeed in giving voice to trauma and the past and to the destabilizing effect that WWII memory has had on female identity construction. These two films inscribe themselves into a new tendency of cinema in France during the last three decades to become more open to differences, to examples of the past, and to challenging gender-neutral recollection and single-point-of-view approaches in writing history.
Karin Albou’s work reflects her eclectic education and life experience as well as her complex background. Born in Algeria to a Jewish family, she lived in Algeria and Tunisia, and moved to France when she was still very young. There she studied literature, English, drama, and dance, and finally enrolled in a film school in Paris, wishing to become a screenwriter. While at the film school, she discovered that she wanted more than anything to direct films. She made her first short films *Chut (Shh!)* and *En un clin d’oeil (In the Blink of an Eye)* in 1991, right after completing her film studies, which confirmed her vocation. She then spent a few years working on a documentary about Tunisia, *Mon pays m’a quitté (My County Left Me)* [1995] and on her third short film, *Aid El Kébir* (1998), which was “adapted” into her first novel, *La Grande Fête (The Great Feast)*, in 2010. Albou also made a television film, *L’Innocente (The Innocent)* [2001], which tells the story of Juliette, a woman unjustly accused of embezzlement. Her feature films, which consecrate her style and cinematic work, are *La Petite Jérusalem (Little Jerusalem)* [2005] and *Le Chant des mariées (The Wedding Song)* [2008]. *La Petite*
*Jérusalem* won the prize of best screenplay in the 2006 Cannes film festival (Critic’s Week section), and was twice nominated for the French Academy César. *Le Chant des mariées* has been omnipresent in numerous French and Jewish film festivals. It won several awards among which the Female acting award for Olympe Borval and Lizzie Brocheré at the Festival *Rencontres du Cinéma Francophone* in Villefranche, France (2008) and the Jury Award at the Festival *du cinéma méditerranéen* in Montpellier, France (2008).

Karin Albou’s films create a rereading of the past which brings history closer to the present and reconstructs it from the perspective of the female artist. She addresses topics from a female and feminist point of view and rewrites the past in such a way as to reflect women’s lives, concerns, and roles in society side by side with those of men. In addition to the important part history plays in her work, Albou’s films depict characters who are very often displaced individuals, living cross-cultural experiences of integration. Albou herself is a diasporic artist, creating art that crosses geographic, ethnic, and gender borders.

Albou has been one of the few female filmmakers of Maghrebian origin in France who have centered their films on the intersection of the memories of the Holocaust and colonialism. In speaking about the Maghrebian filmmakers who live and work in Europe, Hamid Naficy notes that the majority of the filmmakers were men, reflecting the dominance of patriarchy within the sending nations and the general pattern of migrations worldwide, which have favored the emigration of men ahead of their families to establish a beachhead for chain
migration. This gender imbalance also reflects the belief, common to many Middle Eastern and North African societies, that cinema is not a socially acceptable, religiously sanctioned, and economically feasible enterprise for women. The patriarchal ideologies of the receiving countries, too, contributed to women’s underrepresentation. (18)

Coming from Algeria, Albou brings a significant contribution to the reversal of this pattern of the dominant male representation in cinema. In her films, she adopts female and feminist perspectives not only by approaching certain themes but also by creating a specific cinematic style through which her films express a synergy of female subjectivity, female gaze, and, what Naficy calls, “accented style” (4).

In order to bring to our attention the fact that existing literature on postcolonial cinema has approached diasporic filmmaking at a thematic level rather than a stylistic one, Naficy creates the concept of accent style as a framework for his analysis of diasporic cinema. According to Naficy, the accent style follows certain patterns such as claustrophobic setting, emphasis on the oral and the vocal, native music, multilinguality, closed framing, and memory/nostalgia. I utilize this stylistic approach and analyze Albou’s texts in order to determine how women’s accent cinema develops a particular style in which these elements are present and sometimes emphasized, reduced, or employed in such a way as to focus the image on women and gender relations and to create the possibility of an autonomous female perspective. Here, I adopt and integrate into my analysis theories of female perspective, female body, and cinematic gaze as they have been developed by film theoreticians such as Teresa De Lauretis and Judith Mayne.
who demonstrate that the perspective in women’s films consists of the female gaze and female voyeurism.

Taking as a starting point Naficy’s definition of accented cinema, one can consider Albou’s films “diasporic” and “postcolonial ethnic and identity” films at the same time. They are diasporic because, for instance, by quoting Naficy, one can say that 

*Le Chant des mariées* has “a vertical relationship with the homeland.” On the other hand, they are ethnic identity films because of their focus on the “here and now,” on the country in which the filmmaker resides, a concept illustrated by *La Petite Jérusalem* (19). Another diasporic characteristic in addition to these traits, the filmmaker as the author, is illustrated by the fact that Albou has written and directed all of her features and she made documentaries and short films. In light of these classifications, I undertake the task of exploring how Albou’s accented cinema and, by extension, accented cinema made by women constructs and represents gender relations, how the female point of view contributes to our perception of history and of women’s experiences of trauma, displacement, and migration, and how they construct the relationship between the past and the present as a basis for a better understanding of the present.

In determining what role memory and trauma of war and inter-ethnic conflicts play in Albou’s films, I invoke Michael Rothberg’s *multidirectional memory* as a basis of interpretation. In addition to superimposing past and present, Albou brings together two types of memory: of the Holocaust and of the colonial regime. These memories, instead of competing as two opposing sites of remembrance and of overshadowing each other,
form a synergy. Echoes of the two traumatic events are shown as reverberating through generations in *La Petite Jérusalem*. Albou brings into contact the memories of the two histories. In *Le Chant des mariées* Albou goes back to the sites of the historical events and presents them as the main background for the development of the film plot and as an evocation of a history common to so many people in Europe and Africa. Albou’s cinema comes to counteract the common assumption which places Africa as completely removed from memories of the Holocaust.

Albou’s films *La Petite Jérusalem* (2005) and *Le Chant des mariées* (2008) blur the boundaries between film and history and point to cinema as a key to understanding the complexity of the present French and Francophone worlds through the lens of the past. In *La Petite Jérusalem* Albou tells the story of a displaced family of Maghrebian Jews living in present-day multicultural France. In *Le Chant des mariées* Albou returns to the site of historical events, to Tunisia during the Nazi occupation. Faced with this complexity of meaning, the filmmaker creates innovative images in order to represent female characters dealing with the challenges of reconciling two different cultures: Jewish and Muslim. While filming characters in search of their identity against a background of ethnic conflict and war violence, Albou depicts, with sensitivity and strength, an intimate, feminine intersubjective space.

In this chapter I analyze the three major components of Albou’s work: history, memory, and gender, and explore the ways in which the tropes of displacement and femininity are constructed and intertwined in Albou’s films through paying close
attention to the female body, space, and place. I also adopt a stylistic approach and analyze the various elements such as setting, framing, and camera angles in their synergy. In addition, I show how this cinematic quest creates the sense of a feminine universe in search of new modes of expression and unveils new cinematic spaces in contemporary French-language cinema. I demonstrate that Albou’s films shift the filmic and historical discourses from male to female perspectives and bring nuances of gender history to the filmmaking experience.

In order to understand Albou’s view of the past as well as the diasporic and autobiographical elements present in each of these films, I explore *La Petite Jérusalem* and *Le Chant des mariées*, as well as her short film *Aïd El Kebir* and its “literary adaptation,” her novel *La Grande fête* (2010), which focuses on women’s lives during the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s. For the purpose of this project, interviews given by the filmmaker constitute invaluable sources as well, and contribute to better explaining Albou’s films and their tendency toward autobiography and documentary.

The multiethnic title of Albou’s film, *La Petite Jérusalem*, plays on the double meaning of the two words. La Petite Jérusalem is the nickname of Sarcelles, a suburb of Paris inhabited primarily by Jewish immigrants. After the independence of Tunisia in 1956, and after the ethnic Arab-Jewish conflicts following the six-day Arab-Israeli war in 1967, half of the Tunisian Jews chose to take refuge in France, while the other half went to Israel. A large number of Tunisian Jews are living now in Paris and its surroundings.
Spectators can also consider the main protagonist, Laura, to be la Petite Jérusalem, for she serves as a metaphor for displaced female Jews in France.

While telling the story of a displaced family of Maghrebian Jews living in France, Albou’s *La Petite Jérusalem* depicts a mother’s nostalgia for a lost home, Tunisia, and two sisters’ friendship and search for identity. The two opposite dimensions of this world – tradition and modernity – become complex issues that are amplified by questions of religion and gender in a multi-racial environment.

In the context of a post-colonial France in which women with immigrant backgrounds often struggle to find their voice and life purpose, the film *La Petite Jérusalem* poses the question of reconciling two contrasting desires: remaining within the boundaries of one’s traditional community or acknowledging the wider, multi-ethnic society. The filmmaker creates innovative images as new modes of expression for a feminine universe facing the challenges of integration. In *La Petite Jérusalem*, Albou succeeds, through her filmmaking, in deconstructing the classical concept of femininity as it was built by patriarchal norms. By her use of various cinematic elements such as framing, camera angles, and editing, she creates a feminine discursive space in which women reevaluate their desires, sexuality, and place in society.

Laura lives with her mother, her sister Mathilde, Mathilde’s husband Ariel, and the couple’s four children. Determined to change her life, she rejects the religious and superstitious education that she was given. Instead, she studies philosophy and works to raise money to move to Paris. She meets Djamel, a young Algerian immigrant, but their
relationship becomes impossible because of the Arab-Jewish tensions in their community. While Laura transgresses all traditionally established rules in order to become independent from her family, her sister Mathilde tries to save her own marriage after having realized that her husband has cheated on her. In the end, the entire family decides to move to Israel, with the exception of Laura, who, with her mother’s support, moves to Paris.

The opening sequence of the film consists of a powerful and suggestive shot of Laura’s body. With grace and delicacy, Albou creates a fragmented physical portrait of the young woman through a series of extreme close-ups of her body while Laura is getting dressed, then while she is reading a prayer book. Albou’s meticulous filming style captures in detail male and female bodies having as one of its main stylistic components the image of the body and the way it is integrated in the filmed space.

The spectator can sense a certain tension between desire and reason, prefiguring the young woman’s anxiety later in the film, due to the struggle between her principles of not giving in to physical desire and her attraction to Djamel. Laura embodies a modern woman in search of ways to become autonomous from the traditional social rules by reading Kant and organizing her life according to her own rational and metaphysical rules. By emphasizing Laura’s progressive femininity and investing it with the power to transgress established norms, the filmmaker accomplishes a reversal of the traditional trope of femininity, a trope which idealizes the traits of purity, dependence, and vulnerability.
Placing the film’s focus on the two sisters’ intimate spiritual and physical lives, Albou creates a discursive space which privileges a female point of view. Feminist film theoreticians have underlined the difference between the image of the woman as the object of the masculine gaze as it is constructed in the classical Hollywood “woman’s films” and the concept of “women’s films,” which refers to the reality of women as historical subjects. As Mayne states, “it is the singular – the woman’s film – which is used more frequently to refer to the Hollywood product and the plural – women’s film – to refer to works by women directors” (Woman 5). This distinction encourages the idea of analyzing Albou’s filmmaking and her female protagonists from the point of view of women expressing themselves as subjects in a historical context. The film director succeeds in redirecting the gaze toward self-reflection and self-analysis.

The gazes at the female body within the film are realized by multiple extreme close-ups of the two young women’s bodies: Laura, in multiple moments when she dresses, undresses, and explores her own sexuality and Mathilde at the mitzvah, the traditional Jewish bath, where she sees a marriage counselor. Although showing the two sisters as very close to each other, the film places Laura in opposition with Mathilde. Their strong connection and reciprocal support does not diminish the differences between them. Mathilde is always preoccupied by how to maintain her marriage, she is the object of desire for her husband, and she remains an object of an eroticized gaze at the bath where she seeks advice on her conjugal life. In spite of the two young women’s friendship, this opposition between the two sisters accentuates the gap between an
idealized and a progressive femininity. Their closeness and, at the same time, the evident
differences between them are emphasized through sequences of shot/reverse-shots and
medium shots showing Mathilde confiding in Laura about her husband’s affair. Laura
never hides her sensuality, always wearing her hair down while Mathilde always covers
her head under nets and wigs, as Jewish tradition requires from married women. These
contrasts challenge the Jewish traditional views of female and feminine identity which
praise attributes such as docility, subservience, and passivity by showing Laura as having
a different view of life, as breaking with religion and family tradition through her
dynamic and bold personality and her advanced thinking.

The figure who represents the traditional female archetype in its entirety is the
mother. The mother embodies tradition, domesticity, maternity, the idealized motherly
figure, shy, living within the community’s strict rules, who has always considered the
topic of sexuality as taboo. In the scene of her dialogue with Mathilde, another moment
full of sensitivity, we find out that the mother was born in Tunisia, married young, and
devoted herself to her husband and children. She is often in conflict with Laura, because
of her superstitions and the pressure she exerts on Laura to find a husband. But she is also
the one who supports Laura in her decision to move to Paris (the city signifying
independence, social integration, and modern life for Laura), probably as a way of
encouraging her daughter to acquire the independence that she herself never had.

Another sequence through which Albou creates an image that challenges tradition
and religion is composed of a montage of alternating shots of Mathilde’s husband, Ariel,
praying, and of Laura, undressing and getting ready to go to bed at dawn, after a night spent on studying philosophy. The filmmaker inscribes femininity into the secular, transgressing the religiously regulated life, oscillating between physical desire and faith. By creating a parallel between the two series of images, the filmmaker operates a reversal of the image of the prude, shy woman by showing Laura undressing while her brother-in-law performs a religious incantation. Ariel is completely covered; he wears a fringed prayer shawl, while Laura is naked. He is seen as a person who follows the strict religious rules of Jewish tradition, while Laura pursues a new identity through exploring her desires and a world that is new to her. Female nudity is juxtaposed with a prayer scene in such a way as to emphasize existential doubt and the questioning of religious rigor. Ariel’s veiling and Laura’s unveiling suggest a ritual and counter-ritual which contrast with each other in order to express two different ways of thinking: openness and closeness toward novelty, toward a world different than your own.

As Carrie Tarr has noted, the film enables its female protagonists to “negotiate new, gendered identities in relation to the limitations of their place within their diasporic communities” (81). While women are the ones who open up spaces for negotiating identities, the male characters throughout the film are conflicted most of the time, in search of their identity and roots, striving to preserve and transmit their family values; they conduct themselves according to traditional codes and ethics, remaining within the limits of their community. Even Djamel, who rebels against the restrictive community of
Muslim immigrants in which he lives, becomes powerless when called upon to protect his relationship with Laura.

Laura and Djamel’s relationship fails because of cultural and religious barriers and the impermeability of the two communities, Muslim and Jewish. Besides their perfect intimacy and communication at the level of physical desire, almost all their interactions take place with difficulty, timidity, and almost a sense of culpability. Most of their encounters occur in the locker at their workplace and rarely do we see face-to-face dialogues. They almost never look at each other. The same hindered communication takes place between Mathilde and Ariel as well as Laura and Ariel, such as the scene of the discussion about Ariel’s affair with another woman.

The desire to break with tradition becomes evident in scenes of recollection of the past. During the intimate conversation between the mother and her elder daughter, Mathilde, the mother recounts her past, while living in Tunisia. The spectators do not know the circumstances in which she became single. Her confession offers, in a very shy manner, details about her relationship with her husband and the beginning of her sexual life as a young woman. This scene shows the extent to which sexuality has remained taboo in this community. The predominance of scenes centered on female subjectivity and intergenerational communication reveal, through shyness and delicacy, a desire to share.

This sequence, as well as the last scene of the film which shows Laura’s dialogue with her mother and immortalizes the mother-daughter bond, operate a separation
between the past and the present, but also a way of reconciling past and present: the mother places Laura’s photograph next to her own photograph taken in Tunisia, when she was young. The presence in the film of fetish elements or “souvenirs” from the home country, such as the photograph and the ring, confirms another feature of accented cinema. Naficy argues that accented films “emphasize visual fetishes of homeland and the past (landscape, monuments, photographs, souvenirs, letters), as well as visual markers of difference and belonging (posture, look, style of dress and behavior)” (24).

The mother preserved an old suitcase with objects from her home country symbolizing archaic beliefs such as the power of the talisman that she hides under Laura’s bed which she believes will protect Laura from evil forces and help her find a husband. With the same purpose, the mother sings incantations and performs religious rituals. These cultural ‘signs’ reminiscent of home which transcend time and space perform the important role of making the film ‘accented’ as well as of serving as vehicles for the transmission of memory.

The exploration of Albou’s cinematic treatment of space throughout her film reveals her concern with challenging the notion of private space as one that is reserved exclusively for women. Albou alternates private space, represented by confining interiors such as the house and the locker, with exteriors such as streets, parks, the metro, and other public spaces. This oscillation frames two contrasting worlds: on the one hand, the past, religion, repressed sexual desire; and on the other hand, the present, philosophy, and freedom. According to Naficy, accented cinema privileges claustrophobic spaces (32);
and the emphasis on private space in *La Petite Jérusalem* demonstrates the director’s preoccupation with the personal and the immediate that are placed against the collective from a desire for realism and in an effort to render historical truth through personal histories.

While conceptualizing gender and ethnic classifications of the inhabitants of the city, Albou draws a fine analysis of Laura’s desire for integration, of adaptation to the present multicultural France. The character seems to never fit in the space filmed. Laura rejects the domestic space of femininity and romance. The film inspires a sense of enclosure every time she is filmed in family scenes. She prefers public, transitory spaces like the streets and the metro. Laura refuses to belong to conventional domestic interior spaces, she wonders through the neighborhood. Her displacement is multiple: she is alienated from her family, from her country of origin, from the culture and traditions that her family constantly pursues, and from the city of Paris to which Laura longs to belong. The open ending of the film shows her in the urban space, although alone, this time alienated from her roots and her family. This closure can be read as the sacrifice that Laura needs to make in order to fulfill her desire. In the larger context of the community, this suggests the difficulty of integration of any ethnic group within a society.

The main character’s peregrinations outside of the confining apartment or work place are filmed as an escape. For instance, her walks, during dinner time when the family is at table, offer her space and time to think and be on her own. Also, the
existential conversations with her sister usually take place outside, while she is going to school or to the *hammam*.

Laura’s relationship with Djamel takes place in the locker, never outside; and when they go to visit his family, the cultural difference barriers imposed by religion and tradition take the relationship to a dramatic end: Djamel’s family rejects Laura, which causes her suicide attempt. The space opens at the end of the movie when Laura moves to Paris, only to suggest the lack of constraints of this new location, and symbolically, Paris being the cinematic city par excellence, it contributes to Laura’s image as the embodiment of a new cinematic type of *flâneuse*: the female who will cross the boundaries of gender and ethnicity.

The nineteenth century concept of *flânerie* exists without a direct translation into English. *Flâner*, according to the French Robert dictionary, means “to stroll without haste, randomly,” it is a main trope in the nineteenth century literature. The figure of the ‘dandy flâneur’ is especially present in Charles Baudelaire’s poems. The activity of *flânerie* is defined by Walter Benjamin as a walk (almost in the sense of a hobby) during which one observes the city and enjoys the spectacle of the street, watches people, and is being seen (32). The female counterpart of the *flâneur* has found more often an expression in the twentieth century literature and films. French literary and cinematographic creations as well as critical studies always found a special relationship between the city of Paris and the concept of *flânerie*. 
In *La Petite Jérusalem*, the very well known city of the *flâneur* in French literature and cinema, Paris, remains far away and invisible; we can hardly notice the contour of the Eiffel Tower in a single panoramic shot of the city seen from the distance of the suburbs, at the beginning of the film. Is it possible to consider Laura a *flâneuse*? She is neither a bourgeois like the nineteenth century *flâneur*, nor a window shopper in the sense of a visual practice such as it was defined by Anne Friedberg (37). Laura is the marginal *flâneuse*, isolated from the crowd. Laura’s walks in the streets of suburban Paris, in an industrial cityscape where the strict geometrical lines of the HLM architecture and the absence of light (Laura’s walks mostly take place at night, in small poorly lighted streets) are a search, a negotiation of a new urban identity. Her wanderings outside the space of the home and her precise philosophical quest of a rational spiritual life constitute a type of female agency as Laura is taking the role of a female philosopher and someone who crosses ethnic boundaries.

Her desire to live in the city is constantly deferred because of her economic and social condition. The mother’s gift, a valuable ring, makes possible Laura’s moving to Paris. The money that Laura will get from selling the ring will allow her to pay the rent. Contradictorily, it is the strong connection with the mother which enables Laura’s break-up with tradition and family. The price to pay is even higher: she will be alone this time, isolated from her family. The displaced family’s trajectory, geographically and spiritually, differs from Laura’s path. The family remains within a closed community, following an almost foreseen itinerary – from Tunisia to France and Israel – as their
attempt to find a home in France fails. Israel, the promised land, becomes their next
destination, where they continue their peregrination, while Laura moves to Paris. The
desire to live in the city is fulfilled by Laura although she is even more alone now that
she is not any more part of her community.

In the last sequence of the film, Laura is seen alone in a train station in Paris,
surrounded by people in motion, while she moves in an unknown direction, carried away
by a horizontal escalator. This image suggests mobility and an illusionary extensible
space created by the setting and the camera, while time stands still. Laura remains in
displacement from her homeland as well as her family. The space of the French
metropolis becomes her new home and her chance to find her identity. Only the
separation from the family and her mother’s breaking up with tradition enable her choice.
The unfulfilled mother’s desire is further pursued by the daughter. If the opening
sequence of the film deconstructed the socially coded body of the character, at the end of
the film, we see Laura transformed because of her experience and ready to assume her
new position in society. The horizontal tracking shot combined with a close up of Laura
erases the distance between the character, camera, and viewer and inspires identification
and self-reflection to the female spectator. While people around her going in all
directions can be distinguished but not clearly seen, the camera insists on the character at
the center of the frame, suggesting that the focus of the film has been entirely on female
subjectivity. Thus, through her film, Albou creates a space for the female and feminist
perspectives.
Quoting Teresa de Lauretis’s words about “women’s films,” we can say that Albou’s film constructs “discursive spaces in which not Woman but women are represented and addressed as subjects, possessed of both a specificity (gender) and a history” (10). If conventional cinema narratives represent women as the passive object of the male gaze, in women’s films, women represent complex historical subjects capable of action and of constructing history. Albou places female subjectivity at the center of her film and redirects the gaze in such a way as to facilitate the spectators’ identification with the female protagonists. In this film, Albou’s cinematic techniques, as well as her choices of casting and setting, enable the construction of powerful images, full of sensitivity, of the experience of the female diaspora in France and a complex exploration of a diverse, constantly changing, modern France. All of these cinematic elements compete in placing *La Petite Jérusalem* at the border between fiction and historical document.

In Albou’s *Le Chant des mariées*, the setting changes to Tunisia and imagines life and relationships between Jews and their Muslim neighbors. The film takes place in Tunisia in 1942, during the Nazi occupation. After its colonization by France in 1883, Tunisia had been a French protectorate until its independence in 1956. Among the French colonies in North Africa which were under the rule of the Vichy government during WWII, Tunisia was the only one to be invaded by the Nazis in November 1942. The Allied troops managed to defeat them in May 1943. During the Nazi occupation, the Germans seized Jewish properties in Tunisia, five thousand Jews were sent to labor camps, and nearly two hundred were deported to death camps in Europe.
In the historical context of the Nazi occupation of Tunisia, *Le Chant des mariées* tells the story of two sixteen-year-old girls, Myriam (Olympe Borval) and Nour (Lizzie Brocheré), who are best friends in spite of their religious and cultural differences. Myriam is Jewish and Nour is Muslim and they grow up together in the shared yard of the apartment complex where they live. Their friendship faces the difficulties of war. The two childhood friends start to see the differences between them. Jews have fewer and fewer rights and they are unjustly charged with fines. Myriam is not allowed to go to school anymore and when her mother, Tita, loses the right to work, she decides to marry her daughter to a rich, older doctor. This marriage also puts distance between Nour and Myriam, as Nour envies her friend, who now lives in a big, wealthy house. The two girls also grow apart because of Nour’s boyfriend, Khaled, who collaborates with the Germans and tries to convince Nour that Myriam and her family are the reason for their difficult life. During a key moment in the film, when the *hammam*, in which women in several scenes are portrayed, is visited by SS troops, Nour saves Myriam’s life by declaring to the SS soldiers that she is her sister. Finding himself in a marriage that lacks love and in order to prove his feelings for her, Myriam’s husband goes to work as a physician at a labor camp. The film ends with a moment of solidarity between the two women during the bombardments, when Myriam and Nour reunite while in a shelter.

Against a background of war and violence, Albou depicts the girls’ enduring friendship, which is challenged by the animosity inflicted upon the two ethnic groups by the Nazis and their collaborators. Nour lives a love story with Khaled, a young man
determined to succeed in life by all means, including collaboration with the Nazi régime. Myriam, at her mother’s insistence, experiences a forced marriage with an older man, a rich doctor who helps her family overcome poverty. In addition to depicting the fragility of friendship when exterior forces, especially war, challenge it, the film reveals what happens when the tradition of arranged marriages imposes its rules on the younger generation.

The displacement of the female characters in the film is dual in nature: physical and psychological. Myriam is displaced in relation to her friend because of her ethnicity and the treatment that she, as a Jew, receives, as well as in relation to her husband who is from a different social class and age group. When Myriam moves into her husband’s house, she feels like an outsider. During the bombardments she returns to her old home to find shelter against the German attacks. Nour, in her turn, feels estranged in her relationship with her fiancé Khaled because he has different beliefs and works for the collaborators and he sees Myriam as an enemy. Influenced by Khaled, Nour adopts for a while his anti-Semitic point of view. This leads to distancing in her friendship with Myriam. The sequence in which people take refuge in the bomb shelter shows Myriam and Nour as estranged characters. Although they find themselves in the crowd of refugees, they seem isolated from it because of the others’ disapproval of their cross-cultural relationship. Yet, their physical closeness (they hug and pray together) reveals a solid, unbreakable bond.
The focus on female characters and the way history affects their lives is a recurrent characteristic in Albou’s works. Her study of gender relations in the context of war and violence sheds new light on such complex traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust and colonialism. Albou creates strong female characters who are able to endure the challenges of war and male characters who are torn between love and honor on one side, and the compromises they are compelled to make, as providers for their families, in order to survive the harsh political conditions.

Overcoming the fact that the social and historical circumstances offer more possibilities of agency to men than to women, Albou empowers her female characters with qualities and desires which place them at the same level with men. Commenting on her characters’ complexity and choice of casting, Albou has declared in an interview that "the female protagonists in the film are all such strong, even rebellious characters.” This empowerment is made possible by the cinematic discourse, as Albou notes, “this is, after all, fiction which allows [her] to impose [her] will. Perhaps this can be viewed as an early form of feminism, and if it is, so much the better” (Brownstein 1). Albou’s film can be considered a ‘film engagé,’ a historical film, a diasporic film, but above all, it can be viewed as an expression of feminism due to the special attention it pays to women’s lives and experiences and the way it privileges female characters. She shows women expressing themselves and she is interested in revealing the restrictive lives that they lead in Tunisia during the war years.
Myriam and Nour embody opposite personalities who come together in perfect harmony despite their different cultural backgrounds. Alou emphasizes the difference between the two young women and the construction of their identities, while they experience love and sexual relations, but also the violence of war and an oppressive social code. Nour is in love, but she is biased by people such as Khaled, whose beliefs let him fall prey to the collaborationist influence. She is misguided by Khaled’s misinterpretations of the Koran; she starts reading it herself and as a revelation, she discovers truths she did not know before, such as the fact that the Koran recognizes other religions. Myriam is less submissive and more determined to act in order to become independent and follow her own rules in life, although unsuccessfully.

The realities of war contribute to a self discovery in both women; the differences that challenge their friendship and the look at each other through which they see the “Other” bring the revelation of an alterity, of which they were not aware before. Their differences become suddenly salient and are revealed more through Nour’s analysis of the situation. She expresses her frustrations as a Muslim girl to Myriam before Myriam’s life becomes restricted due to her being Jewish: “Why do you go to school when I don’t? Why do I wear a veil when you don’t? Why can you go out without being criticized when I always am? Why can’t I go out? Why?” Alou’s choices of casting reveal her desire to confound the two girls’ social and cultural positions and to show the interchangeability of the two characters. So she casts a non-Muslim actress, Lizzie Brocheré, in the role of Nour.
Another casting choice which sets the film apart from other films with similar thematic and formal focus is the fact that Albou plays the role of Tita, Myriam’s mother, herself. According to Naficy, “in the accented cinema, the author is in the text in multiple ways, traversing the spectrum of authorship theories, from prestructuralism to poststructuralism. It is thus that authors become discursive figures who inhabit and are constructed not only by history but also by their own filmic texts” (35). The presence of the director in the film is a diasporic characteristic of accented cinema, a signature of the author. In Albou’s case it is also a confirmation of the autobiographical element. Her position is special and brings value to the film by her cultural heritage and her director persona. The presence of the director in _Le Chant des mariées_ proves the value of the film as a vehicle for memory transmission. The fact that Albou comes from a family who has experienced the traumatic events of the Second World War adds validity and documentary value to her film. As she has declared in an interview, her presence as an actress in the film in the role of Tita is a tribute to her grandmother who was cast in a film in which she did not get to play because of the war.\(^{13}\) We find out from biographical information that Albou, who has Muslim friends, got the idea for "The Wedding Song" after reading the papers of her paternal grandfather, who was a German prisoner of war. During her research, Albou discovered that, during World

\(^{13}\) Curiel notes that “Albou, who is Jewish, grew up in France, but her family's roots are in Algeria, and she lived for a brief time in Tunisia. She researched the history of Jews and Muslims in North Africa, and says the teen-agers’ basic story in "The Wedding Song" is based on recollections of older North Africans she spoke with, and her desire to show that the religions can co-exist during war” (1).
War II, France stripped French citizenship from its Jewish citizens in Algeria. […] As a director and an actress working on her own projects, Albou, 41, is living a kind of dream life -- one that would have thrilled her paternal grandmother, Germaine Albou, who was raised in eastern Algeria, and had been tapped to act in a film 60 years ago. The film, which had her portraying an Egyptian, was canceled by World War II, ending her career before it started. The grandmother died when Albou was in her 20s and had just completed film school. Albou says their bond -- a deep friendship between women of different generations -- "encouraged me a lot," and helped transform her into the filmmaker she is today. (Curiel 1)

By making films, Albou not only continues a tradition in her family but she also gives voice to her family history, which explains some of her motivations, and her country’s tortured past.

The opening scene of the film starts with a song which is played several times in the background, later in the film. Against a dark background, we hear a little girl’s voice singing in a children’s game about the bride’s preparation for the wedding. The next shot shows the singer in a bright light and, in front of her, another little girl wearing a wedding dress. From this luminous frame, Albou cuts to a darker shot in which the two friends, Myriam and Nour, look without being seen through a prison-like window at a group of men passing in the street, going to a religious reunion. This gaze constructs a female point of view which will predominate throughout the entire film and, at the same time, it conveys the central preoccupation of the film: locating female subjectivity within the cinematic space. The image also expresses a fusion of contrasting characteristics: freedom and claustrophobia, desire and constraint, curiosity and timidity. This sequence sets the tone for intimacy between the two girls who are imagining their future, love lives, and marriage with excitement but also with fear. Their interaction is made of long
conversations but also affection and physical closeness. The camera very often catches them sitting down next to each other talking about religion, life, love, and war, hugging while laughing or crying. They have a reciprocal protective relationship with each other; they share intimate aspects of their relationships and comfort each other when going through hard moments. Myriam offers Nour gifts such as a bra and a bracelet knowing that she cannot afford to buy them.

The shots that follow, one showing a women’s party on the occasion of Nour’s engagement, the other filming a men’s party, set gender as an axis of differentiation in *The Wedding Song*. The men’s party gathers around a dance performed by a female dancer who entertains the watchers, and this is one of the very few shots of the film which constructs the gaze in the film as an eroticized male gaze. The camera here flirts with the belly dancer’s body and shows the future groom clapping and placing bills into her hip belt to express appreciation for her dance. A close-up reveals it to be a food ticket bearing the following printed message: “coupon d’achat pour 100g de pain, 1942.” The sequence which opens the film with the dance and continuing with a close-up of the ration coupon appears as a startling image that announces a historical setting which comes as a surprise and cannot be foreseen at the beginning of the film. Next, a rough cut brings on screen a black-and-white newsreel showing a picture of Hitler and his SS general, Himmler, shaking hands with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and reviewing Nazi troops. We hear Hitler give a speech, and then the Mufti’s voice through a radio broadcast in his efforts to recruit Muslims for the SS. These apparently unconnected
sequences come together to emphasize how social and historical conditions regulate women’s lives. These shots also underline the main concerns of the film: gender awareness and history. They also show a dominant point of view as a perspective which will be deconstructed and reversed during the rest of the film which privileges a female perspective and gendered narrative that focuses on the way women lived and saw the war. In an interview, Albou declares:

La guerre est vécue du point de vue féminin, c’est à dire perçue de l’intérieur des maisons (par la fenêtre) et lors des rares sorties en ville. En plus, j’aime filmer l’enfermement, physique et psychologique. Je me suis demandé : « Qu’est-ce que des femmes qui restent chez elles toute la journée perçoivent de la guerre ? Des bribes de mots et d’images, des annonces radios, des voix de soldats, des coups de feu »… On a beaucoup travaillé au son cette présence allemande ainsi que les bombardements. D’ailleurs, j’ai vécu personnellement dans des endroits où il y avait des bombardements lointains et c’est vrai que ça existe beaucoup plus au son… (Interview 1)

The filmmaker is interested in images as well as sounds which can render realistically the effects of war but also the everyday life of men and women. The little girls’ song repeated throughout the film, the dances and songs performed by women in the sequences analyzed above synthesize another element of accented cinema. As Naficy remarks, accented films “equally stress the oral, the vocal, and the musical – that is, accents, intonations, voices, music, and songs, which also demarcate individual and collective identities” (24). Besides marking the accented differences, in Le Chant des mariées, all the songs and dances come together to reveal a female world beyond stereotypes. In the film, they are all performed by women. During the women’s party which celebrated Nour’s engagement, the counterpart of the belly dancing performed in the men’s party is
a woman disguised as a man, wearing a hat and a coat and playing the role of the party’s mistress of ceremonies. This female drag queen whom Albou ‘brings on stage’ reveals to spectators, at the same time, the forbidden character of any male dancer’s intrusion in a women’s party and the desire of reversing gender roles in Muslim female culture. The female celebration comes as a counterpart to the male party: it centers on a woman disguised as a man, it constructs a female gaze, it is more lively and vibrant, and offers women the occasion to express themselves through music and dance, thus creating a separate, protective universe.

The most emblematic sequence of the film and, at the same time, the most powerful and expressive, the depilation scene, is introduced by the words of Tita, who bows very apologetically and submissively, kisses the future groom’s hand, thanks him, and asks: “How would you like the bride? Oriental or European style?” The marriage is seen very much through a physical lens; in traditional Muslim culture the female body is the property of men. The preparation for the marriage is depicted by Albou as almost a sacrifice for the young woman.

The scene of Myriam’s preparation for the wedding, of the depilation of her body, is shot on a note of perfect female intimacy. The Muslim cultural tradition requests that the future bride be clean for the wedding night. Body hairs are considered unclean. Women including the mother of the future bride assist and watch the ritual during which other women sing and perform dances. The dances and songs confer to the depilation scene a performative character as well. A theatrical component is generated and
reinforced by the presence of the women who form the ‘audience.’ The camera moves between the women in the room and the two girls who seem to be ‘on stage.’ Myriam’s suffering contrasts with the joy and the cheerfulness around her.

The depilation sequence plays on duration as a means of expression. It is made of extremely long shots that capture the intensity of the physical pain that Myriam endures and also the emotional challenge of her having to accept this sacrificial treatment against her will. The music and the women’s voices cover Miriam’s cries and sighs. Nour, present at her side throughout the entire waxing operation, comforts Myriam. Several close-ups show Nour holding Myriam’s hand or her head in a gesture of deep connection and understanding of what her friend is experiencing. Also with a sense of curiosity when she observes her best friend’s naked body, the camera captures her exploring it as if it were her own body, with a sense of self-discovery, fear, and fascination. Through using extreme close-ups of the waxing of Myriam’s pubic hair and of her intimate body parts, Albou succeeds in exploring and rendering with sensitivity, grace, but also vibrancy, female intimacy: "The wax scene is something that has never been shown in a movie before," says Albou […]. The Wedding Song is a chance to offer the audience a new look at what is femininity" (Curiel 1). Albou also succeeds in depicting these teenagers’ limited universe, their becoming women through painful experiences.

What adds complexity to Albou’s filming is that although the purpose of this aesthetic ritual is destined to a heterosexual sexual experience, the gaze remains feminine, while the look at the female body is eroticized. The authorial perspective
privileges a woman’s point of view not only because the director is a woman, but also because the gaze in the film is predominantly a female perspective. The male gaze in the film is rarely used. In an interview, Albou declared that “c’est un film féminin parce que déjà, je suis une femme et j’ai un regard féminin sur l’adolescence, sur la féminité. […] c’est un regard féminin, de la jeune fille, c’est vrai qu’il n’y a pas de regard masculin dans le film” (Universcine 1). In *Le Chant des mariées* Albou emphasizes the look and voyeuristic structures of seeing. She creates detailed shots and extreme close-ups of female bodies, the gaze is constructed through the look of the two girls at each other’s bodies in the hammam. Male voyeurism, traditionally omnipresent in mainstream cinema, is inverted in the sequence in which Myriam watches with extreme curiosity the love-making and defloration scene between Nour and Khaled.

The juxtaposition of the depilation sequence with the scene of aggression which shows German soldiers entering Myriam’s house by force has the double effect of augmenting the violent note of the former but also of adding more fragility to its atmosphere by reinforcing the idea of the intimacy of an exclusively feminine space which becomes in fact fragile and exposed to violence. In *Le Chant des mariées*, the space of the house is over feminized, it is conferred over protective characteristics against which Myriam reacts several times during the film. On the other hand, this space fails to protect Myriam and Tita. By showing the soldiers’ intrusion, Albou is subtly suggesting defloration.
In *Le Chant des mariées* women are seen mostly in private spaces suggesting feminine intimacy, but also a feeling of claustrophobia. The film pays close attention to the cultural and social spaces that women have created for themselves in such restrictive, traditional societies, like the *hammams*. We notice a constant preoccupation with the female body within this space. In the scene of the *hammam*, the bath becomes a realm of female friendship and solidarity.

Albou’s camera enters a female world full of pleasure, sensuality, and magic. Albou makes the female body visible; what is striking is the nudity that the spectator is not accustomed to seeing. In most films when Arab women are represented on screen, they appear veiled. Showing the Muslim female body not only without a veil but in all its intimacy constitutes a shocking image, not only for the traditional spectator, but also for the modern one. It stands in a way for a re-appropriation by women of their own bodies which by Muslim law do not belong to them. This overrepresentation of female nudity within one frame and the female gaze in this film constitute innovative cinematic elements.

In the same way as in *La Petite Jérusalem*, in *Le Chant des mariées* the tactile sense plays a significant role in expressing an intimate communication between Myriam and Nour. There is almost a symbiosis between the two young women’s physiques; the shots in which they both appear show them within the same frame, very close to each other. Very often their bodies seem to merge into one, for instance in the two key scenes which are illustrative of the way the haptic is represented. During the soldiers’ raid at the
hammam and in the closing scene taking place in the shelter after the bombing, the two girls hold each other and sing a prayer song; this is emblematic for the way in which the teenagers’ closeness is portrayed.

The scene in which the familiar space of the hammam where female nudity prevails, invaded by soldiers, constitutes a metaphor for the fragility of women’s situation during war when they are exposed to aggression. This metaphor is taken even further in the sequence of the house raid. Here SS soldiers including Khaled break into Tita’s house in search of Myriam who escapes by hiding under the bed in which her mother is sitting. The soldiers’ faces are not filmed; the whole scene is shot as seen through Myriam’s eyes who is looking through Tita’s legs from under the bed. The mother is interrogated and beaten. As Naficy remarks, in accented cinema the integrity of the body is put into doubt, “the body’s integrity, requiring a coincidence of inside and outside, is threatened, as a result of which it may be felt to be separated, collapsed, fractured, eviscerated, or pithed” (28). At a metaphorical level of meaning, as in other films about war, in Albou’s film the wholeness of the female body is shown as being jeopardized by the intrusion of exterior, violent forces which originate very often in the historical and political situation.

The fact that Nour saves Myriam’s life expresses a surpassing of ethnic barriers and the victory of friendship over war. This idealistic interpretation of the hammam scene constitutes a message of peace for viewers at the present time. Hope emerges from these dramatic sequences and the trauma of war and occupation which catalyzed inter-ethnic conflicts inspires tolerance and understanding. Due to the reconciling message suggested
by the way in which Albou succeeds in portraying the Other not only vis-à-vis the colonizer but also in relation to another ethnic group, film critics have called *Le Chant des mariées* an “ode to tolerance,” as it inspires respect and understanding of race and cultural differences at the present time.\(^{14}\) By depicting the friendship of two young women from different, competitive cultural backgrounds, Albou succeeds in personifying the convergence of the two types of memory, of the Holocaust and colonialism that she brings together as a means to integrate her country’s history within the larger Holocaust and colonial history.

While bearing the theme of the entire film, the recurrence of the wedding song, which is first performed by the little girls in the beginning of the film, is a symbol of the memory which is transmitted orally throughout generations. Similarly to the concept of *multidirectional memory* that Michael Rothberg created, bringing together, for the first time, the memories of the two historical events that have always been in competition with each other, a “competition of victimization” as he describes it, in Albou’s *Le Chant des mariées*, the memory of the Holocaust facilitates the understanding and recollection of the colonial past. Rothberg’s theory of *multidirectional memory* argues that “far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition, the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories – some of them predating the Nazi genocide, such as slavery, and others

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\(^{14}\) Albou declares: “Both Muslim and Jewish audiences have praised the movie. After a screening this month in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, an Albanian Muslim woman told Albou that she "recognized herself in the characters - that it's a message of peace," Albou says. "Some people have said the film is too romantic - that it (the relationship between Jewish and Muslim friends) can't exist" (Interview 2).
In his book, Rothberg explains how multidirectional memory as a concept can be extended to other historical events such as colonialism and slavery. By applying Rothberg’s theory, it can be demonstrated that the memories of the Holocaust and colonialism, rather than overshadowing each other or competing for historical uniqueness, enlighten our understanding of both. Although more often shown as politically contrasting and geographically distant, in Albou’s film they converge. Even if the two events are seen by historians so different, they both occurred from the same desire: the desire of domination and expansion.
Besides her interest in personal and collective history, in the majority of her works, Albou states her preoccupation with women’s roles and gender relations in the context of a restrictive and traumatic historical event which limits individual freedom. *Mon pays m’a quitté (My Country Left Me)*, a documentary made by Albou in 1995, explores the culture shock that a family of Mizrahi Jews who emigrated to France experienced and the consequences of the Israeli-Arab conflict. The documentary depicts different ways in which generations define their identity in relation to their place of origin, to France, and to the influence of the Arab and Judaic cultures on their lives. It includes a trip to the homeland, Tunisia, by three generations of Jews.

Albou’s short film, *Aïd El Kébir*, and her first novel, *La Grande fête* (2010), depict women’s lives in Algeria in the 1990s, during the civil war between the army and the Islamic groups who were terrorizing the population. The crisis in both works is political and historical, but also social. Albou makes this very clear in her book which tells the story of an impossible love with serious repercussions on the couple. The restrictions imposed by religion and societal rules are difficult on men and even more so, on women.\(^{15}\)

The autobiographical note in this work is a major element, since Albou was born and lived in Algeria before moving to France. Her interest in literature and specifically in

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\(^{15}\) Albou declares in an interview: “Dans les pays arabes, une femme a du mal à vivre seule. Il faut qu’elle ait un père, un protecteur. En plus, c’est le code de la famille : une femme a besoin d’un tuteur. Par exemple, elle ne peut pas voyager seule. Tous ces pays iront beaucoup mieux lorsque les femmes seront libres” (Interview 5).
literature about the past manifested itself with her written adaptation (2007) of Marguerite Duras’ work *La Douleur*, a semi-autobiographical and fictional work in which Duras recounts her experiences during the Nazi occupation in France. For this written adaptation, Albou won the Grand Prix for best screenwriter in 2008, although the corresponding film has never been made. Critics argue that it is not fortuitous that Albou has adapted a work belonging to the author of *Hiroshima mon amour*, which treats such topics as war memory and trauma. These tropes appear and are reiterated throughout Albou’s oeuvre. The important contribution that Albou brings to French-speaking cinema and literature is, among others, the fact that she addresses the historical drama of war and inter-ethnic conflicts from a female perspective and in the socio-geographic context of French-speaking Africa.

The book *La Grande fête* reiterates the subject of Albou’s short fiction film made in 1998, *Aïd El Kébir*, shot in Algeria, which won the Grand Prix at the Clermont-Ferrand film festival in 1998. The story of the book is the rewriting of the film plot. The film tells the story of a Muslim family who is getting ready for Aïd El Kébir, the feast of sacrifice in a country in crisis. The political situation in Algeria was a precarious one in 1998. There were bomb attacks, which resulted in massacres of hundreds of innocent people, believed to be organized by the Armed Islamic Group, a radical Islamist group.

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which committed numerous murders. These attacks took place during the Ramadan and
media sources recounted stories of many girls having disappeared after the attacks.

Aïd El Kébir, also called ‘la Grande fête’ (the Great Feast/Festival), is one of the
most important Muslim holidays. On this day, the Muslim tradition in Algeria requires
that every family sacrifice a sheep. The meat is divided into three shares: one for the
family, one for the poor, and the third for neighbors and friends. This takes place in order
to commemorate the sacrifice that God asked from Abraham, to sacrifice his son, as a
proof of his faith. Seeing Abraham’s willingness to carry out this sacrifice, God allowed
him to slaughter a lamb in place of his beloved son. This event marks the end of the
pilgrimage to Mecca. This holiday is also called ‘la Fête du sacrifice’ (‘the sacrifice
feast/festival’) and it takes place every year during the last month of the Muslim calendar
(very often in November). On this day, people pray, exchange greetings with each other,
and offer gifts to both Muslim and non-Muslim friends. It is also an occasion to reunite
with family and relatives and to share food with people in need. Muslims dress in their
finest clothes and go to the mosque to pray. The signification of this celebration is
sacrifice, commitment, and obedience to God.

The book tells the story of Hanifa, a young woman who secretly loves her
brother-in-law, Selim. Her father who is very sick has only one desire: that his daughter
gets married. Hanifa becomes pregnant, gives birth alone on the beach, and gets rid of the
baby by abandoning him on the seashore, prey to the waves, the seabirds, and whoever
passes by. This cruel development is presented by Albou as the only option that Hanifa
has since in Muslim society adultery is punished very seriously. Hanifa’s second pregnancy ends with her secret move to France where her other sister helps her give birth and raise her little girl.

Albou uses free indirect discourse in a number of chapters combined with first-person narration in other chapters in order to render Hanifa’s thoughts and feelings. The change from one narrative style to another takes place suddenly, as if the writer intended to separate Hanifa’s world from the tableau of the rest of Algerian society, to show her isolation. This type of partition, similar to a rough cut in film, genuinely brings to our attention the relationship with Albou’s short film *Aid El Kébir* on which the book is based, and reminds us that Albou is primarily a filmmaker. The short film, differing from the book, shows only the key moments of the same plot: the celebration of the Great Feast, the dying father’s wish, and the heroine’s choice of love over honor. The book offers a broader image of Algerian society and reiterates the idea of displacement seen as an evasion from a limiting space.

If diasporic writings most often represent or imagine homeland as an idyllic place, while exile is seen as a temporary solution for homelessness, as a confining surrogate of home, Albou’s novel constructs the image of Algeria as an enclosure, a limiting and constrictive space. The fragment of the book in which a lamb, purchased in order to be sacrificed on the day of the “Great Feast,” gets away and runs in the streets, being chased and finally caught by men, represents a metaphor for the forced ‘sacrifice’ and for
homeland as prison and as a community which reprimands and forces its members to follow strict religious rules:

Hanifa redoutait chaque fois ce moment du sacrifice: elle se sentait lésée parce que le fils sauvé qu’on promettait à Ibrahim à la place du mouton ne venait jamais. A la place, il n’y avait jamais la vie mais seulement la répétition absurde de la même absence. Chaque année, elle se demandait à quoi servait tout cela et pourquoi elle, comme beaucoup d’autres femmes, avait dû sacrifier son enfant sans que Dieu leur vienne en aide. (108)

Religion fails to offer Hanifa answers to her existential questions. The big absence of a sign that would acknowledge the worthiness of the religious and personal sacrifice causes her disappointment. The painful sacrifice that she, as a woman and a mother, had to make in order to be able to lead a normal life without the family’s and community’s reprimand still does not guarantee her freedom. Hanifa still has to follow her father’s will at his deathbed, that she get married in order to ‘wash away the shame’ of her family and her own and to attain happiness:

Les yeux fixes de son père continuent de soutenir cette dernière demande. Il ne lui a pas parlé depuis. Il la regarde et ses yeux lui ordonnent d’obéir. Il le veut pour moi, pour mon bonheur, mais moi, j’ai vécu trop de choses pour être simplement heureuse. Il veut que j’aie une vie de femme respectable pour faire taire les rumeurs qui ont sali le nom de notre famille. Il veut faire oublier ma faute, et je dois pour cela la réparer car elle poursuivra notre nom même après sa mort. Il me dit avec ses yeux qu’il souffre physiquement. Il me regarde et il me dit encore avec ses yeux qu’il souffre moralement car je ne me suis pas encore mariée. (74)

The disconnect between Hanifa’s desires and her father’s visions of happiness and fulfillment speaks of a patriarchal system of control which exerts its coercive principles through the sense of guilt, honor, and pride. Hanifa’s induced feeling of sin is counteracted in the book by the heroine’s desire to leave Algeria and explore her
potential to be happy in a society free of such strict rules. Hanifa is interested in the world around her from the perspective of a woman who aspires to a knowledge superior to the one to which she now has access. She becomes more aware every day of aspects that expand her universe. Albou’s interest in picturing the female body and centering her narrative on women’s experiences is expressed by the way she presents Hanifa’s fascination with watching the women’s bodies at the *hammam*:

Dans le bain, les femmes n’étaient jamais complètement nues. Elles étaient pudiquement recouvertes d’une *fouta* puis, à mesure que les heures passaient, le tissu cédait sous la chaleur, s’imprégnait d’humidité et collait à la peau. Hanifa ne pouvait alors s’empêcher de regarder leurs corps. Certaines parties non dissimulées par les *foutas* la fascinaient. Entre les plis du tissu elle pouvait distinguer leurs chevilles solidement plantées, leurs mollets gonflés, craquelés de veines et de tâches bleues comme des marques de coups. […] Puis une métamorphose survenait lorsqu’elles entraient dans la salle chaude, inondée d’une vapeur épaisse blanche et opaque : ces femmes obèses devenaient soudain déesses de marbre. L’épaisseur de la vapeur effaçait les aspérités de leur corps qui semblait alors lisse et dense comme celui d’un bébé ou d’une statue de pierre. (46)

The aspects which evidently strike the reader in this passage are Hanifa’s curiosity and the monumentality of the portraits that Albou creates through the heroine’s eyes. The naked bodies revealed through the vapor clouds and under the transparent *foutas* are stripped of their signs of aging. They are beautifully and graciously transformed into ‘stone statues’ and ‘marble goddesses,’ the goddesses of a secret world in which no outside eye or camera would be allowed to penetrate.

Through the act of painting these portraits through Hanifa’s observant look, Albou’s accomplishment becomes twofold. On the one hand, she constructs a female point of view on the Algerian female universe of the 1990s from the inside, as she has
perceived it while living there. On the other hand, she depicts a world which interdicts its
members to explore and openly talk about the naked body and physical desire, a world
which refuses to recognize physical attraction and passion. It is a society in which
arranged marriages make Hanifa’s relationship with the man she loves impossible and
almost fatal for her. The only solution for her is to leave the country, to join her sister,
and start a new life in France.

The neighborhood of the city in the proximity of Paris in which Hanifa finds a
protective home offers her the occasion to discover elements of her own culture, but also
to experience a progressive femininity to which she was aspiring while in Algeria. She
adjusts to a multicultural society in the same way as her elder sister, whose change of
appearance and lifestyle reflects the way her living in France has opened new horizons
for her:

Très vite, Hanifa s’est habituée au quartier. Elle y a retrouvé certaines
habitudes, presque le même pain, la même odeur de café. Il y a aussi des
femmes qui portent le foulard, comme elle. Sa sœur veut qu’elle l’enlève
mais pour l’instant, Hanifa ne se sent pas prête. Elles sont très différentes.
Elles ne s’étaient vues depuis longtemps et Hanifa a eu du mal à la
reconnaître. Elle a beaucoup changé. Elle ressemble un peu aux femmes
d’ici. Toute cette cité pourrait faire penser à un village, sauf que les
Arabes viennent de partout. Elle peut rencontrer des Marocains et des
Tunisiens. Cela lui ouvre d’autres horizons. Elle aurait aussi aimé
rencontrer des Français comme le directeur du centre culturel mais ils
n’habitent pas dans le quartier de sa sœur. Il faut aller en ville, à Paris,
prendre un train spécial. (164)

The same way as Laura in La Petite Jérusalem, Hanifa remains far from the city
of Paris. Her adjustment has just begun and the closeness to the city makes her want to
become different. She welcomes with enthusiasm the completely new world around her,
although at the moment she is still not ready for the great change; she notices the cultural differences. To counteract Laura’s sense of painful distancing from community and family, Hanifa’s experience of France becomes a positive one. In her book, Albou places her character in a surrogate home, a better one in which elements of her own culture and French aspects intermingle to create a sense of a possible happy cohabitation of cultures in France.

For Karin Albou, to write *La Grande fête* means a return to Algeria, the country where she was born and where she lived for a while. Albou is preoccupied with women’s role in a society where modern life has not totally been adopted yet, and where the female body is still veiled and in men’s possession. She centers the narrative and the message on Algerian women and their lives as well as their difficulties in their own country and experiences of displacement and integration into a different culture.

In *La Petite Jérusalem*, as well as in her other films such as *Le Chant des mariées* and her first novel, *La Grande Fête*, Karin Albou creates a rereading of femininity by privileging the analysis of female protagonists, of relationships between mother and daughter, and friendship and solidarity among women. The innovative images that she creates compete in framing a complex female universe and in showing how female protagonists in these works see and define themselves as “the immigrant others” in the historical, religious, and social context of contemporary French society.

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17 Albou confesses : “Je me suis inspirée d’amies qui étaient dans le milieu populaire. Quand je vivais dans une famille en Tunisie, on m’invitait pour les fêtes musulmanes. J’ai vécu tout ça de près” (Interview 20).
While portraying female subjectivity from a feminist point of view, as the filmmaker herself has argued, Albou succeeds in her works in rendering the realm of the confined feminine space, the representation of women in relation to patriarchal tradition, successful and, sometimes less so at negotiating their autonomy and identity. She achieves a new way of filming women in a historical context. At the thematic level, her accomplishment is unique: she not only portrays gender relations in the context of war, women’s experiences, female friendship, but also examines solidarity during traumatic historical events, while surpassing barriers of inter-ethnic conflict. At the formal level, Albou succeeds in creating a cinematic space that reveals a dialogue between female perspective and history.
CHAPTER FOUR
FROM NOUS TO JE:
COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND MULTIETHNIC FEMININITY IN FILMS BY
YAMINA BENGUIGUI, GERALDINE NAKACHE, AND HERVE MIMRAN

The past two decades have witnessed striking shifts in the way in which French people—artists, scholars, and ordinary citizens—think about and represent the colonial moments of their nation’s history. As part of this reassessment project, French women filmmakers are calling into question France’s ambivalent relationship to its colonial past in cinematic projects that focalize first-person, introspective autobiographical narratives.

Catherine Portuges (81)

According to Carrie Tarr, “one of the most significant developments in Beur cinema has been the exploration of the histories of the parents’ generation, breaking the silence about the legacy of France’s colonization of the Maghreb and working towards the restoration of a collective memory which would give the Beurs a coherent identity and legitimate their presence in France” (Maghrebi-French 27). By going beyond classifications such as beur filmmaking and banlieue cinema, categories which would encompass all the films that will be treated in this chapter, I would like to address the issue of the significance of memory and cultural creation in ethnic women’s agency
towards integration in the French society and their resistance to already established cultural models.

I will look at cinema that stages the representation of history, memory, and family through the lens of ethnicity, race, class, and gender. This type of cinema is accomplished through a woman’s point of view which destabilizes traditional theories of race and gender. I demonstrate that the films studied in the current chapter attempt to deconstruct Eurocentric views which neglect or proclaim cultural and gender differences as easily assimilable, and, by appealing to collective and personal memory, these films accomplish what Gayatri Spivak calls “alternate storying” (4) or women’s rewriting of history. The filmmakers that I study in this chapter seek to question how women negotiate between identity and already created images, conservative standards, and previously established patriarchal norms.

*Beur* filmmakers have alternated stages such as the representation of the *nous*, the collectivity and its history, with the centering of their cinematic narratives on the *je*, on the ethnic subject. For instance, Yamina Benguigui moves from a perspective based on memory and the return to the past in films such as *Mémoires d’immigrés* and *Inch’ Allah Dimanche* to an outlook focusing on the present in *Le Plafond de verre (The Glass Ceiling)* and in her more recent TV series *Aïcha*. Thus she inscribes her work within a tendency in the cinema of the last few decades in France to show personal experiences of integration of the first and especially second generation Maghrebian immigrants, with a
particular attention paid to women’s desire to overcome the status of ‘the other’ in society.

I will start this chapter by analyzing Yamina Benguigui’s *Mémoires d’immigrés, l’héritage maghrébin* (Immigrant Memories [1997]), in order to show the point of departure of Benguigui’s work, collective immigrant memory, and I will continue with *Aïcha* (2009), and *Aïcha, job à tout prix* (*Aïcha, A Job At All Costs* [2010]) as a study of the filmmaker’s evolution to a cinematography which privileges the “je” and a female point of view. In addition, for the purpose of analyzing multiethnic femininity and its representations I will extend my study to the film *Tout ce qui brille* (*All That Shines* [2010]) by Géraldine Nakache and Hervé Mimran, two of the emerging young talents of the cinema in France.

These films strive to create spaces of negotiation between female individual desire and the images and expectations that others have created for these women. The demands of these others create an imperative to represent ethnic, cultural, and gender difference as a way of finding a place in society. These works foreground issues of difference as ways to bring to the front line matters such as racism and discrimination but also methods to solve them. I will analyze how conflicts between feminist values and the feminine body, feminism and femininity, tradition/history and modernism, and family and individualism are resolved by envisioning difference as social relation, subjectivity, and identity.
Filmmaker, producer, and writer Yamina Benguigui is the creator of films dedicated to the exploration of the immigrant heritage in France, the celebration of cultural diversity and the protection of human rights. Born in Lille, France, into a family of Kabyle origin who immigrated from Algeria in the 1950s, she is one of the first filmmakers in France to recount the exile and rootlessness of Maghrebian people and to give voice to their individual and collective history.

Benguigui has won numerous awards at international film festivals. She received the *Prix de la Paix* in Florence for the ensemble of her œuvre (2003) and she is *Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur* and *Officier des Arts et des Lettres*. In her documentaries, short films and features, her series, and her TV shows, among which *Mémoires d’immigrés, l’héritage maghrébin* (*Immigrant Memories, the Maghrebian Heritage* [1998]), *Le Jardin parfumé* (*The Perfumed Garden* [2000]), *Inch’Allah Dimanche* (2001), *Femmes d’Islam* (*Women of Islam* [1994]), *Le Plafond de verre* (*The Glass Ceiling* [2004]), *Les Défricheurs* (*The Clearers* [2006]), *9/3 Mémoire d’un territoire* (*9/3 Memory of a Territory* [2008]), *Aïcha* (2009), and *Aïcha, job à tout prix* (*Aicha, A Job at All Costs* [2010]), the filmmaker takes aspects from the life of generations of Maghrebian immigrants in France and reveals their communal past as well as their culture.

Benguigui is also interested in showing how women have lived the experience of immigration and integration in the present French multicultural society. For instance, in her film, *Mémoires d’immigrés*, a tripartite documentary, *Les pères / Les mères / Les enfants*, she tries to restore the memory of Maghrebian immigrants by not only
recounting the diasporic experience of men but also of women. *Inch 'Allah Dimanche*, a full-length feature film which was awarded 27 prizes, focuses on the displacement of women from Maghreb to France in order to rejoin their husbands. It centers on a female protagonist and her struggle to adjust to a new, foreign place. The daughter-mother relationship and their estrangement symbolize the immigrant’s exile and removal from the homeland and traditional culture.

In *Mémoires d’immigrés* memory serves as a vehicle for connecting past and present and for recuperating or reconstructing identity. Benguigui collects testimonies on the members of the North African diaspora who are looking for new homes while in exile. By reviving and constructing a memory, the filmmaker finds a place for her parents’ generation and her own generation in history. Yamina Benguigui has discussed her strong connection with the people about whom she made her film, about her autobiographical interest, and has explained very often in interviews her intentions when creating the film *Mémoires d'immigrés*.

Before Benguigui’s films were made, immigrant history had been a taboo topic not only in French families but also in Maghrebian families living in France. The filmmaker underlines the need to tell the parents’ stories, to acknowledge the repressed past, and to record the memories so that new History can be written accordingly:

Je voulais redonner de la dignité à ces immigrés Maghrébins dont on a oublié le passé et les conditions dans lesquelles ils ont été accueillis en France. Je suis née ici, issue de parents algériens. Mes parents, et tous ceux des enfants des banlieues, des beurs comme on dit, sont toujours
restés dans l'ombre. Jamais on ne les a laissés s'exprimer sur leur passé. Dans ma famille, il y avait quelque chose de honteux à parler de cette immigration. De ce fait, on se taisait. Et nous, enfants d'immigrés, ne savons rien de la réalité. L'ignorance est dangereuse. Il faut retrouver notre histoire pour mieux comprendre notre double culture, et la faire connaître aussi aux Français de souche. (55)

The film Mémoires... attempts to go back into the past in order to make visible and interpret the role of immigrants in French history so that they are able to integrate into the present. According to Dumerlat, “for a collective memory to emerge, individual recollections must necessarily be objectivized by a process of naming, fixed in writing, but also continuously recalled by monuments and other forms of commemoration” (173). Thus, by reviving and constructing a memory, Benguigui finds a place for her parents’ generation and her own generation in History.

Benguigui’s function as a ‘memory entrepreneuse’ is described by Dumerlat as being “reinforced by the fact that, on an individual level, her documentary allowed her to give meaning to her own experiences” (173). The creation of the film is not only a project of collective memory reconstruction but also a collective autobiography as well as a cultural heritage for the generations to come. According to Dumerlat, the film is a means by which Benguigui reconnects with her father with whom she hadn’t spoken since she was eighteen because of having broken his traditional rules about marriage (173). While reconciling generations, Mémoires also operates as a reconciliation of the immigrants with the host country. This aspect plays a central role in the North African immigrants’
search for an identity and in their struggle to integrate into French society, to “create roots” for themselves and for their children.

These efforts toward integration become clear in the stories of immigrant parents. For instance, their desire to remain in France is almost unanimous. In the film, one of the interviewed mothers, Aldjia Bouachera, admits that at the beginning, she was “complètement dépaysée” in France. But now, she appreciates her freedom and she wants to settle here: “Je vais mourir ici.” Yamina Baba Aissa remembers her journey and move to Paris with her parents, when she was young, and their efforts to recreate a “home space”: “C’était un petit village reconstitué, l’Algérie. But after growing up, she feels at home in France: “En tant qu’immigrée, je ne me sens pas immigrée.” Zohrra Flissi declares, with a tone of confidence and of belongingness to Frenchness that “Toute femme algérienne comme moi se sent chez elle à Paris.” Unlike other displacement stories, these declarations represent a break with the “mythe du retour” (Dumerlat 176). These immigrants made a choice: to stay, to live and to raise their children in France. Some of the interviewees seem to have a strong desire to talk about their experiences and feelings, they look straight into the camera and the spectators can sense their hope that these ideas be shared. A certain ease can be felt as well, a familiarity due to the informal manner in which they are being filmed. Many of them are filmed in their homes, others outside, in the streets.

Benguigui’s film not only traces the parents’ memories but it also records their children’s individual testimonies. Thus, the documentary represents a form of declaration
of identity for both categories, Maghrebi immigrants and beurs. The beur girl interviewed in Paris talks about her struggles between the traditional cultural customs imposed by her parents at home and the fact of her being raised among French children, going to a French school, and having French friends. She grew up like French girls but there are still family constraints that prevent her from being totally free: “si je me marie, je me marie avec un frère de chez moi, un Algérien.” At this moment the camera moves from a medium shot to a long shot showing her male classmates. The camera succeeds in capturing the tension of the discussion and the powerful emotion of the confession. She continues: “à cause de mes parents” (Benguigui, film). In spite of the fact that Mémoires is a documentary, the camera movements succeed in creating an authorial signature even if Benguigui’s editing erased her own presence from the film. The tracking shot showing places during the breaks between the interviews is accompanied by music in a very suggestive way. When showing the shantytowns, Benguigui plays a French song and vice-versa, when we see images from downtown Paris, images of Frenchness like the Eiffel tower, the Seine, the cafés, we hear a song in Arabic. The effect created is one suggesting mobility, cultural exchanges, and common memories.

The value as historical document of the experience of diaspora and of displacement of the North African immigrants can also be found in Yamina Benguigui’s book Mémoires d’immigrés: l’héritage maghrébin (1997). Through a search for identity, personal as well as collective, Benguigui tries to reconstruct the memory of the North Africans in France. Besides giving an exact transcription of the film which makes the interviewees’ messages more accessible to the public through the printed medium, the
book *Mémoires* also comprises the filmmaker’s introduction, comments, and explanations. The book was written after the film was made and renders the interviews taken by Benguigui and the central questions of the documentary: “Qui sommes-nous aujourd’hui? Des immigrés? Non! Des enfants d’immigrés? Des Français d’origine étrangère? Des musulmans?” (10). The answers to these questions remain probably unknown or partially unknown to the reader but the most important achievement of Benguigui’s work is that it succeeds in reconstructing a collective memory of the exiled North African population in France by recording their individual memories which represent a part of their history and of the history of France.

Benguigui may be one of the first artists in France to tell the Maghrebian immigrant women’s story. Other previous immigrant stories, for instance in literature, *La Plus haute des solitudes* (The Highest Solitude) (1977) by Tahar Ben Jelloun and *Les Boucs* (1955) (The Goats) by Driss Chraibi focus mostly on Maghrebian immigrant male stories in France. Her book, *Mémoires*, has been recently adapted into a historical graphic novel entitled *Les Mohamed* (The Mohamed) (2011) by Jérôme Ruillier. Illustrative of how intensely the trauma of colonialism reverberates through generations, *Les Mohamed* can be compared to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986, 1991), a graphic novel in two volumes telling the story of Jews under the Nazi occupation and of the trauma of the Holocaust. In a similar way, Ruillier’s graphic novel accomplishes a work of art by using animals in order to originally render the complicated postcolonial relations.
The question of integration from a female point of view is addressed in the second part of the film, *Les Mères*. Referring to this section of *Mémoires*, Benguigui confesses in an interview: “Pour moi, d’un point de vue personnel, artistique et féminin, il est important que les femmes d’origine maghrébine issues de la deuxième, troisième génération puissent, et je pense en particulier aux auteures, aux écrivaines et aussi aux cinéastes, s’emparer de ces questions-là. Le cinéma issu de l’immigration au féminin démarre avec nous” (*Entretien* 5). Through her work, Beguigui initiated a new tradition, a new way of making film in France by giving voice to a section of the population that had been underrepresented in this medium. Her personal history, as well as her artistic persona is deeply embedded in her work. We find echoes of her father’s and mother’s history in *Mémoires* as well as in her fiction film *Inch’ Allah Dimanche* which comes as a more personal story of the immigrant self. In an interview in which she talks about *Inch’ Allah*, Benguigui declares that “[L]e film relate les balbutiements de l’émancipation des femmes maghrébines en France, et dévoile leur trauma d’exilées forcées. Le personnage de Zouina ressemble à ma mère, qui a porté comme un fardeau la honte de l’exil, et connu la profonde solitude et l’enfermement…” (*Télérama* 46). Although the filmmaker elided her interventions in the film *Mémoires* through editing, her presence can be sensed by the spectators because the people interviewed talk with ease and confidence, they are telling their story to someone who has lived a similar experience to theirs. Moreover, the film initiated an epistolary dialogue between the spectators and Benguigui. People with
similar stories, after having seen the documentary, wrote letters to Benguigui in which they describe their own and their families’ experiences of immigration. 18

The *regroupement familial* (family reunification), which made it possible for Maghrebian women and their children to join their husbands in France, resulted in a massive female migration from Francophone Africa. The first to come to France from Maghreb as a work force for the reconstruction of the economy, were men, during the two decades after WWII. In the 1970s the women and children started to arrive. This family reunification was regulated by a law passed in 1976, by the President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, created as a measure to legalize this immigration of women of Maghrebian origins who came to France to reunite with their husbands. The women who moved to France had to face challenges greater than they had imagined. The female component of the Maghrebian immigration to France is an essential part of the process of integration. Their arrival and settlement write a new page in History. Benguigui states:


[P]our moi, m’intéresser à l’immigration des femmes dans toute l’histoire de l’immigration représente un des rouages les plus importants, un rouage qui inverse le système. Les gens se retrouvent à se dire “on est né ici, on va aller là-bas”. Un questionnement se pose: où on allait faire grandir ses enfants, la problématique du logement, la venue de ces femmes qui vont vivre dans des bidonvilles, la condition de ces femmes emmurées. Elles arrivent en plein cœur du féminisme, de la lutte des femmes, des marches pour avoir la pilule. Elles arriveront dans une France émancipée, mais la France ne les voit pas. La France n’est pas au courant, le mouvement féministe ne les concerne pas, elles n’y ont pas accès, même les maris ne

18 See Fleury 2.
For the Maghrebian women who immigrated to France, feminism started much later than for the rest of the women in France. At the time when the *regroupement familial* was made legal, feminism was already an important movement in France. Because of their condition and isolation from the rest of the society, Maghrebian women did not have access to information on the rights and privileges that they might otherwise have had. Only later, beginning in the 1990s, when they had access to education and when other waves of female immigration from Africa arrived in France, did immigrant women start to become aware of the independence that they could earn.19

In the TV series *Aïcha*, in the first episode *Aïcha (2009)* and its second episode, *Aïcha - Job à tout prix (2011)*, Benguigui shifts her attention from the collective to the individual, from a group history to a story of the self. In doing so, she depicts postcolonial female subjectivity and desire. The filmmaker centers her narrative on a family living in the HLMs. HLMs, *Habitations à loyer modéré* (‘housing at moderated rents’) is the name given to large buildings made of apartments for rent, usually at the outskirts of the big cities in France. Benguigui’s telefilm brings to the front line a female protagonist, Aïcha (Sophia Essaïdi, an actress of Moroccan origins) and her real and imagined journeys into the city of Paris. With this project, Benguigui’s first goal is to

19 At present, 47% from the immigrants in France are women, out of which, 41% are Tunisian and 39% are Algerian. Between 1992 and 1999, the number of female immigrants in France was multiplied by 3.5. 1211 women come from Algeria, 34349 from Morocco and 8827 from Tunisia. (Chekir 1).
create a TV series based partially on the experience of first generation and mostly of the second generation to come from the Maghrebian immigration in France. Another aim is to show women’s lives in the Parisian banlieue and their desires and aspirations.

The telefilm Aïcha takes place at a few kilometers north of Paris, in Bobigny Est, a ghetto-city made entirely of HLMs where a multiracial society has its home. The narrative centers on the Bouamaza family, a family with Algerian roots. At age 25, Aïcha is their eldest daughter, and her dream is to become independent from her family and the closed community where she lives and to live and work in the City of Light. She works as a bookkeeper in a used car lot in her neighborhood. When Farida, her cousin, tries to commit suicide because she cannot tell her parents that she is pregnant, Aïcha is the one who takes care of her and tries to reconcile her with her parents. Aïcha accidentally meets Patrick (Axel Kiener), a former schoolmate, who is an architect working on a project to rehabilitate the neighborhood. In spite of the fact that she likes Patrick, Aïcha decides to marry Abdel, the owner of the garage where she works, hoping that this marriage to which her parents agree will help her to become independent from her family. In the meantime, Aïcha is scheduled for a job interview with a cosmetics company and she intentionally misses her engagement party in order to be able to participate in the interview. She is hired but, to her surprise, not at the company headquarters in Paris but at a regional location in Bobigny Ouest, not far from her home. She will be "chargée des tendances ethniques, c’est-à-dire, les tendances de demain." The episode ends with Aïcha’s first day at her new job, looking through the window at the Eiffel Tower which
stands very far, in the distance. The one who supports Aïcha all the time is Lisa, her best friend.

The second episode, *Aïcha, job à tout prix*, follows Aïcha throughout her journey to advance in her job. She works hard to accomplish an important project which would be the opportunity for her to find another job position in Paris. The biggest challenge for her is to compete with Gloria, her colleague, who has the same objective and who does not hesitate to show her desire to take Aïcha’s place. Aïcha becomes very involved in organizing for her company’s campaign ‘Frisé is beautiful’ for which she takes as a model Angela Davis’s ideas and her feminist and anti-racist activities of the 1960s in the USA. Aïcha continues to see Patrick and her trips to Paris become more frequent.

Another key moment in the second episode is the feminist march that Nedjma, Aïcha’s cousin, organizes. She creates a Muslim women’s group which unites with a Jewish group in order to obtain more rights for minority women. This union conveys a message of interethnic collaboration toward the integration of minority groups. In the context of the ongoing Jewish-Arab conflict, this combination also undeniably emphasizes the desire to solve divergences through mutual understanding. The echo of a past which left deep traces in the collective memory of both ethnic groups is still being heard and, this time, the memories of both the Holocaust and colonialism, deeply embedded in the collective subconscious come together in order to find solutions to the social, political, as well as historical crisis. Through this series of scenes, Benguigui’s telefilm offers what Michael Rothberg calls “an alternative to competitive memory,” a
way to nonviolently integrate both traumas within the same society (Rothberg 24). The manner in which Aïcha, as a beur telefilm, brings to the front line Jewishness in conjunction with Arab culture denotes a revival of the memory of the Holocaust by aligning it with postcolonial processes, idea which goes along the same line as Rothberg’s observation that the process of decolonization has catalyzed the memory of the Holocaust.

The opening sequence of the telefilm, which introduces the characters through Aïcha’s voice-over, also proclaims the space of the banlieue a prison for the young girls. Many young women try to escape but end up living there either because of economic reasons or because they do not want to disrespect their parents’ values. The spaces of the family home and the banlieue represent a prison-like environment both physically and psychologically. The female protagonists start to desire a place outside the patriarchal society and outside the economically limited environment where they were born and raised. Cinematically, their ‘imprisonment’ is expressed in the first episode through a series of shots presenting the homes as suffocating, limiting environments. The characters are filmed more in interiors than outside. For instance, numerous fixed frames show conversations between Aïcha and her cousins after Farida’s suicide attempt, between Aïcha and her best friend Lisa, between the girls and their parents. The first scene depicts a family wedding. In the second episode, the camera moves into the streets of Paris, offices, parks.
The film emphasizes Aïcha’s desire to escape, to evade from the ethnic enclave which consolidates the sense of belonging of the elderly more than that of the younger generation. Several sequences in the film are made of panoramic shots and low angle shots filming the HLMs. The involuntary proximity between the people living there, due to the restrictive space of the narrow streets and undersized apartments brings them closer and creates a feeling of solidarity but also of suffocation. It is a unifying, collective identity which opposes any form of subjectivity or individualism. These narratives of entrapment take us to the closed, confining, suffocating spaces of the family apartments in prison-like HLM buildings, to the intimate interiors of the protagonists’ rooms which are constantly surveyed by parents. It is paternal as well as maternal confinement.

At the beginning of the film, Aïcha confesses to spectators that she plans to take “le plus long voyage de ma vie, je m’échappe, je vais de l’autre coté du périph, en France,” while the title sequence shows the Eiffel tower, very far in the background. Separated from the capital by the boulevard périphérique, the generally accepted border between Paris and its suburbs, the banlieue remains throughout the film the main setting for the entire action. It is a physical and psychological border at the same time, separating people of different social classes. For Aïcha, the périph is the limit that she needs to cross in order to feel integrated socially. And for that, she needs to succeed professionally. Paris is always filmed as an unreachable, faraway place, as the object of desire.

Aicha’s farewell letter, written in the garage, expresses her contradictory wishes, to leave her family but without causing any pain. She feels guilty, being aware that by

Thus, the collectivity no longer constitutes a protective space for the ethnic female. In the multicultural society of the last few decades, the postcolonial woman feels more at home outside the ethnic enclave.

Benguigui constructs interesting female figures, starting with the protagonist, Aïcha. As Benguigui has pointed out in an interview, Aïcha is a modern Scheherazade, embodying femininity, charm, and agency: “L’héroïsme d’Aïcha réside dans sa capacité à faire quelques mètres par épisode pour avancer. C’est une Shéhérazade des temps modernes qui, tous les jours, doit inventer pour faire bouger les choses” (Lebard 1).

Always good-hearted and willing to neglect herself in order to help the others around her, Aïcha, this Amélie of the banlieue, strives to reconcile her origins with her desire to succeed and, on the other hand, her femininity with her career-oriented side.20 When setting off on a quest to find her identity, Aïcha only succeeds when the people whom she cares about are happy. Her itinerary follows an imaginary line which intersects other identities at defining moments in their evolution, such as Farida and Nedjma. Similarly to Amélie, Aïcha leaves the familial environment in order to find herself, and she gets

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20 Reference to the character Amélie from Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s film Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain (2001).
farther and farther away from home, like in a female *bildungsroman*. If Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s character, Amélie, succeeds in creating her own dream world, a cinematic creation, in the working-class neighborhood of Paris, Aïcha’s trajectory also defines a cinematic space which, as she gets closer to Paris, turns into an in-between place where ideals become more accessible. She evolves from the status of a working girl in a used car lot, male space par excellence, fact which stands as a metaphor for the reappropriation of this space, to an office job in a cosmetics company. Here, Aïcha finds opportunities to transgress the limits of her social condition.

If Aïcha strives to transgress the limits of the *banlieue* and her ethnic background and sets off on a journey of discovery, her best friend, Lisa, a ‘française de souche,’ enters Aïcha’s world in an initiation into the cultural norms and customs of the Bouamaza family. The film depicts this character as Aïcha’s counterpart, always happy and curious to discover her friend’s culture. Lisa is filmed many times in the middle of the Bouamaza family. For instance, during the sequence of the wedding in the opening scene of the first episode, Lisa is wearing traditional Maghrebian clothes and she is dancing together with the crowd. This cultural exchange expresses hope in interethnic communication. A scene which depicts Lisa and Aïcha’s friendship is when they meet to talk about Farida’s attempted suicide, when Lisa is very supportive and offers to host Farida. The fixed camera depicts a conversation between Aïcha and Lisa during which

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21 The expression *français de souche* refers to indigenous French or people coming from French-native families. It is a term created and used by ethno-nationalists.
their strong bond overcomes this obstacle. The background is made of traditional Maghrebian art with walls covered in mosaic and oriental rugs.

The telefilm constructs a playful tone based on many stereotypes and gender relations in order to laughingly explain and deconstruct them. For instance, Mr. Bouamaza (Amidou), the father figure is a person who cares greatly about his family’s honor and about tradition. Although obviously a representative of the old Maghrebian patriarchal system, the character is portrayed as a ‘Papa poule,’ over-protective of his children. He casts a shielding aura over his family and everybody respects him. They listen to his criticism when he feels that his wife becomes too independent and when his daughters return home late. Beyond the humor with which the figure of the father is depicted, the sequences that immortalize him show him very often in the middle of his family, centrally framed.

Mrs. Bouamaza (Rabia Mokeddem), the mother, is an embodiment of the superstitious, conformist, and simple woman. She is still nostalgic for her past in Algeria and she feels protected within the familiar landscape of the racial neighborhood where she lives. A fatalist, she often critiques her daughters for being too progressive and believes that everything that is outside Muslim norms brings bad luck to the family. Mrs. Bouamaza is concerned, above everything, with good reputation. For this reason, after finding out about her niece’s pregnancy, she and her sister take all the young girls to the doctor, including Aïcha, to get a ‘certificate of virginity.’
Aïcha struggles to succeed without denying her cultural background or her roots, unlike her colleague and competitor, Gloria. Similar to other female characters in the film, Gloria struggles to enter a socially fabricated image; she is the victim of the society’s predisposition for the repression of everything that is different. She invents a totally different identity for herself. She pretends to be Spanish when she is in fact of Algerian origins only to succeed and to better fit into the society’s stereotypes of success.

At the opposite end, Aïcha’s cousin, Nedjma, refuses to change her name into a more native-French one and she fails to obtain a job in spite of her good credentials. The theme of discrimination is an echo of Benguigui’s earlier documentary, *Le Plafond de verre* (The Glass Ceiling) (2004) in which Benguigui talks about discrimination on the labor force market. The title of the film is borrowed from the American sociologists’ terminology. ‘Glass ceiling,’ used to refer to “the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements” (Federal 4). *Le Plafond de verre* presents the difficulties of integration of French people of African origin into the French society and describes the necessity of the American-style concept not yet implemented in France of *affirmative action* (‘discrimination positive’). In support of this association, in her film, *Le Plafond de verre*, Benguigui uses newsreels showing the march for the civil rights in Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. The filmmaker’s intention goes beyond rewriting history, through these references to the past she attempts to find ways of intervening in the contemporary French society.
The racism that these characters encounter has been a reality in France in spite of the government’s measures to encourage tolerance. Organisms such as La Halde (*Haute autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l’égalité*), created in 2004, CNIL or *La Commission nationale informatique et libertés,* and the *Défenseur des droits* (2008) have been created in order to help minorities fight against discrimination. Benguigui mentioned that there has been no resentment in the creation of her work in spite of the anti-racist message and references to the existing trauma of colonialism. She declares that “il n’était pas question pour moi de ressentiment, et jamais mon travail n’a été fait avec du ressentiment. Mon travail est vraiment construit dans l’intention de comprendre, d’entendre et d’essayer de digérer les choses. En plus, c’est à partir du moment où il y a beaucoup de similitudes dans les histoires que cela devient une histoire collective” (Entretien 5).

Benguigui has stressed several times the need that people from different cultural backgrounds in France work together to change the perception that French society has of people of foreign origin and emphasizes her disapproval of any form of extremism because of its inherent dangers. This idea of condemnation of fundamentalism is illustrated in the second episode of her film *Aïcha* by the sequence showing the march of the Muslim and Jewish women, organized by Nedjma who became a radical, liberated, revolutionary feminist. Benguigui proposes a resistance to racism and a claim for tolerance through collaboration, dialogue and efforts toward integration on both sides,
through challenging stereotypes and preconceived ideas by bringing forward cultural uniqueness as a support for intercultural dialogue.

Some of the most important conversations in both episodes of the telefilm take place in female spaces par excellence which become sites of resistance to society’s prejudices and prefabricated images. Numerous scenes depicting debates and dialogues on the characters’ beliefs are filmed in the *hammam*. The camera seems to hide and study this female universe where femininity and female agency meet. Other significant sequences have as a setting the hair salon, reminding spectators of films like *Venus beauté* (Venus beauty Institute) (1999) by Tonie Marshall and *Caramel* (2007) by Nadine Labaki, which focus on female sensitivity, solidarity, and sisterhood.

The sequence in which Benguigui introduces Angela Davis’s image is filmed in the hair salon where Aïcha’s aunt, Biyouna, works. Davis’s words are used as a voice-over during the preparation of the hairstyle exhibition that is part of Aïcha’s job project. Her inspirational speech suggests its similarities to the situation in France, although much later: “54% of all black families are not even able to live a decent life if you use the standards that have been established by the Department of Labor, the US Department of Labor, 54%! The fact is, in 1976, 60% of Black youth could not find a job. And you talk about Black women? You haven’t had it this bad in a long, long time.” Aïcha is amazed at how much the women in the aunt’s hair salon know about Angela Davis and the Black women’s movement of the 1960s. She finds out that it was an inspiration for a lot of women in Algeria at the time. This transfer of feminism from one generation to another
becomes impressive; the discovery of similitude in women’s thinking after decades consolidates the belief that feminism is still compatible with today’s society.

The hairstyle exhibition, ‘Frisé is beautiful,’ paraphrasing Angela Davis’ ‘Black is Beautiful,’ organized by Aïcha and supported by her aunt and her friends advances these ideas and supports the specificity of ethnic femininity as a form of resistance to uniformity and exclusion. By taking an exclusively female space as a location for a feminist dialogue, the filmmaker sets the stage for a feminine universe where feminist ideas are supported. Thus, Benguigui offers solutions to the conflict between femininity and feminism by showing the transgressive power that women, through their bodies and their images, can have over hegemonic forms and discourses. This, in its turn, can become a way to resist discrimination.

These scenes encompass the entire theme of the film which underlines the multiethnic women’s image as being placed in opposition with dominant discourses of whiteness. We see the female body in relation to discourses of power carried through images. The ethnic hairstyles, which build self-confidence, trust in their own beauty and uniqueness and their power of expression and agency, build a critique of the Western concept of Otherness and deconstruct it. These sequences also subvert the media and the commercial messages and discourses in order to underscore cultural difference as a positive distinction. The body is put in relation to commodities but not just to any commodities. The hairstyling products for ethnic women that Aïcha promotes are beauty products which emphasize individual beauty and cultural uniqueness and advance the
The director of the company where Aïcha works (Cyrielle Clair) announces: “Notre groupe a décidé de lancer une autre gamme de produits révolutionnaires pour cheveux frisés et rebelles. La cible : les communautés black et arabe de France. Car aujourd’hui ils ne sont plus une minorité sur notre sol.”

The presence of the actress Isabelle Adjani in the role of the doctor, in the second episode of Aïcha, as a powerful image of mixed ethnicity in general and, in particular, as a film star, reinforces the filmmaker’s intention to desacralize and destabilize the myth of whiteness and its dominant racial narratives, still central, to some extent, to cinema in France. Adjani has played roles such as Queen Margot and roles that make reference to her multiethnic origins, such as Ishtar. Her star persona embodies a racial duality that transgresses cultural differences. According to Guy Austin, “Adjani remains a star who has been perceived hysterically because she lived out in her star body the complex racial make-up of her society. Adjani – like a true star – has transcended the hysteria and the ambiguity. She has done so in a manner which seems to reiterate whiteness but which also […] manages to accommodate the foreign body” (133). And it is this art of accommodating the racial identity as part of a whole, multiracial collective identity that Benguigui’s cinema strives to bring forward through her themes, cinematic techniques, and casting choices.

The ethnic woman’s desires are also the main focus of Géraldine Nakache and Hervé Mimran’s film, Tout ce qui brille, which takes the city of Paris with its suburbs as its main setting. The film depicts the protagonists’ attempts to escape from the prison-like
space of the banlieue. Through themes and cinematographic elements, Tout ce qui brille situates itself in the beur-banlieue film category and, at the same time, goes beyond it. As ethnic subjects, the protagonists transgress the limits of their own condition and symbolize a form of female resistance and agency.

Géraldine Nakache, at age 30, a young actress and filmmaker, co-wrote and co-directed Tout ce qui brille with Hervé Mimran. She started her career as a casting assistant at the French TV channel Canal +, and she works as an executive producer at another channel, Comédie 1. Her first important role as an actress was in the film Comme t’y es belle! (2006) by Lisa Azuelos who had as co-writer the same Hervé Mimran. The film tells the story of Nina and her friends, Jewish girls living in France and confronted with the problems of cultural and sexual difference and integration.

Tout ce qui brille centers on the adventures of its protagonists, Ely (Géraldine Nakache) and Lila (Leïla Bekhti), who are best friends who grew up together in the same city, the Parisian banlieue, situated at ten minutes from Paris. Ely has been raised in a Jewish family while Lila’s parents are of Maghrebian descent. They are very close friends who share the same dream of living in Paris and leading a better life than their parents. They are ready to do everything it takes to be part of the high life of the city which seems to be closed to outsiders like them. Whenever they try to enter a club or a restaurant in Paris, they are rejected because they do not belong there. They succeed one evening in entering a famous dancing club where they meet two girls from the ‘beau
monde’ through whom they will make their way into the high society of Paris but only by pretending that they are Parisians themselves.

Ely and Lila’s game becomes dangerous when Lila, although already engaged to Eric (Manu Payet), falls in love with Maxx (Simon Buret) who, after a few weeks, decides that he cannot break up with his actual girlfriend and abandons Lila. Lila becomes obsessed with the new identity that they assumed, believing that it would make them happy. Abandoned by her father, who, separated from her mother does not want to see his daughter again, Lila starts to live in this dream world, which only widens the gap between her humble origins and her aspirations, leading her to distance herself from her family and friends and, in the end, to fall into a depression. Ely, more realistic than Lila, succeeds in the end in convincing her best friend that the high society in which she would love to live will not necessarily bring her happiness.

In the context of the memory and trauma of the colonial past, Nakache’s film moves from remembering to what E. Ann Kaplan calls “subconscious disremembering” (6). If the first generation, such as the characters in Benguigui’s film Mémoires d’immigrés, has suffered the consequences of colonialism had interest in the recollection and recording of memories, the second and third generations move forward and welcome the process of forgetting their parents’ victimization and reconciling past and present. Illustrative of this tendency, Tout ce qui brille demonstrates a shift from the characters’ desire to connect with their roots and immigrant origins to an attempt to integrate into the Parisian society. The two female protagonists of the film both search for
their identities through journeys beyond the *banlieue*, into the city of Paris. Lila’s personal history has been a challenging one because of her split family. Her father is in Morocco where he formed another family and wishes to forget his family in France. This violent, imposed rupture with her Maghrebian roots and with the father for whom Lila had been longing from an early age, results in a refusal to identify with her ethnic identity and a search for a new identity.

The absence of the father, whose identity we only discover when Lila receives a letter from him asking her to forget him, triggers Lila’s identity crisis which will culminate in her total rejection of her social condition and in having fantasies about a new life in the city. This relationship contrasts with Ely’s strong bond with her father which renders her vision of life more balanced and more realistic. In spite of these differences and others such as their cultural backgrounds, the two friends’ relationship can be compared to a strong sisterly bond. Lila and Ely’s friendship echoes Mina and Ethel’s bond in Dugowson’s film *Mina Tannenbaum*, demonstrating the validity of the theme of cross-cultural female interaction as a means of coping with the society’s limitations in contemporary film.

Through the characters Lila and Ely, ethnic, hybrid identities, Jewish and Maghrebian, intersect and separate often throughout the film. Although not clearly emphasized as different, the two protagonists’ searches for an identity seem to diverge at key moments, moments of crisis for their friendship. For instance, when Ely tries to convince Lila, unsuccessfully, of the superficiality of the world she desires, they have a
serious argument. In Lila’s case, it is the repressed past that comes to inflate her wish to be someone else. There seems to be more solidarity between them when they are in the banlieue. Once in Paris, their different views collide. But most of the times, their feelings and wishes converge and the fact that Nakache and Mimran do not emphasize the ethnic variation is, on the one hand, a way of erasing difference as a possible barrier for friendship and, on the other hand, of suggesting that the memory of the past with its divergences and conflicts can and ought, after all, only reunite and not separate survivors and their successors. As Rothberg signals, “the model of multidirectional memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites” (11). Although uniting memories that seem contradictory, multidirectional memory not only erases distance between past and present but has also the power to spatially and culturally connect people.

The representation of the setting in the outskirts of Paris, in the HLM cités, points to the identity crisis of the characters. While the parents’ generation is relatively stable, the younger generation is experiencing an identity crisis. The female characters’ search for a better location in the city and a place in society illustrates their search for identity and their concern with negotiating a new, more independent position as women.

Lila and Ely desire something concrete: the background is very often the city of Paris, although in the distance most of the time, with L’Arc de la Défense and the Eiffel Tower symbolizing that although the object of their desire is very close, it is, at the same
time, unreachable. *Tout ce qui brille*, dynamically, shows beautiful scenes of Paris by night and also numerous fixed shots as a background for the protagonists’ quest. The alternating elements such as day and night, interior and exterior, suggest the dichotomy of the contradictions of the protagonists lives and dreams.

The protagonists’ identity searches manifest themselves, most of the time, as performances. Throughout the film, they often perform, sing and dance, their song, *Drôle de vie*, initially written by Véronique Sanson, a hymn to friendship, which is embedded in the film soundtrack. The opening sequence of the film, which has as setting the *banlieue* with its HLMs’ cold verticality, shows the two girls, Lila and Ely, in a fixed shot, doing a role-playing game. They each pretend to be on TV and impersonate different characters such as Céline Dion and Pamela Anderson. Their strong desire to identify with stars, to live like them and to be someone else expresses their will to escape their lives and their social condition. Lila protests: “Pourquoi Pamela Anderson? C’est tout pourri, Pamela Anderson!” Her reaction incites resistance to popular culture icons as symbols of whiteness and to identification with images that render tastes and desires uniform, causing spectators to question concepts already deeply internalized by society. It also suggests that women coming from mixed cultural backgrounds have a need for images and icons with which they can identify.

The title of the film, *Tout ce qui brille*, is a direct allusion to the saying “Tout ce qui brille n’est pas or” or, in translation, “All that glitters is not gold” which expresses eloquently the message of the film, the fact that the characters are attracted to richness,
social status, and power, but that this attraction is a false, misleading one. When Ely’s
parents buy a new apartment which looks out to the Eiffel tower seen far in the distance
and is situated “only 10 minutes away from Paris,” in Puteaux, a suburb of Paris, one
would think that their lives would change. Being at ten minutes away from Paris stands as
a metaphor for being close to your dream, it applies to everyone. Although so close to
Paris, for Ely it is not enough to make her happy. She also seeks the company of rich and
famous people.

The main narrative of the film, made of the two girls’ story, Ely and Lila, centers
on their friendship in spite of their different ethnicity. Their friendship has lasted since
their childhood; they each even have a shared blue ribbon as their lucky charm. Ely and
Lila share the same desire to escape the banlieue and live in the capital. This relationship
is challenged by the turn of events in their lives determined by the people they meet and
moreover, by Lila’s identity crisis. Different personalities, Ely and Lila are not driven
toward professional success. They are rather wishing to advance up the social ladder
through networking and social interaction. This illusion becomes an obsession for Lila
while Ely, more realistically, tries to warn her of the consequences of such a step. The
two girls’ encounters take them to social circles where they would have never had access
normally. But the apparent freedom will be soon replaced by the anxiety of not being at
ease in this environment.

The two protagonists are modern Cinderellas spending their days in their
neighborhood and escaping at night to the city of Paris. The difference which
distinguishes the characters’ real and imagined worlds is based at the same time on both concepts of materiality and culture. The oscillation of Lila and Ely’s trajectory goes between the two spaces, their community and the city of Paris, which is the zone of their desires. In Paris they usually feel like outsiders, unwelcome and different. In spite of that, they persist in trying to know people and make friends who are materially superior to them and culturally different. The lies and false identities through which they hope to succeed put them at high risks of losing their true identities and of becoming emotionally and psychologically wounded.

Nakache and Mimran make only indirect allusions to the ethnic origin of their characters and no allusion to their past or family history with the exception of Lila whose father, as the spectators find out, is in Morocco. The difference is made visible between the two of them and the Parisian society. When Lila and Ely go to parties with the celebrities of Paris, they feel like little impostors and their rich ‘friends,’ the lesbian couple Agathe (Virginie Ledoyen) and Joan (Linh-Dan Pham) become quickly aware of their true origins. In spite of this, the relationship continues by a tacit mutual agreement of service exchange: they are received in the Parisian young women’s circle but they babysit their child and sometimes pour wine at their parties. The film suggests that there cannot be real friendship because of the social differences. The only true, genuine connection is built between Lila, Ely, and their friends’ son whom they look after.

Lila is the one who falls in love with Maxx and at the end she suffers because of the superficiality of their relationship and of all the connections that she and Ely build
with this world. The superficial bond is accomplished through the love for pop culture, glamour, physical appearance, and commodities: clothes and jewels. These are also the major means through which this world communicates. Image is primordial; the Parisian Joan is a photo model. Numerous scenes in the film capture the objects with which Joan and Agathe surround themselves and which fascinate Ely and especially Lila who is more driven to becoming part of this world than her good friend.

If one considered *Tout ce qui brille a banlieue* film, one would notice the striking absence of violence and racism in the film. The *banlieue* streets are not the zone of conflict, they are rather calm and without incidents. In films representative of the genre, such as *La Haine* (*Hate* [1995]) by Mathieu Kassovitz, the *banlieue* neighborhood becomes the stage for divergences and clashes due to racism and discrimination. *Tout ce qui brille* inscribes itself in a trend of optimistic *banlieue* films which have started to be created recently such as *Jeunesse dorée* (*Golden Youth* [2002]) by Zaïda Ghorab-Volta which tells the story of the friendship of two teenage girls from the Parisian suburb. Another positive portrayal of the *banlieue* is offered by the film *100% Arabica* (*100% Arabic* [1997]) by Mahmoud Zemmouri which depicts a suburban neighborhood’s transformation from a religious fundamentalist area into a pacifist one due to the presence of a new Rai music band. There are also optimistic ideas of multicultural understanding in *L’Esquive* (*Games of Love and Chance* [2003]) by Abdellatif Kechiche. The *génération beur* in *Tout ce qui brille* is concerned with issues of social and cultural integration. A great interest also lies in bicultural femininity and the popular material
culture as characteristics which come together to render more complex the ambivalent attitude of the *beur* generation toward pop culture and all the complex issues that this combination raises.

The key moments of the film are made of a set of scenes in which Ely and Lila go to a party and then to Agathe and Joan’s place for the first time. This represents their introduction to a universe which completely absorbs Lila but which will remain incomprehensible and impenetrable to them. The setting for the party is a real supermarket where products are nicely arranged on shelves, as part of a décor and people just admire them without touching. This interior has the appearance of a museum of consumerist culture where everyone is concerned about image, money, and power. These elements work as a magnet for Ely and, especially, Lila who enter it as novices and who had prepared in advance by buying expensive fashionable shoes and clothes in order to fit in the landscape.

The static shots and fixed frames used to show the slow, quiet, and uneventful life of the *banlieue* is replaced in the party scene by dynamic shots exhibiting excitement, noise, and music in order to render the spectacle-like moments of city life where everything is full of surprises. When the two protagonists enter the party space, the euphoric atmosphere is created through powerful lighting and loud music. The backward tracking shot signals their entrance and their surprise at the view of this world totally new to them. Then, the camera follows the girls with a forward tracking shot throughout the large supermarket which is the setting for the party on a discovery tour during which they
cannot help expressing their amazement at what they see. While Lila is talking with Maxx, Ely continues to explore the room on her own. When a medium shot shows her eating a candy from a shelf, a party guest warns her that “Il ne faut pas manger ça, ça fait partie du décor.” These gestures, as well as Ely’s rather suspicious attitude toward what she sees, express the two characters’ unease in this environment. The gap between Lila’s and Ely’s humble origins and genuine cultures and the materialistic, high life environment engulfs the two young women who are seen as exotic by the partying crowd.

Another main scene in this series of sequences which express the essence of the film takes place at Agathe and Joan’s luxurious Parisian apartment, after the supermarket party. The space of their home is intimidating for Ely and Lila who step into it as into a palace and are completely lost at first. They become integrated little by little although they feel like outsiders all the time. Joan’s beautiful photographs, which cover the apartment walls, fascinate Ely and Lila. The process of identification with the image of the mundane, successful young woman is rendered more complex by the constant awareness of their class limitations. They are reminded all the time of their non-belonging to this place. While Ely is told by Agathe “Tu as une très belle peau,” she is asked to pour wine and when she opens the door, she is mistaken for housemaid by the incoming guests. While the guests celebrate at a table on the balcony with a view of Paris, ignoring her, Ely starts to explore the apartment. The camera follows her slowly through the wide, luxurious space. The frame freezes for a few seconds on Joan’s photographs hanging on the wall. The static shot which shows Ely, the wine tray in her
hand, right after having served the wine, while she contemplates the photographs, captures the real difference between her and her hosts and her desire to identify with them.

Ely’s and Lila’s reactions when they discover Agathe and Joan’s walk-in closet, a sanctuary of fashion, expresses their bewilderment and attraction to clothes, shoes, and jewels. While in the closet, their conversation centers around a comic topic, on Lila’s surprise to find out that rich people eat the same food as them: *pâtes au citron*. She wonders: “Mais, c’est un truc de riches, ça?” They discover in fact that the differences between their world and the rich people’s world rely much on appearances. This sequence is made of short shots which succeed rapidly one after the other against a live musical background. They show Ely looking closely at the objects in the closet, touching them, and trying them on. The contact with the materiality of this world transforms the young women into consumers and a process of female objectification is suggested through their desire to possess and to identify with the images they see. Lila is completely mesmerized by what she sees while Ely still opposes some resistance.

Unlike in *Mémoires...* by Benguigui and, to some extent, her other film *Aïcha*, in *Tout ce qui brille* the female space cannot be contained any more by the kitchen and the family apartment. It is extended to the larger space of the city, through a nocturnal, repeated *flânerie* which distances itself from its classical meaning since Ely and Lila explore Paris, but more than Paris, its social night life. Their relationship to the city space is mediated by a total immersion in the mundane community of the French capital.
From the point of view of film aesthetics, the film frame opens up in *Tout ce qui brille*, from shots showing the inside, closed, restrictive space of the HLM apartment, to the outside, larger, and adventurous space of Paris. The ‘Je’ is filmed radically different than the collective ‘Nous’ and the camera follows its desire outside the collectivity, in an area of freedom or imagined evasion. This adventure becomes a possible liberation. The accent is placed on female subjectivity, on tropes like identity search, romance, and emancipation as elements that challenge the traditional, collective views on women.

Ely and Lila’s voyages to Paris offer them occasions to know themselves better and, in the end, strengthen their friendship, their self-confidence, and their pride in their social and cultural backgrounds. The economic and the material play an important role in their awakening as they interfere with their identity search as temptations and barriers, at the same time. They also play a significant part in the process of objectification to which the female protagonists in the film resist in the end.

Like Benguigui’s *Aïcha*, *Tout ce qui brille* succeeds, to an even greater extent, in constructing an image of an illusionary space between the imagined world and the real world of the characters, a space of escape where their desires transcend reality and get closer to their ideals. Both films create narratives which center on multiethnic female subjectivity as it accomplishes a journey outside the space of the collectivity and its historic and cultural memory, in search of new images with which to identify. These stories focusing on the self build new methods of resistance and of inscribing difference into already existing societal hegemonic structures.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation suggests that contemporary French language cinema during the last three decades has become increasingly interested in engaging with echoes of the Holocaust and experiences of colonialism. By making references to past discriminations, using the lenses of gender and ethnicity, the cinematic and literary works of Chantal Akerman, Martine Dugowson, Yamina Benguigui, Karin Albou, Géraldine Nakache, and Hervé Mimran inspire and encourage racial and gender tolerance. Their works offer spectators the opportunity to reevaluate the two most important historical events of the twentieth century from a comparative perspective, using what Rothberg calls multidirectional memory, rather than a single point of view that would render each of them unique and isolated. According to Rothberg,

[O]ur relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly, and never without unexpected or even unwanted consequences that bind us to those whom we consider other. When the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed, […] it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice. (5)

Multidirectional memory contributes to a better understanding of both historical experiences and reinforces people’s belief in a greater awareness and acceptance of
differences in the French society. Multidirectional memory also encourages female subjects from different cultural backgrounds to communicate with each other.

This dissertation has shown how the films and writings studied in the preceding chapters engage with memory and trauma from a female perspective as a way to give voice to women’s silence during the Holocaust and colonialism/postcolonialism. By telling women’s stories during traumatic historical events, these works succeed in re-appropriating the official historical discourse and deconstructing pre-established views of the past. They accomplish a destabilization of the hegemonic narratives through a combination of themes, filmmaking and writing styles, and gendered perspectives which, all together, counterbalance mainstream means of expression and traditional views of history and draw attention to the specificities of women’s experiences of war and trauma. The filmmakers studied in this dissertation privilege female subjectivity as a way to move power in the direction of greater female agency in history and in history-telling.

Moreover, in their work, these filmmakers/writers engage with methods of re-appropriation of dominant discourses. As it was noted earlier in these dissertation chapters, Benguigui has pointed out that women need to break certain barriers and negotiate a place in society, especially, but not only, in the case of multiethnic women. In this context, the films analyzed here, in particular Benguigui’s, Albou’s, and Nakache’s and Mimran’s films have placed emphasis on tropes such as the female body and its power to deconstruct the prefabricated images of society. By emphasizing femininity, women are encouraged to express themselves through a new, revolutionary image which
breaks with the tradition of humbleness and conformism and with any form of racial discrimination.

This dissertation offers additional insights into the mechanisms of memory and trauma in relation to the Holocaust and colonialism in the context of women’s involvement in the cinematic works that treat these themes. The representation of trauma transmission from first- to second- and third- generation female survivors of both events in contemporary French language cinema has not been well known or investigated. The works explored in this dissertation suggest the immense difficulty of the process of remembering, the consequences that the trauma has had on later generations, and the importance of the intersections between the memories of the two historical events.

The predominant theme of collective versus individual memory present in all the films analyzed in this dissertation reveals the fundamental role that collectivity plays in the recollection of traumatic events. For instance, Albou’s and Benguigui’s films portray Jewish and Arabic cultures, often in interaction with each other. Women’s identity within these communities is depicted as a part of a whole, some being successfully integrated, whereas others are placed in positions of conflict. The two filmmakers’ works show a transition from the collective toward the individual self: most of the time the individual is refused integration within the traditional community and instead identifies with stereotypes, which results in a persistent focus on the self and female subjectivity.

The filmmakers who are the subject of this dissertation come from various cultural backgrounds and have family histories about which they have spoken in
interviews. They have embedded autobiographical elements in their works. Autobiography plays a primordial role in Akerman’s, Benguigui’s, and Albou’s films, a fact that they explain directly or indirectly in interviews and which can be noticed in their works. This element emphasizes the importance of first-person narratives in the construction of a counter-discourse and the writing of an alternate history. It also constitutes a model for multiethnic French-language filmmakers/writers in their creation of new spaces for multicultural and gendered subjectivity.

Many of the protagonists discussed in this dissertation go through an identity crisis, most of the time due to the impossibility of coping with the trauma that caused them to search for their identities. The films communicate a concern with trauma as a cause for their isolation and torment. The solution that the films offer to this female identity crisis is the construction of an in-between space, closer to their object of desire, where an identity negotiation is made possible. The focus on female subjectivity as a main axis for the construction of the narratives unveils dominant tropes inherent to female identity construction, such as maternal silence, the mother-daughter relationship, female friendship, displacement, femininity, and engagement. For instance, the mother-daughter relationship is prevalent in a majority of the films studied in this dissertation. In Akerman’s films, this relationship is portrayed as an oscillation between intimacy and distancing: the mother also silently bears the trauma, which is also the case in Dugowson’s films. In Benguigui’s, Albou’s, and Nakache’s films, the mother remains well integrated within the traditional family.
Another fascinating finding in relation to the six aforementioned filmmakers constitutes the connection and interaction between their works. Akerman and Dugowson are the pioneers of filming memories of the Holocaust that suggest an opening toward the consideration of these memories as facilitating and in concurrence the recollection of other historical traumatic events such as colonialism or communism. Moreover, their influence on the work of later generations who bring together intersecting memories of the Holocaust and colonialism can be clearly noticed. For instance, in Nakache’s and Mimran’s film Tout ce qui brille, the two young women’s friendship unequivocally echoes Mina’s and Ethel’s friendship in Dugowson’s Mina Tannenbaum. Albou’s protagonists’ story in Le Chant des mariées, although in a more remote time setting, suggests a similar inter-ethnic connection.

Seen from a feminist perspective, the six filmmakers’ films raise issues such as female emancipation and engagement, voicing of the female experiences, material and cultural limitations, and ethnic and gender discrimination. These filmmakers offer methods to address these issues by stressing the importance of female solidarity, expression of the individual self, attention paid to progressive femininity, evasion, and agency. Cinematically, the films offer solutions through the construction of the gaze as a gendered gaze. For instance in Le Chant des mariées by Albou, the predominant point of view is female, as it is in Le Rendez-vous d’Anna by Akerman. Another cinematic method of expressing and overcoming limitations is the emphasis on female desire for concrete objects such as a place for a home (Akerman), the city of Paris (Albou, Nakache
and Mimran, Benguigui), understanding one’s cultural legacy (Dugowson, Akerman), and desire as strong identification with someone else (Dugowson, Nakache).

In conclusion, I hope that this dissertation suggests the need for even further research on the contributions that contemporary French-language filmmakers have brought to French-language cinema. In the context of the intergenerational transmission of the trauma of the Holocaust and colonialism, these filmmakers have paved the way for future creations to engage with the transmission and preservation of cultural and historical legacies as a way of opposing discrimination of all kinds.
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