



“Banlieusarde”<sup>1</sup>, the empowered (fe) male: man up! Gaining back her body is gaining back her space in *Divines* (2016)

Androgynéité de la banlieusarde : pouvoir dans la réappropriation du corps et de l’espace dans *Divines* (2016)

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This article will examine the representation of the second generation of immigrant women in their urban space in the movie *Divines* directed by Ouda Benyamina (2016). Benyamina portrays a young, yet determined, female, Dounia from a disadvantaged area on the edge of the projects, who lives with her mother and her cross-dressing uncle. Her identity eventually becomes a hybrid-gender (fe) male: the looks of a female with male personality attributes such as hustling, dealing drugs, and being a provider. Like her male counterpart, she has the agency to create a specific representation by telling or showing her own story. I will explore how resistance becomes a protective shell for the female protagonist that allows her to create a macho violence as a survival strategy in her own space. How does female agency, articulated through a thematic of space lead to a reconstruction of the female body and identity? I argue that the French underrepresented female situates herself in relation to Republican hegemonic discourses by adopting a double-gender status and a double-space status. Space in *Divines* challenges the gender problematic since it is focused on a strictly male environment of the projects that she attempts to dominate at all costs. Changing her space is changing the view of her male counterparts but, most of all, changing the condition of these *femmes de l’ombre*. That allows her to regain this violence into power to survive and to renegotiate her space in French society.

Keywords: suburban space, empowerment, second-generation immigration, space, women

Cet article examine la représentation de la jeune femme issue de la seconde génération de l’immigration dans son espace urbain dans le film *Divines* produit par Ouda Benyamina (2016). Benyamina présente le portrait d’une jeune fille forte et

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déterminée du nom de Dounia. Elle habite dans un camp, à la marge d'une cité, avec sa mère et son oncle travesti. Son identité devient hybride, elle a l'apparence tantôt d'un garçon manqué, tantôt d'une femme féminine. Dans sa ruée vers l'or, elle est dotée d'attributs moraux masculins en subvenant aux besoins de sa famille à travers la vente de drogues. Elle a le pouvoir de créer sa propre histoire en s'insérant dans un environnement phallogentrique. J'analyse comment la résistance devient une protection qui conduit la banlieusarde à adopter une attitude machiste comme stratégie de survie. Comment le pouvoir de la femme dans son espace entraîne à la reconstruction du corps féminin et de son identité ? J'affirme que la femme de banlieue se situe par rapport au discours hégémonique républicain et masculin et qu'elle adopte un double statut de genre et d'espace. L'espace dans *Divines* met au défi la problématique du genre dans un environnement masculin qu'elle parvient à dominer à tout prix. Le changement de l'environnement va de soi avec le changement des perceptions masculines mais surtout, avec le changement de la condition féminine de ces *femmes de l'ombre*. Cela leur permet de reprendre et dominer cette violence symbolique pour la survie de leur espace et de ce fait, leur propre survie.

Mots-clefs : banlieue, espace, femme, pouvoir, seconde génération de l'immigration

Este artículo examina la representación de la mujer de la segunda generación de inmigrante en su espacio urbano en el film *Divines* (2016). Benyamina describe el retrato de una mujer fuerte y determinada, Dounia quien vive en un lugar pobre al margen de los barrios, con su madre y su tío travesti. La identidad de Dounia es híbrida: tiene la apariencia de un marimacho y de una mujer femenina. Por su deseo de dinero, tiene atributos morales masculinos por ser el proveedor de la familia por vender drogas. Tiene el poder de crear su historia integrándose en un contexto falócrata. Analizo como la resistencia se vuelve a una protección que conduce la mujer del barrio a adoptar una actitud machista como estrategia de supervivencia. ¿Cómo el poder de la mujer en su espacio produce la reconstrucción del cuerpo femenino y de su identidad? Yo afirmo que la suburbana se sitúa en relación del discurso hegemónico republicano y masculino, y ella adopta un doble estatus de género y de espacio. El espacio desafía el problema del género en un medio ambiente masculino que ella quiere conseguir. El cambio del medio ambiente va con el cambio de las percepciones masculinas y, con el cambio de la condición femenina de estas *femmes de l'ombre*. De esa manera, la mujer repite y domina esta violencia simbólica para la subsistencia de su espacio y después de su propia supervivencia.

Palabras clave: suburbio, espacio, mujer, poder, segunda generación de inmigrante

Este artigo examina a representação da mulher de segunda geração de imigrantes no espaço urbano do filme *Divines*(2016). Benyamina descreve o retrato da mulher forte e determinada, Dounia que vive num lugar pobre à margem dos bairros, com sua mãe e seu tio travesti. A identidade de Dounia é híbrida: tem a aparência de uma lésbica e de uma mulher feminina. Por sua cobiça por dinheiro, tem atributos morais masculinos por ser o provedor da família vendendo drogas. Tem o poder de criar sua história integrando-se em um contexto promissor. Analiso como a resistência se transforma numa proteção que conduz a mulher do bairro a adotar uma atitude machista como estratégia de sobrevivência. Como o poder da mulher em seu espaço produz a reconstrução do corpo feminino e de sua identidade? Afirmo que a suburbana se situa na relação do discurso hegemônico republicano e masculino, e ela adota um status duplo de gênero e de espaço. O espaço desafia o problema do gênero num ambiente masculino que ela deseja conseguir. A mudança de ambiente se dá com a mudança das percepções masculinas e com a mudança da condição feminina de ser *femmes de l'ombre*. Dessa maneira, a mulher repete e domina esta

violência simbólica para a subsistência de seu espaço e depois de sua própria sobrevivência.

Palavras-chave: espaço, mulher, potência, segunda geração de imigrantes, suburbana

The main character Dounia in the movie *Divines* directed by Ouda Benyamina (2016) finds a way to escape control and strives for success, not through education but through a *ruée vers l'or* – instant money and wealth. *Divines* challenges the stereotypical figure of the *girl des cités* submissive to her older brother, a female venerated as a religiously veiled woman or marginalized as a wandering scum. While much of the research emphasizes on the female's invisibility in the banlieue, few of them analyze the complexity of the female who fully embraces both, her feminine and masculine sides. This movie shows the female “hustler” playing the male role of the family provider (in this case her mother) and focused on one goal in mind: being rich. I argue that the fear of non-belonging leads to her self-reliance and to her gender fragmentation.

In the following developments, I will attempt to examine the role of the female body and image in her space. My analysis will provide a better understanding of the way characters find a way to step out of the space; in other words, how they step out of the traditional role of female from the suburbs. What is the function of different images/looks of the female character? How are body and space intertwined? Through the movie, the suburban young female's representation and different shots of space are better understood. The female does not have the position of victim any longer; she becomes self-reliant and does what males usually do from the suburbs, which is being a provider and enrichment to leave poverty.

Dounia's origin should not be the main focus, her actions are uniquely driven by her desire to leave poverty. Rather than migrant identity, the uniqueness of this film and this character lies in the latter's creation of a double gender status: not only does she assume the female role but also the male acting role to redefine her space and to integrate in it with the mere goal of economic prosperity. Above all, this economic “protest identity” leads the character to reject self-pity and domination in a predominantly male environment. She uses her body and image not in a sexual way but in a both manly and feminine way so she can exit from poverty. The role of “space” acts as a precursor role to enable her for adapting this double gender status. Through her movements in the space, she constructs who she is and her becoming.

The film tells the story of the character Dounia<sup>3</sup> who shares a trailer with her single alcoholic mom and her transvestite uncle in a Rom camp right by the projects. The film shows the evolution of the main character Dounia and her best friend Maimouna, relating the journey from dropping from school to falling in love with a male dancer, to her fateful meeting with a female drug dealer, Rebecca. She admires the latter so much that she wants to work with her in order to achieve economic fortune and success, which both tragically end with the death of her best friend and her own tragedy.

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<sup>3</sup> Dounia's definition “derives from the root word “dana” that means to bring near. In that sense, “dunya” is "what is brought near". It refers to the temporal world—and its earthly concerns and possessions—as opposed to the hereafter”. It is clear that Dounia becomes obsessed with financial possessions and aspires to be higher through her love story.



The movie poster glamorously shows Dounia and Maimouna in a luxury car driven by a male chauffeur, at night on the *Champs Elysées*, one of the most famous and luxury avenues in Paris, both wearing fur coats that make them look rich and famous. Unlike what the poster displays, the female character in the movie does not totally claim her femininity but is forced to use it and prefers to claim her self-reliance and resourcefulness to achieve what she wants, as a ‘go get it’ female. As a matter of fact, the film director emphasizes that the movie is not feminist but humanist. She adds: “Je ne me définis pas par rapport aux hommes, je ne suis pas leur attribut. Le pouvoir est aussi féminin” (Torlottin, 2016)<sup>4</sup>. In another interview, the host points out that the dealer is a female and the dancer is a male and thinks it is indeed a feminine movie. Benyamina also rejects this idea: “Ce qui m’intéresse, c’est la redéfinition du genre, la masculinité et la féminité sont à redéfinir au 21ème siècle.”<sup>5</sup> (Laphix, 2016).

Most importantly, the movie leads us to evaluate the representation of the space of the banlieue, which is surprisingly odd: indeed, the protagonist does not live in a building of a  *cité*  but *next to it*, in a Roma camp. It shows upfront the outcast’s status of the main character who breaks the stereotype of *beurette des cités*<sup>6</sup>. Also her mom is far from representing the old traditional mother; she is an alcoholic who never married, who dances in bars at night, and whose life is determined by the whims of her sexual partners.

At the same time, the film features the age-old quest to overcome poverty and economic hardship, presenting a French version of the American dream. In this world, however, characters take their own fate in their hands from the beginning of the movie. By adopting multiple identities in different spaces, the female is empowered. The multiplicity of spaces reflects Dounia’s own multiple facets. She is in an environment more marginalized than the banlieue itself. The Rom camp is more

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4 “I don’t define myself in relation to men, I am not their object. Power is also for women.” All translations in this paper are mine.

5 I am more interested in the redefinition of the genre. Masculinity and femininity should be redefined in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

6 Second-generation young woman from the Projects.

marginalized in which Roms live in extreme poverty, unsettled and nomadic surviving between hustling and stealing, as Dounia's life style shows it well; she does not have any attachment and sporadically comes back to her trailer to help her mother and is mainly in the street selling or stealing. She is indeed looked down by the banlieusard and considered as an outsider.

## Switching images, switching spaces: Female Empowerment

The movie's director innovates the French cinema by switching roles generally attributed to females and males. My goal in my analysis of *Divines* is to understand the source of the character's motivations to empower her space. This is explained by the director, in an interview at "Festival de Cannes" (Torlotti, 2016). Benyamina with her sister Houda Benyamina, the one who plays Dounia, states:

After the 2005 riots, I always wondered why there are so many anger rather than activism to express injustice (...) I could have been one of these women full of anger disconnected from the society who doesn't know what to do with this anger and who will become delinquent. This is not the banlieue, it's a working class area<sup>7</sup>.

In the same sense, Tarr (2002) explains the female position in the space:

As well as negotiating a place for themselves within a fundamentally male-dominated French cinema industry, films which centre on realistic representations of young French women of Maghrebi descent need to situate themselves in relation to Republican discourses on assimilation as the route to integration.<sup>8</sup> (87)

To follow Tarr's ideas, the French woman situates herself, in relation to republican discourses, by adopting a double gender status and a double space status. Directors, indeed, create movies to denounce and redefine the French system through their characters and what they shoot. They all have different techniques but convey the same message. *Divines* is not limited to the projects and Paris and this breaks the stereotype of a banlieusarde being "stuck" in the estate. The first scene of the movie clearly shows the female protagonist's agency over space. With the soundtrack of Muslim prayers evoking mysticism, Dounia is seen in different types of shots: alternating between close ups and long shots; she's outside the mosque, watching behind an air vent wearing a hoodie that reminds us of a Niqab<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 3).

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<sup>7</sup> Suite aux émeutes de 2005, je me suis toujours demandé pourquoi il y a une colère, pourquoi il n'y a pas de révolte, pas de verbe qui justifie cette sensation d'injustice. (...) Je pouvais être aussi un de ces êtres en marge; désaxé animé par la colère qui ne sait pas quoi en faire et qui vont la mettre au service de la délinquance. Ce n'est pas la banlieue, c'est un quartier populaire. (interview in french)

<sup>8</sup> Tarr, C. (2002) "'Grrrls in the 'Banlieue': Philippe Faucon's 'Samia' and Fabrice Gényestal's 'La Squalé.'" *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 42, 3, 28-38.

<sup>9</sup> Veil in the Muslim tradition.



Fig.1

In this opening scene, the spectator witnesses multiple spaces (the prayer room, the entrance of a building in which she sees Rebecca, the drug dealer, for the first time) within one single space of the cité and the character is filmed from different shots—far and close. In the picture above, the character is seen cross-dressed like a man who, in the words of Hayward (2000) analyzing women in Besson's *Nikita*, “behaves transgressively, which patriarchy cannot tolerate.”<sup>10</sup> (304).

On this point, Tetreault (2015) adds:

While adopting masculine styles “respect” did allow girls to construct positive reputations among their peers and to voice critique of dominant gender ideologies, peers also enacted borderwork to re-established the normative boundaries of gender that were reinforced by local and dominant gender ideologies. (152)<sup>11</sup>

The quest for respect through adopting male personality attributes helps to understand Dounia's subversion as a character. Hiding in these two spaces and dressed this way, she reveals her uniqueness as a banlieusarde operating her agency through her gaze: she can observe where the others cannot. By witnessing the drug exchange between Veronica and her male partner, she uses the gaze simultaneously as a tool to understand her environment and as a tool to reverse the power structure. She gains power because she can secretly observe. Dounia's gaze is innocently deceptive because she is undetected, but this then also becomes a strategy of resistance and revelation.

What she discovers fascinates her but this fascination stops when she is called *bâtarde*<sup>12</sup> by the male drug dealer who catches her gaze during the encounter with Veronica. This word is both an insult and a term that makes her character singular. Most of all, the term is mainly used for males in French. The extra “e” transforms the masculine noun into a female noun. That describes Dounia's characteristics; her male attributes are within a female body. She does not accept the androgynous cross-over and rather acts like a solely male from the cité.

Therefore, by leaving, she also rejects the name *bâtarde*. Not only is she subjectified by the society, but by men as well. She is spatially limited by the fence and doesn't have access to the other side when she can be inside the projects and voluntarily

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10 Hayward, S. (2000). “Recycled woman and the postmodern aesthetic Luc Besson *Nikita* (1990)”. In *French Film Text and Context*. NY: Routledge.

11 Tetreault, C. (2015). *Transcultural Teens, Performing Youth identities in french cités*. Ed: Blackwell.

12 Bastard.

stays in the other side of the society. Her goal is to cross this border to go beyond the space limitation and to be free to circulate from space to space.

By crossing a new space in a supermarket with a background of an opera,<sup>13</sup> Dounia completely veiled in black in the Muslim tradition subverts her appearance with her actions. Through the act of stealing the female characters, both characters show their power defying laws. Space acts as a trickster: Dounia uses it to reach her goals. Moreover, the transformation of clothing constitutes a kind of masquerade. Performing this masquerade constitutes a way to reject gender identification, as Joan Riviere (1999) states:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it-much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the “masquerade”. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference, whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. <sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the film shows that hiding behind a veil constitutes the absence of the gender; the two characters are both stared at by the male security. He obviously sees them as females but their covered bodies hide their body language; therefore their intentions are unknown. Interestingly, Riviere (1999) compares masquerade to the act of stealing. Adopting androgyny reveals a dishonest aspect of the character that helps her to survive. Wearing a mask for these two characters means rejecting identity, gender labels and adopting a subversive form of individuality based on who they are, rather than on social classifications of gender and identity

Dounia is then dressed in male clothes: a hoodie, sweat pants and fingerless gloves after she was previously totally covered in a black veil. Masquerade acts as tricking the environment and leads to a total freedom to switch gender through clothing. Masquerade covers like a mask; according to Doane (1988).

(Masquerade) is employed to designate a mode of being for the other-hence, the sheer objectification or reification of representation (...) Masquerade would hence appear to be the very antithesis of spectatorship/subjectivity. (48)<sup>15</sup>

The phenomenon is clear here and shows that it can be removed or transformed. It is used as a strategy switching from male to female clothing:

the woman becomes a man in order to attain the necessary distance from the image. Masquerade involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery or more simulation of the missing gap or distance. (Doane, 2003: 43)<sup>16</sup>

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13 Nisi dominus (Without God) Cum Dederit Dilectis Suis – La Tempesta. Vivaldi's Andromeda liberate. The text is based on the Book of Psalms, chapter 127, verses 2 & 3.

14 Riviere, J. (1999) “Womanliness as a masquerade” in Bassin, Donna. *Female Sexuality*. Aronson. (131)

15 Doane, M. A. (1988). “Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator.” *Discourse*, 11 (1), 42-54.

16 Doane, M.A.(2003). “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the female spectator” in Jones, A. and al. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. NY: Routledge.



The space can be switched along with the transformation of the body appearance, in other words, the character makes space interchangeable along with the way she dresses: one space represents one look. Masquerade involves space that shows down at the supermarket, she hides and is covered. Then, up at the roof where she observes the dance rehearsal, she becomes again a tomboy. The hidden body veiled in a feminine way brings the character to take another hidden door (the hidden body represents an hidden space) behind the grocery store that leads to, once again, the top in which both female characters use their gaze as a dominant power situating them as voyeurs.

They gain power by adopting a dominating gaze, observing with a critical eye the performance of only male dancers. Classical dance is usually connoted with female dancers (ballerinas) and gazing or voyeurism is attached to the male: this is completely reversed in this scene. The female now becomes the voyeur in a process that Laura Mulvey (1999) calls the “masculinization of spectatorship”<sup>17</sup>.

In other words, through gazing, the female adopts a male position. The voyeur gains power by watching without being watched. Indeed, dance is a metaphor for the French cultural policy’s inefficiency and inadequacy that both characters observe and criticize. The integration failure of the cultural policy leads to the integration’s failure of the *monde d’en bas* (low social class and the banlieue) that characters have the power to transform into the *monde d’en haut* (politics and upper class).

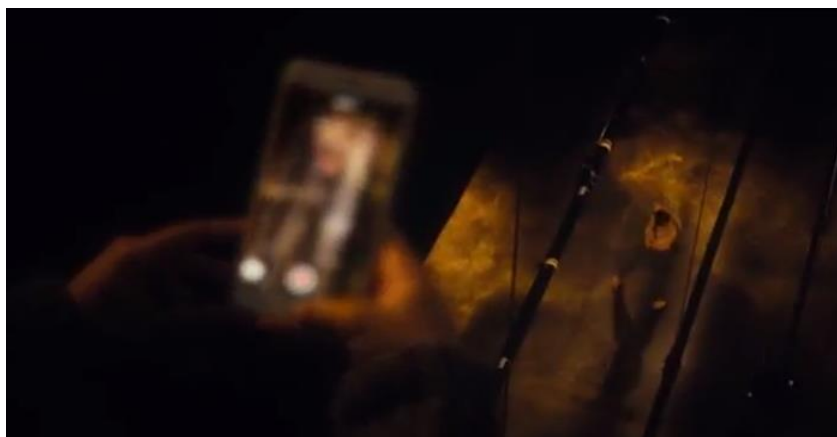


Fig.2

Dounia is again transforming according to her space and denounces ideology through education. With a different clothing style, she simulates a professional interview in class with her teacher. Dressed in a black suit, white blouse and tied hair, Dounia displays a rebellious attitude towards the teacher. The latter forces Dounia to smile but while the teacher simulates the interview in her *BEP accueil*<sup>18</sup> class, Dounia angers the teacher. Alternating quickly between close-ups of Dounia and the teacher, we witness a violent argument between them. When the teacher yells she is here to help them make money, Dounia revolts by saying: “Nous aider à quoi !? A être des larbins de la société !?” (“Helping us, How!?! By being state slaves!?”). Standing on a table, and occupying the dominating position in the classroom, space and clothing

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17 Mulvey, L. (1999) “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In Brudy Leo, Cohen Marshall. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. New York: Oxford UP, 833-44.

18 Name of a degree in vocational schools. Commonly, BEP classes are composed of ethnic minorities groups from projects that lead to BAC “professionnel”- a more specific type of high school diploma i.e Bac pro secrétariat, Bac pro vente (sales) etc...

intertwine to fuel the character's agency. On the top of a table, she takes off her jacket. This represents the professional world she refuses to belong to that she wants to dominate. "Becoming a self is something one cannot do on one's own, it is an intensely social process."<sup>19</sup> (Reed, 1995).

By choosing to be independent, predicts the future danger of Dounia's decision. Dounia challenges the French educational ideology, republican values such as *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, and the so-called integration which tries to make youths from the project believe that there is a future after a BEP whereas half of students end up unemployed or having low paid jobs. Dounia destroys this ideology, and replaces it with her own ideology that will lead her to success and superiority. Her pride and determination increase along with her outburst in class; in fact, she makes anger as a positive and driven emotion.

The rejection from the rigid educational space by the teacher who keeps telling her to leave the class symbolizes education rejecting the suburban individual. However, the rejection is reversed: the jacket thrown at the teacher represents a rejection of the dominant values and the professional world that French society wants to offer to the projects. The entire scene symbolizes the failure of integration and education. The scene shows that the French Republic ignores the dreams of individuals from the Projects and tries to keep them in a box, limiting them the access of more ambitions in life. This is illustrated in the action of shutting down the one who speaks up, in that case, the teacher telling Dounia to shut up.

Exclusion affects minorities in education and by extension in society. Underrepresented segments of the Republic are clearly shown in the film: second generation of immigrants but also the LGBTQ community who both seek for integration. Interestingly enough, the father's absence from Dounia's family structure is compensated by a male cross-dresser who is Dounia's uncle, whose feminized symbolizes a total absence of the male figures. The absence of masculinity serves to emphasize the numeral domination of the female within the movie that creates a sense of empowerment and central role. Transvestism in the uncle is the reversal of masquerade; he is actually the most feminine character in the family in the way he dresses and behaves.

The film director has the goal to redefine gender roles; therefore, men close to Dounia adopt mostly feminine roles: a dancer, an uncle with make up on, a wig and a dress. He doesn't use femininity as a mask but as a new identity. McCaffrey (2005) explains that this type of character represents "a product of a culture that officially privileges assimilation as its approach to the integration of its multiethnic and multisexual communities"<sup>20</sup> Even though the uncle has a minor role and the filmmaker emphasizes "straight" males who have very violent interactions with Dounia, this character challenges our sense of identity-formation in the movie. This will later be mirrored in the male dancer Dounia falls in love with.

Dounia becomes the provider in her family. Having become numb to feelings of intimacy, she gains self-value only through materialism found in the quest for money. This is also illustrated in a scene that shows her watching a female drug dealer bragging to males from the Projects about a trip she took to Thailand, where

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19 Reed, E. (1995). "Becoming A Self". In Rochat, P. *The Self In Infancy*. Ed: Elsevier. (431).

20 McCaffrey, E. (2005). "The Gay Republic: Sexuality, Citizenship and Subversion in France". In Narayana Chandran, K., *Texts and Their Worlds II*, Foundations. (33).

she plans to move to own prostitute bars, since France does not allow them to make money:

They don't care about our lives, look, it's been two years they haven't touched this (close up of a broken window), I'm gonna live there, so much dough you can make: sex, drug, alcohol. You can make easy money with bars for whores.<sup>21</sup>

The scene shows women with a double status: active- the one who speaks - and passive but in control - the one who watches. The female drug dealer Rebecca occupies and dominates the verbal space, appropriating the male voice and giving it a bi-gender character: a female who would sell other females. What is said parallels the position of characters: the female in the center and men around, including Dounia who with other men watches the central female character, the drug dealer Rebecca. With a cigarette in her mouth framed in a close shot, Dounia observes a female drug dealer, watching the exchange of drugs and money between Rebecca and her "client". Her body language changes, she looks determined and, at the same time, anxious as she witnesses the scene. Being behind the fence obstructs her sight and distorts the reality.

Rebecca completely reverses traditional gendered roles by having a half naked man in her apartment as the figure of a common male gangster in movies. She uses the man as a true symbol of wealth, power, domination and reduces him to a sexual object. In the same manner, she reverses the gendered code of language with the expression: "You have some clit, I like that!" ("T'as du clitoris toi, j'aime bien!") Her comment shows her appropriation of the phallic discourse; here a male-centered informal expression, originally from "T'as des couilles" meaning "You got balls" is reversed. Phallogentrism, according to Derrida's definition (Felluga, 2015) indicates "the privileging of the masculine (the phallus) in understanding meaning or social relations."<sup>22</sup> These women reverse the phallogentric into a discourse with the same function that puts the female genitalia at the center, thus challenging French theorists' claim that "all western languages are utterly and irredeemably male-engendered, male-constituted, and male-dominated" (McCaffrey, 2005)<sup>23</sup>.

Genders reversal constitutes the center in the entire film. What is commonly attached to females, such as dance, is now given to male figures. Embarrassing and mocking the male dancer ( who is grocery security at day) by making classical dance moves, Dounia and Maimouna tell him in a teasing sexual voice: "My little dancer, where's your pantyhose and tutu?" ("Alors ma petite danseuse étoile, on a pas ses collants et son tutu."). By mocking the dancer/security guard, female characters readjust the balance between the inequality male-female, making them superior.

By reversing role characters, characters have the power to redefine space. Filmed with a dolly shot in a low angle shot, Maimouna, Rebecca in the center and Dounia are surrounded by tall buildings, which gives the impression of a heavy and oppressed space. Dounia breaks this domination by entering a utopian world through imagination. Idleness kindles her vision: Dounia transforms the real space into a fictive one by projecting herself and her friend in the future on vacation in Thailand, after they make enough money to finally escape the projects. In the dream-sequence,

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21 "Ils s'en battent les couilles de notre vie, Téma ça fait deux ans ils touchent plus à ça (close up on a broken window), je vais vivre là-bas, trop de maille à se faire, sexe, alcool, drogue. Tu peux t'faire de l'argent facile avec des bars à putes. "

22 Franco Felluga, D. (2015). *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts*. NY: Routledge.

23 *Op.cit.* 96.

they jump into an imaginary Ferrari. In a crane shot, the camera becomes the car and, filming only faces, transports the two characters in a new space and a new time defying and redefining the estate.

## Dounia as an Androgynous Character in an Androgynous Space

The reality of the space is deeply connected to Dounia's body. When she encounters her first customer, the darkness of the staging predicts an upcoming danger. She is trapped in an underground cave where the customer attempts to steal from her, which leads to an unbearable scene of violence, shot in a long take, in which she is assaulted. Continuing to resist, her face becomes a punching ball covered with blood and her body thrown down on the floor is numb to any fear and pain. Her body is not prioritized because her aspirations and future come first. Even though the scene reminds of the harsh reality of male violence on women in the banlieue, Dounia embodies the resistance by going through hurt and pain to achieve what she is looking for: money.

The reflection of the violated body is reinforced in the use of a mirror in Rebecca's apartment. This echoes Lacan's theory and the mirror stage. Indeed, he explains the recognition of the self that he calls "ideal ego" but if the subject finds himself in misrecognition, the ideal self is fragmented and chaotic. Not surprisingly, Dounia's swollen face becomes a fragmented image of herself. At the same time, however, the mirror reveals Dounia's femininity. Winnicott (1967) comments on the mirror stage and states "the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face."<sup>24</sup> Through the broken face, Dounia sees a broken mother. Rebecca observes in another scene: "No wonder why you're so messed up, you're like your mother" ("Pas étonnant que t'es baisée quand on voit ta mère.") The glance of the mother through the mirror represents a distorted image/identity of Dounia.



Fig.3

Dounia's femininity is revealed; but it's deformed. Her feminine traits are revealed through a mirror, a broken image of her swollen and bloody face. Rebecca lets down Dounia's hair and notices how beautiful she looks with her hair down. Rebecca has a role of shaping Dounia; both as an attractive female and a battered male-like drug

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<sup>24</sup> Winnicott, D. W. (1967). "Mirror-role of the mother and family in child development". In Lomas, P. *The Predicament of the Family: A Psycho-Analytical Symposium*. London, Hogart. (26)

dealer. However, Dounia refuses this feminine side and ties her hair: femininity means vulnerability.

Femininity fades then away entirely. Dounia boxes on a soundtrack of a powerful opera music that parallels the intensity of Dounia's actions: boxing, screaming, dealing drugs, spending money, kissing the euro bills. Music finds a paroxysm when Dounia is seen in a church with hair down looking like a *madona*, praying and then unexpectedly exchanging drugs with a big stack of euros followed by with a close shot of Jesus. This shows that ideology has no grip on Dounia and she is not following it; indeed, she reverses religion and prays Allah in Arabic in front of a picture of Jesus in an extreme close up. The scene has a blasphemous tone but also totally reverses the religious codes along with the female codes: there is a dichotomy between the Madonna and Dounia, a female outlaw who seeks for forgiveness but finds herself trapped in illegal activities.

The bi-gender role that Dounia embodies from scene to scene is demonstrated again when she attempts to walk with heels in Rebecca's apartment. Rebecca is the one who reveals Dounia's femininity as a strategy to fool the police who, according to Rebecca, "don't check women with heels." Rebecca's goal is to be as discrete as possible, so she uses Dounia's femininity to reach her purpose. Femininity becomes a strategy rather than a marker of Dounia's identity. Rebecca asks Dounia to obtain money from a dangerous male dealer. Rebecca shapes Dounia through her body, her image, her future and her emotions.

She forbids Dounia to be scared and her apartment is the space where femininity and masculinity are intertwined in the female character. Particularly striking is the moment in which Rebecca holds a gun in Dounia's mouth to train her against fear. Rebecca fully embodies a male role through her act of pointing a gun, the symbol of phallocentrism, into Dounia's mouth but also through her language yelling " You scared? You want me to blow your head?? You want me to fuck you up??" ("Tas peur ou pas?? Tu veux que j't'explose le cerveau ?? tu veux que je te baise ta race??") In a close shot of their two faces, Rebecca pulls the trigger, but the gun is unloaded.



Fig. 4

Dounia's body and identity are transformed through the act of trying different clothes. She looks at herself in a mirror and her reflection is a deformed vision of her. She is now disguised in a costume, covered with a female hat and mocking a refined voice that is not hers. In her new character, Dounia kisses a male mannequin who does not move, emphasizing her domination over an objectified male. The action of changing clothes reveals Dounia's ability to adjust and change her appearance very quickly. The conflation of multiple identities into one character may be similar

to a *mise en abyme* of the character- the versatility of the character allows her to distance herself from her own self and truly shows her film character.

Bodily appearance is observed where she arrives at a night club on a mission to trick the man who stole Rebecca's money. Slow motion and a strong halo-like light all around represent her as a perfect feminine image of the *femme fatale*: hair down, red lipstick, an open and revealing white dress that exhibits her breasts and legs. Her capacity to embody multiple characters allows Dounia, through clothing and attitude, to combine violence and innocence into the same androgynous figure. By only focusing on the visual aspect of Dounia, the man object is tricked and Dounia achieves to gain his attention.



Fig.5

Dounia's sex appeal switches again to masculinity when she burns a car to take revenge on Rebecca's associate who had sex with Dounia's mother (see figure 6). The lighting in this scene evokes fire, now illuminating Dounia from the front but, here, symbolizing the passion of the character with strong principles but, most of all, the fire of her anger. In this scene, Dounia is totally covered and can be easily mistaken for a male.

By this means, the character has a power to transform again her space, by reversing stereotypes commonly attached to males from the estate: vandals, hooded rioters, car burners etc. She takes their place adopting a male figure. Some male characters intervene but disappear just as quickly during this scene, revealing that space is dominated by the female figure. Dounia does the action and Maimouna video records with her phone the entire scene even when the police arrive and chase them. This acts as a remembrance symbolizes an act of existing. Dounia feels satisfied. She enjoys a temporary power until the police catch both of them and bring them to custody.

Everything seems to revolve in a spatial configuration through violence, disorder, and chaos that characterize the space of fiction, not to mention the rebelliousness of women against a city order. (Tchumkan, 2015, 132).<sup>25</sup>

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25 Tchumkan, H. (2015). State Power, Stigma, and Youth Resistance Culture in the French Banlieues. Uncanny citizenship. Lexington books.



Fig.6

After playing binary roles, Dounia finds herself alone with the male dancer and claims for the first time in the film her name. “Dounia! My name is Dounia! My name is Dounia!” The character for the first time in the movie gains back her identity, her body, her power and her space. Through this act, she gains power of spaces. At the male’s apartment, the one she tricked at the nightclub who owes Rebecca’s money, she plays a strategic role to obtain what she wants but the man surprises Dounia searching for the money. In the editing, Dounia’s body and her dancer friend’s body are shot in parallel, making both bodies seen as a union. Being beaten by the man, her body is thrown on the floor as the dancer who performs in a parallel scene. Esthetical violence reflects the equality between two bodies in movement female and masculine and a strength that Dounia had and helped her to escape and defeat the aggressor.

Dounia’s illusory happiness transforms a space of fear and violence into a fantasized one. What makes Dounia happy is not the money itself but what this money represents: the end of her nightmare, poverty, and the beginning of a better life for her, her mother and her best friend. Money, although touchable, only constitutes an illusion that quickly ends with Rebecca calling Dounia from the basement where Rebecca abducts Maimouna and threatens to kill her if she does not bring the money back to her.

The underground cave symbolizes the darkness and the predictable dramatic end. When Dounia gives half of the money, Rebecca enraged, puts fuel on Maimouna’s body and puts fire on the floor that quickly spreads the whole room. Rebecca escapes through a narrow window, and Maimouna is trapped. The female body is trapped in the space in which it will not survive. Fire is inside and outside where Dounia begs firemen to save Maimouna, but the firemen decide to wait for the police to protect them from being assaulted in the projects.

The fire surrounding Dounia gives a mystical tone to the shot in which the banlieue space is transformed into Hell. A loud sound of explosion marks the end of Maimouna’s life. Dounia yells, cries with the sound off that symbolically muffles her voice and show that female “presence only surfaces to underscore their absence, their silence, in short, their inaction.” (Tchumkan, 2015, 143). Instead, we hear an opera soundtrack that shows Dounia’s immobility in the middle of the fire and a war is taking place between rioters and the police. Due to her androgynous status, the male riot represents the internal anger of Dounia, a “social and moral situation” Dounia faces.

Riot is a consequence of a general anomie, the act of more or less “barbarians”, whose violence takes the place of language,

or as the result of an absence of direction or a general lack of discipline. Rioting, in this view, is a “sign”, the manifestation of a social or moral situation, the expression of the state of a society. Its meaning belongs not to the rioters but to their interpreters. (Lapeyronnie, 2009: 26).<sup>26</sup>

Dounia survives, that means that female subjectivity is not entirely negated. The last scene, therefore, reflects an image of a society that neglects a part of France and causes the loss of what they considered “outcast”. Silence is replaced by male riots and by female screams at this “social situation”. The gender binary identity within the space in the Projects surrounded by fire symbolizes an intense denunciation of the social situation in France that does not allow them to work their way up the social ladder, indeed ideology (represented by the police) refuses to save Maimouna.

A close shot of a full moon appears again and closes the movie. This last shot gives a magical and mysterious tone through the moon that has a power on Earth. It also represents what it is called moon madness that according to popular belief, leads to higher crime levels and emotions or running higher than usual “disintegrating the individual and uniting the collectivity” (Lapeyronnie, 2009, 32).

The moon is known to be the symbol of a feminine goddess and can change from a tiny sliver into a full round orb until it disappears from sight. Like Dounia, the moon appears, disappears and acts mysteriously; in other words, the character occupies “spaces of both inclusion and exclusion” (Geesey, 2011:175)<sup>27</sup>. This last symbol shows the illusion that Dounia lived in. Warning signs in the movie such as the deformed mirror, the deformed gaze behind fences or the palpable money lead to believe that Dounia’s power lies in her space and through her androgynous status. Money and trying to play out in a mainly man’s world of drugs show the limit of taking this road, a road of danger; where Dounia, regardless, shows survival.

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<sup>26</sup> Lapeyronnie, D. (2009). “Primitive Rebellions in the French Banlieues”. In Tshimanga, D. *Frenchness and the African Diaspora*, IUP.

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