

# Sympathy for the Other: Female Solidarity and Postcolonial Subjectivity in Francophone Cinema

---

Kathleen Scott, Independent Scholar

(kathleenscott99@gmail.com)

Stefanie Van de Peer, Independent Scholar

(stefanievandeppeer@gmail.com)

## Abstract:

In this article we explore how female sympathy and solidarity can be forged between transnational subjects and spectators. In particular, we place cinematic depictions of minority female suffering in the contexts of current feminist and postcolonial praxes. The aim is to demonstrate the ways in which world cinema can produce a transnational feminist solidarity through forms and narratives that reflect the experiences of women as gendered postcolonial subjects. Amongst the female and feminist theorists drawn upon, central to our understanding of a transnational feminist solidarity is Sandra Lee Bartky's '*mitgefühl*' (feeling-with). From this understanding we suggest bonds of sympathetic solidarity between audiences and diegetic female subjects that bridge their ontological separation, without conflating the two, in relation to *Rachida* (Yamina Bachir Chouikh, 2002) and *Frontière(s)* (Xavier Gens, 2007). In combining film-philosophy, cinematic affect and feminist theory we formulate a radically new way of understanding and envisioning the construction of female suffering onscreen: as a means of producing transnational forms of spectator solidarity.

**Keywords:** feminism; solidarity; postcolonial film theory; francophone film; Arab women; audience allegiance; the gaze; Bartky.

*Film-Philosophy* 20 (2016): 168–194

DOI: 10.3366/film.2016.0009

© Kathleen Scott and Stefanie Van de Peer. The online version of this article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited. For commercial re-use, please contact [permissions@eup.ed.ac.uk](mailto:permissions@eup.ed.ac.uk).  
[www.eupublishing.com/journal/film](http://www.eupublishing.com/journal/film)

## *Sympathy for the Other*

This article explores the ways in which women spectators, viewing films transnationally, can approach cinematic depictions of minority female suffering in a manner that is amenable to current feminist and postcolonial praxes. Indeed, the fact that feminism and postcolonialism intertwine on theoretical, philosophical and cinematic levels allows us to weave together several related strands of philosophy and cultural theory when discussing recent films, while also performing in-depth textual analyses of how female minority subjectivity is constructed. In employing such an intersection of film-philosophy and feminist theory, we aim to formulate a radically new way of understanding and envisioning the construction of female suffering onscreen: as a means of producing transnational forms of spectatorial solidarity. This linkage of the political and affective elements of contemporary film is especially germane when considering the ethical relationship of spectators to images of female pain and fear.

In developing this linkage of film-philosophy, feminist theory and cinematic affect, we mainly draw upon the work of female and feminist theorists, such as Sandra Lee Bartky, E. Ann Kaplan, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Lúcia Nagib, Ella Shohat and Gayatri Spivak. Central to our understanding of a transnational feminist solidarity is Bartky's '*mitgefühl*' or feeling-with, a phenomenological tool enabling spectators' alignment with women protagonists through structures of political and other sympathies.<sup>1</sup> This focus allows us to highlight and build upon the rich and multifaceted contributions that female philosophers and theorists have made to current understandings of female subjectivity and its construction through cinematic violence. This is in contrast to a Levinasian ethics in which the (feminine) 'Other' is categorised as radically different and removed from the self, irrespective of its place on the male/female, masculine/feminine spectrum. We suggest bonds of sympathetic solidarity between audiences and diegetic female subjects that bridge this ontological separation, without conflating the two. This co-existential approach to understanding spectators as ethical subjects privileges sympathy and solidarity, and as such invokes a promising way of understanding how the spectator is politically and ethically implicated in cinematic violence and female suffering.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. We understand Bartky's 'feeling-with' as similar in many respects to the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of 'being-with,' in which subjects are defined by (and only by) their relations to others. For a cohesive overview of the use of Nancian theory in contemporary film-philosophy, see McMahon 2012.
  2. The slippage in terminology between the words viewer, audience and spectator must be acknowledged. In this article, we prefer to consistently use the term 'spectator', as we do refer to the active, phenomenal, and intersubjective participants in film that term

To this end, we explore two very different films, *Rachida* (Yamina Bachir Chouikh, 2002) and *Frontière(s)* (Xavier Gens, 2007) that represent the experience of the gendered Arab body under attack. One an Algerian political drama, the other a French horror film, both look at the postcolonial subjectivity of an Arab woman whose body is abused by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Genre doubtlessly has a major impact on spectators' perceptions of cinematic violence in each film, especially genres such as horror and melodrama that are often understood as packaging female pain and suffering as 'spectacles' to be consumed by voyeuristic spectators. However, we show that gendered violence can elicit a feminist, transnational solidarity among subjects within films and between subjects and spectators, regardless of genre or national background. Although these films hail from different parts of the world, we analyse them together because the relationship between France and its Arab post-colony, whether within the cosmopolitan centre or outside of it, links the female protagonists of *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)*, as they physically, emotionally and ontologically experience the consequences of postcolonial gendered violence.

The eponymous *Rachida* (Ibtissem Djouadi) is a schoolteacher in Algeria's capital city Algiers. She is shot in the womb for not obeying an ex-pupil turned Islamic terrorist's demand that she take a bomb into her school. Miraculously, *Rachida* survives, but the trauma of being attacked and left for dead leads her and her mother to flee to the countryside in the north of Algeria. Here, *Rachida* becomes a teacher once again and they slowly resume their lives – before the terrorism suffered in Algiers follows them to the periphery. However, the two women and their small community of female friends manage to withstand attacks in spite of the continued gendered violence perpetrated onto the bodies of the women in the village. While *Rachida*'s mother enacts a protective stance over a woman who has been raped, *Rachida* protects her schoolchildren and defiantly continues teaching even though the

---

implies. Yet we want to clarify the substantial differences in the meaning of these concepts for the purpose of this article; all three are involved in the process of the production of meaning. For us, the viewer is an abstract entity that the director may have in mind when making the film. As Minh-Ha says: 'the viewer must be inscribed in the way the film is scripted and shot – solicited to interact and to retrace it in viewing the film' (Minh-Ha, 333). The audience is the collectivity of subjects who watch the film. The spectator in turn is an aware subject experiencing the act of receiving the message from the subjects in the film consciously and interactively. The spectator provides the subjectivity with which both director and subject create an intersubjective relationship for the benefit of the subjective message.

same group of terrorists that is active in the capital has destroyed the rural school.

Likewise, Yasmin (Karina Testa), the young woman of Arab descent in *Frontière(s)*, suffers an assault on her identity as her pregnant body comes under attack twice. First she undergoes and partakes in Parisian *banlieue* violence as a right-wing government tightens its control over second and third generation migrant families. As Yasmin flees north from Paris towards the border with Luxembourg, the film brutally envisions the suffering of a pregnant female minority subject at the hands of fascist captors. Here again, two women ultimately form a bond of solidarity that allows the protagonist to escape her captivity.

*Rachida* and *Frontière(s)* thus explore female suffering engendered by postcolonial violence and terrorism. Each film depicts this suffering through an explicit movement away from the geopolitical and ideological centre towards the periphery, symbolised by a focus on the womb – either through destruction (*Rachida*'s belly is shot) or re-construction (Yasmin is carrying new life). Both films also illustrate the ways in which intersubjective compassion and solidarity are possible between subjects with widely disparate backgrounds and experiences – including diegetic subjects and spectators. We argue that, in parallel with the female solidarity witnessed onscreen, a transnational form of spectatorial solidarity is produced through films such as these that embody the intersection of gendered suffering and postcolonial critique. This transnational feminist solidarity is comprised of politicised forms of compassion and sympathy, in which spectators are sensually, politically and philosophically engaged in the instances of female suffering and postcolonial violence they witness onscreen. *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)* embody such an intersection. Through detailed explorations of these films, we demonstrate the ways in which world cinema can produce a transnational feminist solidarity through forms and narratives that reflect the experiences of women as gendered postcolonial subjects.

In the next section, we provide brief introductions to the three specific strands of our research, the major areas of inquiry that are woven together through the course of our arguments. This is then followed by in-depth engagements with *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)*. Firstly, we are interested in feminist ethics and philosophy as they relate to the concepts and practices of compassion and solidarity; secondly, we employ aspects of postcolonial film studies to explore the racialised and gendered dimensions of female suffering; and finally, we draw upon world cinema literature to inform our approach to the geo-political contexts of each film and the experiences of the female protagonists within them.

### **Feminist Spectatorship Ethics**

We base our understanding of transnational feminist solidarity on the processes of allegiance, affinity and sympathy. By postulating a form of solidarity that simultaneously invites the co-existence of separate subjects while recognising and respecting the differences among them, we encapsulate the political and ethical responsibilities involved in witnessing the suffering of gendered and racialised subjects onscreen.

The central question is how exactly a transnational feminist spectatorship ethics of sympathetic solidarity with female suffering is enacted through film form and narrative. We find sympathy to be a more useful political tool than empathy when discussing an ethical relationship to female suffering, in so far as sympathy encourages the spectator to approximate the politicized position of a minority subject. In fiction films such as the ones we discuss, the spectator is presumed to be sympathising with the main female character. However, when that character is marked as an 'Other,' or a 'subaltern' in Gayatri Spivak's terms (1998), a sympathetic alignment can be difficult to attain. To clearly illustrate how the process of affective and political sympathy translates into feminist solidarity with an 'Othered' female body, we turn to the work of cognitive film theorist Murray Smith on spectatorial alignment and allegiance with diegetic characters (1995) and Sarah Cooper on the face-to-face encounter and the idea of proximity to alterity (2007).

Smith argues that spectatorial engagement with diegetic characters is determined by a structure of sympathy involving imaginative engagement, rather than identification. He explains that imaginative engagement can enrich spectators' emotional, physical, and intellectual involvement with film, especially those films that envision situations, persons and values that are 'alien.' Smith's structure of sympathy is comprised of three different levels of engagement: recognition, alignment and allegiance. Recognition is the realisation that the traits of a character correspond to analogical traits in the 'real' world; namely, these characters could be persons in the real world, and spectators are able to recognise them as such. Alignment occurs when spectators are encouraged by a film to occupy a viewing position or perspective from which they can access the character's knowledge, emotions and experiences. Lastly, allegiance is a moral and ideological evaluation of a character by spectators, wherein spectators become affectively aroused and feel they have reliable access to the character's state of mind, thus understanding the context of her or his actions and able to morally evaluate the character on the basis of this knowledge (Murray 1995, 4–5, 96).

Cooper also characterises the ethical relationship of spectators to film as involving a physical and emotional access to diegetic characters.

## *Sympathy for the Other*

Cooper builds upon and critiques Levinas' understanding of alterity as she discusses the encounter with the 'unknowable other' and the space of responsibility constructed within that encounter. Developing Levinas' idea of the face-to-face encounter with the 'Other,' Cooper points out the possibility of a spectatorial openness to alterity in which proximity serves as an alternative to identification. Audiences and characters are therefore, in her thinking, brought together in face-to-face encounters in which the space of responsibility is constructed. This in turn reminds us of Algerian philosopher Assia Djebar's ideas about being close to the other: she says that 'it is important not to presume to speak *for* – or even worse – *about* women, at best to stand *at their side* and, if at all possible, *directly next to them*' (Hillauer, 5: italics in original). Djebar called this the 'most important act of solidarity' enacted by women who have the freedom to represent. We take this further and show that an inter-diegetic solidarity becomes possible and visible through structures of allegiance and proximity.

Rather than replicating cinematic feelings, as in identification, the spectator thus responds to these feelings *sympathetically* either through understanding (as in recognition and alignment) or evaluating and responding (as in allegiance). For example, spectators might not be able to replicate the postcolonial rape victim's feelings and experiences, but they should be able to understand these feelings and experiences, and respond to them in a compassionate manner. Smith's structure of sympathy and Cooper's face-to-face encounter thus help us to understand how a transnational ethics of sympathy for the Other can be enacted through spectators' engagement with film form and narrative.

In further articulating our model of a feminist ethics of transnational solidarity, we draw on the work of philosophers and cultural theorists who examine the gendered and racialised elements of spectators' ethical relationship to film. Feminist film scholars have been particularly invested in exploring the ways in which gendered subjectivities and relations in film impact upon audiences in political and ethical terms. Of special interest to us are scholars such as E. Ann Kaplan who inflect these investigations with cultural analyses that account for diverse audiences, and who specifically address the gendered and racialised implications of viewing the 'Other' onscreen.

Kaplan has interrogated the male and imperial gazes as they relate to spectatorship and representations of women onscreen in works such as *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (1997). Kaplan makes a specific distinction between 'looking' and 'gazing' that is important for our present analyses. Kaplan first distinguishes between 'looking' and 'gazing' along the lines of gender and race, noting that '[l]ooking will connote curiosity about the Other, a wanting to

know...while the gaze I take to involve extreme anxiety – an attempt in a sense *not* to know, to deny. [...] The gaze...connotes an active subject versus a passive object' (1997, xvii–xviii). As opposed to the gaze, the look for Kaplan has the potential of 'bringing to view a hitherto unrepresented portion of society' (1997, xx), dialogically incorporating both reciprocity and solidarity. Kaplan's argument focuses mainly on the fact that the cinematic subjectivities of spectators and diegetic characters alike are intimately bound up with cultural and bio-political understandings of race, gender and colonial history.

Taking this conceptualisation further, we want to distinguish between 'looking' and 'seeing.' The word 'seeing' implies an ethical rapprochement between two subjects. Seeing enables a true inter-subjectivity, and implies understanding and acceptance. The activity of seeing is transnationally significant: if one 'sees' the Other through the act of looking, one acknowledges the Other's subjectivity and therefore establishes a reciprocal relationship based on proximity, allegiance, understanding and solidarity.

To make further connections between the legacy of feminist critiques of vision and our present articulation of a spectatorial ethics of sympathetic and compassionate solidarity with female suffering, we turn to feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky's thinking on subjectivity and solidarity. In *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (2004) Bartky suggests that a transnational, multicultural form of feminist solidarity can be achieved through political and affective alignment with the experiences of others. Bartky suggests German phenomenological philosopher Max Scheler's concept of *mitgefühl*, or sympathetic 'feeling-with,' as a useful tool for feminist solidarity in this regard. *Mitgefühl* involves a sympathetic attitude resulting from a combination of affective alignment and knowledge of the context of the suffering of others – a form of affective infection that is politically conscious, while also being emotionally and physically inflected (Bartky 2002, 71–3, 80).

A feminist *mitgefühl* would then require an affective alignment or proximity to the bodily experiences of other women, as well as a recognition of sexual inequalities between men and women, and among women of different races, ethnicities, classes, sexual orientations etc. (Bartky 2002, 141–3). We argue that a feminist feeling-with is accomplished in films such as *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)*, which impart sympathetic transmissions of female trauma that extend beyond the realm of the purely visual – that is, each film provides shocking and contemplative moments of tactility that encourage spectators to adopt a sympathetic position. This affective transmission encourages a sympathetic bond between female protagonists and spectators of any gender or sex.

**Postcolonial and World Cinema Studies**

Postcolonial theory and practice, as they relate to solidarity and cinematic experience, also have special relevance to our explorations of the political and ethical resonances of female suffering. Here we focus specifically on the historical and geo-political context of postcolonial France, including its relationship with the post-colony and the role that bio-political understandings of the 'body politic' play within the imagined national community. We interrogate the connection between French understandings of the postcolonial body politic and female bodily subjectivity, focusing on the ways in which the concept of *l'enceinte parisienne*, or 'the pregnant Parisian woman,' influences the ways in which films encourage spectators to relate politically and ethically to pregnant female protagonists onscreen. Here we take the concept of *l'enceinte parisienne* to encompass not only the pregnant Yasmin, but also women such as Rachida whose wombs become targets for postcolonial violence and identity politics.

Our focus on the postcolonial elements of film, media culture and spectatorship in the context of recent cinema also draws upon the work of postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon. In works such as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967[1952]) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961 [1967]), Fanon details his experiences as a black postcolonial subject in France and the post-colony. He articulates his process of realising that he is 'Other' to majoritarian French subjectivity – a process that has direct bearing on the films and modes of spectatorship that we address here, in that sympathy and solidarity counteract this unethical mode of ontological and philosophical Othering.

Of particular importance to us is Fanon's analysis of the ways in which the spatial organisation of racialised subjects in postcolonial France impacted on relations between racial minorities and majoritarian white subjects. Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the 'colonial world is a world divided into compartments' (1967, 29) – the hygienic security of the coloniser and the abject, 'unclean' poverty of the colonised. The divisions that Fanon identified are borne out in films such as *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)*. In these films, the confinement of the female protagonists and their friends to the peripheral villages and the slaughter house envisions the space of the colonised as 'a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire...' (1967, 30).

Fanon also identifies an affective dimension to colonial and postcolonial relations that has bearing on the violence visited upon the female

protagonists in the films we discuss here. He argues that the violence of the colonial environment, the ‘searing bullets and bloodstained knives’ (1967, 28) that enforce its rule over minority subjects, ultimately transforms feelings of rage on the part of colonial subjects into affects of solidarity and sympathy. That is, a form of co-existential subjectivity arises in which the witnessing of postcolonial struggles ‘transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors’ (Fanon 1967, 28) – and thus creates a bond between them and those whose suffering they witness. Anti-colonial solidarity is thus a practice of co-existential compassion:

Individualism is the first to disappear... The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native’s mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom will discover the falseness of this theory. The very forms of organization of the struggle will suggest to him a different vocabulary. Brother, sister, friend – these are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie. (Fanon 1967, 36)

Fanon’s articulation of a racially aware and sympathetic solidarity with the suffering of racialised subjects in France, and in the post-colony, dovetails with our proposal of spectatorial solidarity with minority female subjects in contemporary francophone cinema. We argue that solidarity with female suffering involves a form of sympathetic compassion that is imbued with the intersectional qualities of gender and race, rather than either term alone.

On the topic of gender, feminist postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Ella Shohat have explored the oft-occluded female experience in the history of colonisation and postcolonial life. In her key text ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988), Spivak explores how women from the Third World are marginalised, and thus rendered incapable of truly knowing and speaking for themselves. In works such as ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ (1984), ‘“Under Western Eyes” Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles’ (2003) and ‘Post-Third-Worldist Culture. Gender, Nation and the Cinema’ (2003), Mohanty and Shohat also debate the violent oppression and suppression of the postcolonial (and oftentimes female) subject.

Both Mohanty and Shohat (in)directly criticise Spivak for underestimating the minority subject’s ability to speak. Mohanty argues that ‘it is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented’ (1984, 354).

## *Sympathy for the Other*

She states that colonised peoples know themselves and the coloniser all too well, and asserts that claiming the opposite is based on a privileged standpoint rooted in postmodern relativism and Marxist feminism (2003, 511). From Spivak's point of view, the subaltern is no longer subaltern as soon as she or he speaks. Mohanty and Shohat's discourse is more optimistic in allowing space for the possibility that the subaltern, Othered woman knows herself and can speak for herself. From their discourse it becomes clear that they agree that it is more likely that as outsiders, the 'we' of Western women have become so used to defining themselves as the non-Other, non-subaltern, that they cannot include the Othered subaltern in their understanding of the world; that is, they cannot 'see' the Other, even if she speaks.

Spivak's negative answer to her own question has been widely contested, and we could say that listening and seeing via sympathetic spectatorship renders cinema the ideal medium through which to deal with this problem of female invisibility and non-communication. However, the postcolonial relationship between France and its ex-colonies has involved a distinct lack of reciprocity of listening and seeing – speaking and gazing at an Other have generally dominated. As a tool to move beyond this one-way traffic embodied by gazing and speaking (rather than listening and seeing), a transnational feminist ethics of spectatorship enables solidarity, specifically in its critical explorations of the voice and the gaze.

Mohanty in particular focuses her attention on the ability of feminist solidarity to oppose the violence of colonial praxis. For Mohanty, solidarity is an activist stance: it indicates mutuality, accountability and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. It is not enough therefore, to look: 'seeing' the Other in an ethically responsible manner becomes imperative. Diversity and difference are the basis for a reflective solidarity that defies the more common 'them vs. us' discourse, and replaces it with the 'you and me can communicate *with* a third' discourse. This discourse explicitly foregrounds inclusivity and communication, as it refers back to Kaplan's spectatorial insights into 'looking', and our own thoughts on 'seeing.' However, Mohanty cautions her readers that this solidarity must encompass an understanding of subjectivity as intersectional; that is, as comprised of a variety of identity factors beyond gender or race:

What is problematical, then, about this...use of 'women' as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as

socio-economic political groups *within* particular local contexts, this move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. (1984, 344)

Mohanty emphatically engages with the politics of difference in insisting that Third World women are not a homogenous mass. She advocates strongly for a transnational solidarity between women of colour, white women and women from the areas known as the Third World. She acknowledges the need for a shared frame of reference and a 'search for a common feminist political project, within a framework of solidarity and shared values' (Mohanty 2003, 502). She further argues that this feminist solidarity must be based on the realisation that women across the globe live with common differences, by which she means that diversity and specificity must not be eroded away by generalisations, but should encourage women everywhere to find a common agenda.<sup>3</sup>

Shohat likewise 'emphasizes the particularities and diversity of local struggles for gender equality, and recuperates gender and sexuality from universalizing narratives of national history' (Murphy 2006, 14). She focuses on cinema produced by women from a wide variety of countries during the eighties and nineties in which women reclaim their bodies from the apparatus of the nation state. While Shohat accepts the particularities of nationalist struggles and the consequences of these struggles for women, she refuses to subscribe to any notion of globalised sisterhood. Rather, she argues that the 'national' must cross borders and accept its hybridity, while also recognising its particularities. (Mohanty says of Shohat that she studies regions and cultures 'in a way that transcends the conceptual borders inherent in the global cartography of the cold war' [Mohanty 2003, 520].)

Here we echo Mohanty and Shohat in postulating a solidarity with female suffering in film that is compassionate and sympathetic towards female experience, without being universalising and totalising. That is, while recognising that axes of difference such as race, nationality, class, sexuality and gender invariably impact on how spectators respond to female experiences of suffering onscreen, a mode of compassionate vision – a feminist *mitgefühl* – has the ability to generate feminist forms of solidarity and sympathy across these classifications and borders.

Mohanty's and Shohat's concern with the diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and gendered experiences of particular subjects is also borne

---

3. We would add that we consider each and every spectator on the male/female, masculine/feminine spectrum to have the ability and the responsibility to engage with female suffering through an inclusive form of feminist solidarity.

out in the field of World Cinema Studies. By featuring cinematic examples from both France and the post-colony, and specifically dealing with gendered violence, we establish the ways in which spectatorial solidarity with female suffering is both impacted by, and can transcend, spectators' cultural and political contexts and backgrounds.

The work of world and transnational cinema theorist Lúcia Nagib has been particularly instructive on this point. In *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (2011) Nagib argues that the philosophical and ethical import of world cinemas is inextricably tied to the political history and the geo-political context in which it is produced, as 'making films is making history... and therefore producing an ethical reality' (2011, 15). Nagib's understanding of the spectator as an ethical subject who relates to film in an intersubjective manner signals the disappearance of the ethico-philosophical category of the Other, which in turn opens up to the possibility of intersubjective solidarity: bonds of sympathy and affinity established between spectators and characters from a wide variety of national and geo-political contexts. Her work supports our point that it is necessary to move away from the Levinasian concept of the infinite alterity of the Other for whom we are infinitely responsible and from whom we are infinitely distant, towards an intersubjective and co-existential understanding of spectatorial subjectivity. What is needed is an 'act of interrogating the self about its relationship to the other' (Nagib 2011, 10).

In this sense we are sympathetically aligned with Nagib's film-philosophical outline in arguing that certain films, such as the two we explore in this essay, can enable intersubjective solidarity through alignment with female pain. Nagib's interrogation of the spectatorial self's relationship to the cinematic Other allows us to recognise how understanding spectatorship as an intersubjective experience generates an ethics of feminist solidarity and compassion, rather than distanced identification. As we now explore in the context of *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)*, this solidarity often includes affective, emotional and intellectual sympathy with gendered postcolonial subjects.

#### **The Extreme Internal Other and Female Solidarity in *Rachida***

*Rachida* is the first full-length feature film directed by Yamina Bachir Chouikh. Although it portrays the threats, acts and consequences of sexual intimidation and rape, it is more aesthetically palatable than *Frontière(s)*. This is mostly due to the former film's light and airy visual style, as well as its initial presentation of the female protagonist as a fun-loving, beautiful young teacher representing hope and progress for Algeria. This difference in tone is also due to the formal elements, in that the filmmaker inserts comic interludes, sub-plots and short vignettes

that function as beacons of hope within the political narrative and provide the spectator with time to reflect on the women's relationships with one another. Style and form then already illustrate the strength and resourcefulness of female communities.

*Rachida* evokes memories of the worst atrocities of the Islamist terror campaign in Algeria in the 1990s, on a personal as well as a wider political scale. The political nature of the film aligns it directly with Shohat's, and in particular Fanon's readings of anti-racist solidarities. In the film, a young teacher named Rachida works at a school in Algiers, and is stopped in the street by a group of youths led by Sofiane (Djatout Kamel), a former student, who demands she take a bomb and place it in the school. With echoes of the terrorist attacks by women portrayed in *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), a bomb-carrying basket is thrust into her hands. Rachida refuses, and after she hands the basket back to the youths, she is cold-bloodedly shot in the womb and left for dead.<sup>4</sup> Women in Haïks rush to her aid and cover her lovingly with their white veils. Miraculously, she survives, but the trauma leaves its marks on her body and psyche. To recover, she goes into internal exile with her mother to a rural village in the north of Algeria, where her head teacher has found her a new job as a schoolteacher. However, terrorism is inescapable there too. Factions of the Islamist terrorist groups operate in the wilderness in and around the village, kidnapping and raping women and killing indiscriminately.

*Rachida* premiered at Cannes in 2002 in the *Un Certain Regard* section, and was subsequently screened at several festivals worldwide (such as the London Film Festival, the African Film Festival in Cordoba and the Festival International du Film d'Amiens). While some may see this film as a typical 'festival film,' it is also one of the few films to have been made in Algeria in the last decade. In a country where cinema is rare, *Rachida*, shot on location and directed by a woman, is a victory in itself for the solidarity between filmmaker and actresses, and thus all the more effective in its ability to impact upon an international audience. Furthermore, the film encourages spectators to develop a transnational form of solidarity with the 'Othered' female community under attack, by incorporating styles and forms that appeal to a diverse, multi-ethnic audience.

This feminist solidarity is also linked to the historical context in which the film was produced. During the decade of the so-called Black Years in

---

4. The assonance of 'womb' and 'bomb' perhaps suggests a poetic symbolism in the shot in Rachida's womb as she refuses to carry the bomb. It supports, in a poetic way, the links between violence suffered by a nation and the violence projected onto a woman's body.

the 1990s,<sup>5</sup> postcolonial Algeria created ‘an extreme other’ (Martin 2011, 98) who embodied the fear of the enemy within the country, as opposed to the French Other of the War for Independence. *Rachida* proposes that this extreme Other was male, and focuses on the role women played in defying the terror created within the national imaginary. The film explores ‘the psychological affect of war’ (Martin 2011, 99) as well as the physical scars it leaves, and examines how female solidarity challenges such violent and chaotic environments, where things are not necessarily explained but everything is nonetheless understood. The intricacies of the conflict are not explicitly elucidated, but left implied, thus challenging the audience to ‘see’ instead of ‘gaze’ – to understand and sympathise. By aligning her female protagonists with diverse embodiments of the Algerian woman, Bachir Chouikh invites a transnational audience to experience *mitgefühl*, and to form an allegiance with those who are subaltern, but who have nevertheless gained vision and voice. The film reveals how violence lurks in the shadows – suggesting rather than making explicit terror and violence, and perhaps as such making them more acutely experienced by sympathetic spectators.

The fact that *Rachida* is shot in the womb refers to a number of political and symbolic interpretations relating to *l’enceinte parisienne*, according to which the female belly functions as a metonym for fertility, and – as we shall also see further in *Frontière(s)* – here refers to the woman’s central role as a life-giving vessel. First, the reference to rape as a weapon of war and oppression confirms that fertility and motherhood are seen as means through which to ascertain the continuation of the race. *Rachida*’s fiancé is keen to start a family and has issues with her insistence on being an independent woman. As a result of his ambiguous love for *Rachida*, she keeps him at a distance by hiding their relationship from friends and colleagues. Lastly, *Rachida* is a primary school teacher, which again references her role as a maternal figure, even if the children are not her own.

Aside from these references to fertility and motherhood, sensuality provides another explanation for the focus on *Rachida*’s womb during the shooting sequence. *Rachida* is not a stereotypical Algerian woman. She does not wear a veil – let alone the *Haïk*, the typical full white veil worn in Algeria. Instead, she is portrayed as a sensual, proud, liberal woman who likes to look good and have fun. Her liberal spirit and light-hearted disposition enable an initial transnational feminist spectatorship. The film

---

5. The ‘Black Years’ refers to the years of civil war in Algeria, a period of armed conflict between the government and several Islamic rebel groups.

in fact opens with a prolonged extreme close-up of her applying make-up and loosening her hair for the purpose of the class photo. A shot of her lips and eyes, her hair being styled and her smiling at her own reflection, bring the spectator into face to face proximity, and directly align her with Rachida. She is smiling and humming a song, while others wait for her. One of the more pious women teaching in the school reinforces Rachida's sensuality by remarking that she herself does not want to be in the photograph, and that she is lucky her husband is letting her work at all. This close-up 'portrayal of [Rachida's] defiance of fundamentalist codes' (Austin 2012b, 150), both in the mirror scene and through the contrast it establishes with the extreme violence that follows, further encourages a sufficiently complex reading for the spectators to feel like they are not only 'looking' in Kaplan's sense of the word, but that they can further also 'see' or understand Rachida from the start, to align themselves with her through physical and emotional sympathy. Instead of adhering to stereotypical portrayals of submissive women, *Rachida* enacts the female solidarity inherent to a feminist interpretation of Islamic practices.

The veil, and in particular the Algerian Haïk, is the subject of much gendered engagement with Algerian women. This discourse arguably started with Fanon, whose article 'Algeria Unveiled' (1959) shows how women became involved in the struggle for independence as freedom fighters, and how the veil (both through unveiling and re-veiling) was one of the impetuses for and also a weapon in the war of independence. The colonialists' enforced unveiling of women was appropriated by the anti-colonial struggle and led to women being employed as revolutionary informants or traffickers. Fanon shows how the unveiling became a tool used by women in entering the Revolution, through 'blending in' or mirroring the coloniser in appearance, while at a later stage in the Revolution women re-veiled, in order to use the veil as a screen behind which to hide identities, contraband and weapons. The same can be said of the use of the veil in *Rachida* as a mode of fighting against patriarchal terrorists. In positioning the individuality of the terrorist or coloniser in opposition to the solidarity of colonised peoples, Fanon shows how women, using both veiling and unveiling as a tool in the struggle for liberation, come together in spite of the physical boundaries between them.

The 'historic dynamism of the veil' (1959, 63) Fanon describes is also valid for the post-colonial body-politic, as '[t]his woman who sees without being seen frustrates the [oppressor]. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself' (1959, 44). The woman 'sees' – she observes and understands the other from beneath the safety of the veil. Nevertheless, while there is 'no reciprocity' and total

defiance towards the extreme internal other (the men, whether these are colonisers or terrorists), among women the veil represents protection and community. By foregrounding this double practice of the veil, *Rachida* also embraces the transnational female spectator by presenting a method of allegiance under the cover of the veil. The intimate proximity of this placement of women under the veil enables a powerful female solidarity.

While *Rachida* – with the support of her mother, fellow teachers and in particular the children she cares for – eventually manages to overcome her trauma through witnessing others' testimonies, two other young girls in the film are not so fortunate. As Guy Austin has explained, *Rachida* depicts the 'trauma of the Black Years as a story of women' (2012b, 149), where terrorists are male and rape is a weapon of war. Most importantly, Austin notes, the film reveals a female resistance to patriarchal Islamist discourse. This group feeling – or *mitgefühl*, to use Bartky's term – of female solidarity among the women in the film is most acute in two important sub-plots involving Hadjar (Amel Chouikh) and Zohra (Rachida Messaoui), who elicit immediate sympathy from the audience and their village friends.

Hadjar is the subject of one of the sub-plots, a Romeo and Juliet-type story of doomed romance. Hadjar is in love with Khaled (Zaki Boulouafed), but as he is unemployed her father will not allow them to marry. On her wedding night to another man, Hadjar is kidnapped by terrorists, raped and left for dead. The romantic notion of impossible love is melodramatically emphasised by her torture and death the night before she is due to marry a more financially suitable husband. Likewise, Zohra is found one day after having been kidnapped and raped. She survives the rape and is carrying her captor's child. She comes back to the village, knocks on all doors but is rejected by her own family.

What is interesting here is the change of style in the film: as Austin has pointed out (2012b, 151), Bachir Chouikh changes from her usual restrained, fluid, gentle style of filming the bodies of the women, to a more frantic, jerky, handheld style when she films Zohra running in the woods and escaping her captors. This could tentatively be described as a 'messy' aesthetic, staying so close to the woman's bloodied and dirty body that the spectator is plunged into allegiance with her. While spectators have not witnessed the kidnapping and rape, they are immediately aligned with Zohra through extreme close-ups and an ambient sound design that foregrounds her anxious breathing. Her obvious physical pain is transformed into an emotional agony when her father says that 'she [Zohra] is no longer my daughter, I don't want her. I'd rather she be dead. She humiliated us, dishonoured us.' The shock of physical trauma becoming emotional pain also enables the spectator to become enraged

with this father, and consequently experience an acute sense of sympathy with Zohra. The fact that she is carrying the child of one of the terrorists emphasises the importance of this violence as a gendered act: men are the extreme internal Other to the women who experience the pain perpetrated by them, whether they are Islamists or family.

It is not only the spectator who is invited to really 'see' and sympathise with Zohra – she is also 'seen' and defended by the village women. As was the case with Rachida at the start of the film, the veil becomes a symbol of protection and female solidarity. In a choreography of veils echoing Rachida being covered with white Haïks, the women of the village cover Zohra's bleeding, half-naked body in colourful protection, and she is accepted into the home of her elder sister. That the veils are colourful and transparent rather than white and impenetrable is significant insofar as this colour represents Zohra's body needing not the serenity of tradition but the vibrant protection of outspoken female solidarity after being raped and abandoned. When Rachida is shot in the city, she is thought dead and covered by elderly women in a performance of silence and serenity. Zohra on the other hand forcefully expresses her fear, as the new life in her womb represents the future of Algeria, and younger women cover her in a dance of defiance against the rejecting men in the rural village. Bachir Chouikh portrays a complex society coming to terms with a future in which the past is extremely present, where the young will be confronted with the consequences of the acts of the old, and where urban terrorism enters rural villages. Here, the solidarity is *only* possible between women who are able to 'see' the predicament Zohra is in, and her central role in the future of Algerian village life.

In a subsequent hammam<sup>6</sup> scene, Zohra washes the blood off of her body very violently, but is affectionately interrupted by Rachida's mother who tells her not to hurt herself any longer. This is the catalyst that enables Zohra to testify about the rape and express her devastation at her father's rejection. It is thus once again the solidarity between women that enables Zohra to work through her traumatic experience, while further emphasising extra-diegetic alignment on the part of spectators.

The hammam sequence is also symbolic in another way that is directly related to Rachida. She has a visible scar caused by the gunshot to her womb, which she does not want to be seen in the hammam. She is afraid her scar will be interpreted as being the consequence of a caesarean or an abortion, and as a single woman, this would be detrimental for her reputation. While this perhaps problematises the otherwise consistent

---

6. A hammam is a cleansing steam room.

## *Sympathy for the Other*

sense of female solidarity in the village, it also again indicates the central importance of a woman as a sympathetic and compassionate figure rather than someone contributing to the terror. Her refusal to place the bomb in her school at the beginning of the film signals the onset of her political awareness, and the manner in which her body has become both victim of Islamic terrorism and symbol of female defiance, enabling spectators to develop solidarity across the screen, and beyond any sense of Otherness.

The way *Rachida* ends is crucial when it comes to thinking about a spectatorial ethics of transnational solidarity. After a night of chaos and terror in the village, where women are kidnapped as the leader of the terrorists shouts 'leave the pretty ones for me, and find that new teacher,' Rachida defiantly returns to the school to teach. The school is ruined, but even in the ravaged classroom, she stands up, takes up a piece of chalk and writes down: 'today's lesson is...' as some of the children slowly trickle into the classroom. A freeze frame on her face turned at the camera, breaking the fourth wall, indicates a preoccupation with the future of the children, and implicates the spectator directly. Rachida stares up at the camera, and holds the spectators' gaze with an intense teary look. In this way, Rachida's look is a call to women beyond the narrative, to defy the fear experienced through the extreme (internal) Other. Her look creates an ethical 'space of responsibility' in Cooper's understanding. As she 'looks' back, the spectator feels close to Rachida, and really 'sees' in her dogged defiance a silent call for solidarity. Rachida's look enables spectators to physically, emotionally and ethically align themselves with the female subject.

In *Rachida* the veiled and unveiled solidarity between the women and children in a segregated, chaotic society enables Rachida and Zohra to stand up to their terrorist oppressors. Though the Black Years have left Algeria with the trauma of war, and a war without images, filmmakers have attempted to provide the victims of this shared national trauma with a fictionalised account in order to enable the population to acknowledge the 'extreme internal Other' as one of their own and to re-evaluate recent history. Florence Martin points out that '[Bachir Chouikh's] "giving faces" to victims and perpetrators has two consequences: the former are "viewed" as no longer anonymous, while the latter are "seen" as more anonymous' (2011, 100). Giving faces to victims as well as 'seeing' the terrorists is a tactic employed by the director in portraying the latter group not as an anonymous mass (as the media has typically done), but rather as individuals who do not conform to the stereotype of the Islamist terrorist: they are handsome young men, sons of their mothers rather than a bearded and overly pious group of warriors. These are people

who embody the internal Other, but this Other is not so Other that he cannot be 'seen' or 'understood.' The ultimate goal therefore is to look inward for explanations of terrorism, and not outward towards France any longer.

As we will now show, *Frontière(s)* likewise looks inwards, within France this time, to confront the country with its internal struggles with racism, oppression and political misjudgement. Nevertheless, the feminism in *Frontière(s)*, overseen by a male director, does not reject hyper-masculinized violence as strongly as *Rachida* does, framing this instead as a severe critique of the patriarchal family in which the burden of guilt between men and women is more evenly split. *Rachida* is a film that is clear in its stance on the singularity of female solidarity, arguably as the film results from a traditionally segregated society.

### Female Suffering and Postcolonial Violence in *Frontière(s)*

While *Rachida* offers a politically feminist aesthetic in an art-house film, we argue that feminist solidarity can also be articulated in popular genre films such as *Frontière(s)*. *Frontière(s)* begins in the middle of the violent riots that occurred in the Parisian suburbs in 2005, after a far right-wing Minister of the Interior (modelled on then-Minister and future President Nicolas Sarkozy) announces his candidacy for President. The film follows the escape of four minority youths from the police. Yasmin is a young pregnant woman who escapes the city with her ex-boyfriend Alex (Aurélien Wiik) and friends Farid (Chems Dahmani) and Tom (David Saracino). As the four race towards the border with Luxembourg, they decide to spend the night at a hotel which is, unbeknownst to them, run by a clan of neo-Nazi cannibals. The patriarch of this family, a former SS officer referred to as Father (Jean-Pierre Jorris), marries Yasmin to his eldest son Karl (Patrick Ligardes) in order to ensure the survival of a 'pure race' – even though Yasmin is of Arab descent.

*Frontière(s)* was screened at a number of film festivals in Europe and North America, including countries such as France, Germany, Belgium, Spain and Canada. The film also received worldwide theatrical and DVD releases – including in the United States, where its release was limited due to an NC-17 rating. *Frontière(s)* thus has the potential to reach international audiences, and in the process foster transnational bonds of solidarity between the female protagonist and spectators who live outside of the geo-political environment she inhabits. Furthermore, the viscerally impactful style of the film itself, described in detail in the analysis of the film to follow, is designed to overcome physical and ontological boundaries in order to connect spectators with the painful female experiences unfolding onscreen.

## *Sympathy for the Other*

In this manner *Frontière(s)* exists at the border between female suffering and postcolonial critique, in that it envisions the ways in which the two violently intersect in modern and contemporary French political history. This intersection is especially germane to our present interest in the ability of film to encourage and produce bonds of transnational feminist solidarity among spectators and diegetic female characters. Specifically, the figure of the suffering pregnant woman (embodied by Yasmin) intersects with postcolonial racial politics in France, and encourages spectators to encounter her pain with sympathetic and compassionate solidarity.

Paris itself has been referred to as *l'enceinte parisienne*, or 'the pregnant Parisian woman'; that is, a female embodiment of the national body politic that allegorises issues of national identity and belonging in the contemporary socio-political landscape. This metaphorical use of the pregnant female body conflates the womb and the city as the 'home' of a French nation under attack by postcolonial 'Others,' such as non-European immigrants and citizens from former French colonies. The references in *Frontière(s)* to the riots that occurred in the isolated, economically disenfranchised and largely North African Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-bois in 2005 gesture explicitly towards the socio-political and ethical resonances of Yasmin's suffering.

Austin notes the resurgent figuring of the Parisian border as a pregnant Parisian woman in recent French political life. He writes that:

The iconography of motherhood and of newborn infants – in part a legacy of Catholicism – was employed by the Vichy regime and at the Liberation. As recently as February 2010, in an echo of such iconography, government investment publicity presented the image of a pregnant Marianne under the slogan ... ['France invests in its future'] ... Marianne was dressed in white and seemed to incarnate the joys of motherhood as well as its future benefits for the nation (2012a, 106).

This conflation of the pregnant female body with the real and ideological spaces of the nation suggests that the suffering undergone by the pregnant female protagonist in *Frontière(s)* embodies racialised and gendered conflict within the postcolonial French body politic.

The opening credits of *Frontière(s)* gesture explicitly towards this gendered dimension of postcolonial conflict by featuring documentary footage of the 2005 riots in Clichy-sous-bois. Amidst a chaotic scene of burning cars, smoke and gunshots that echoes Fanon's description of colonial space as one ruled by 'searing bullets and bloodstained knives' (1967, 28), rioters are shown battling with police carrying riot shields and marching in formation.

Fictionalised riot footage then introduces the main characters. A shaky handheld camera closely follows the trajectories of Yasmin and her friends, cutting quickly as they evade the police. This destabilised and often obstructed view has a similar effect to that of the ‘messy’ aesthetic analysed above in the depiction of Zohra’s plight in *Rachida*. It grants spectators direct access to Yasmin’s vulnerability and lack of ontological and bodily security, thus aligning them with her in a physical, political, and ethical manner. Spectators next hear a newscast that ‘[t]he Minister of Interior is officially Candidate for the Presidency of the Republic. He’s the subject of the protests. Instability in the country marks the presidential pre-campaign. The police remain in a state of maximum alert.’ This veiled reference to Sarkozy alludes to his inflammatory comments in 2005, in which he referred to rioters as ‘racaille,’ meaning ‘rabble’ or ‘scum’ (‘Nicolas Sarkozy Says France Has Too Many Foreigners’ 2012). After Yasmin and her friends manage to escape the riots, they drive north to an isolated inn run by the aforementioned neo-Nazi cannibals, who are intent on claiming Yasmin’s unborn child for a ‘pure’ race.

*Frontière(s)* makes its most explicit connection between a postcolonial *enceinte parisienne* and an obsession with the ‘purity’ of the body politic in a special ceremony in which Father betroths Yasmin to his son Karl. Father announces that he and his offspring ‘must renew the blood of the family. But I have doubts. I do not know if she [Yasmin] is appropriate. She has too dark a complexion... She does not have pure blood. But we have no other choice... She will be your wife. Remember to protect the race.’ After forcibly having her hair shorn, because ‘Father doesn’t like black hair,’ Father honours Yasmin as the fetal carrier of ‘the only unborn member of our great race.’ Yasmin’s new husband then seals their union with a violent forced kiss as the family toasts to the ‘pure blood.’

In these sequences Yasmin is often confined to small, restricted spaces, both by the camera and by the environment in which she is ensnared. During the betrothal ceremony she is trapped between members of the murderous family as they sit around a communal table, in an underground room which is itself encompassed by mazes of freezers and holding pens containing the butchered bodies of her friends. The camera maintains a close proximity to Yasmin throughout these scenes, surveying her enraged and terrified face in close-up and extreme close-up shots. Later on, when Eva (Maude Forget), a fellow captured bride, cuts Yasmin’s long black locks to comply with Father’s wish that she be de-racialised, close-up shots of the two women highlight their shared trauma and fear in highly affective terms. This affective alignment encourages spectators to adopt

an attitude of sympathetic compassion for the shared and deeply felt sufferings of each woman. That is, the solidarity between Yasmin and Eva that this scene initiates is replicated in the sense of solidarity that spectators are encouraged to feel towards both women.

The protracted, bloody finale in which Yasmin murders the family and escapes with the aid of Eva encapsulates the violent, gruesome, and emphatically 'messy' aesthetics of *Frontière(s)* (such a contrast to the predominantly light and airy visual style of *Rachida*) that underpin its political and ethical project.<sup>7</sup> This finale begins in the underground communal space when Yasmin escapes her confinement and holds a knife to Father's throat, preparing to cut him open before his sons accidentally shoot him down. Yasmin then flees while the clan opens fire on her – she runs desperately down mine shafts and hides among the frozen bodies until she is caught and severely beaten by Goetz (Samuel Le Bihan), another of Father's many male offspring. The camera co-exists with Yasmin in close-up and extreme close-up shots as she is punched, kicked, and thrown around the icy mineshaft, and spectators bear witness to every blow her body endures.

When Yasmin finally murders Goetz by brutally plunging an axe into his body, she then faces Karl in an isolated elevator shaft. Karl sets about strangling Yasmin with a massive machine gun before the elevator doors open and Eva blows his head off. This moment of solidarity between Yasmin and Eva ultimately allows the former to escape – but not before both battle Father's daughters Gilberte (Estelle Lefébure) and Klaudia (Amélie Daure) in an explosive and bloody stand-off. When Gilberte and Klaudia open fire on Yasmin and Eva, Yasmin begins to shoot the gas cans scattered around the barn where she has taken position. The barn then explodes in fire just as rain begins to fall, and Yasmin staggers out of the barn to attack Gilberte – eventually wrestling her to the muddy ground and biting her neck until she tears off a chunk of flesh. In perhaps the most iconic moment of the film, Yasmin holds her bloody and mud-streaked face up to the rain and howls at the sky, her features contorted to an almost inhuman degree with suffering and rage. Spectators experience this moment as a face-to-face encounter with Yasmin, created by the intimate proximity of the camera, as well as their physical and emotional awareness of the suffering she has endured.

---

7. In this sense the aesthetics of *Frontière(s)* depart widely from those of *Rachida*, whose 'cleaner' and calmer tone approximate the joys the title character finds in experiencing female solidarity as an alternative to male violence.

This entire finale consists of fast, jarring cuts and contains a plethora of bloody, mutilated bodies that spectators witness in close-up and extreme close-up. The intimate proximity of the camera to this carnage fills the spectator's vision with Yasmin's subjective experience of entrapment, brutality, pain, anger, hatred, and death. Spectators are drawn into the world Yasmin inhabits and are encouraged to sympathise with the gendered and racialised elements of her suffering.

These bloody and brutal aesthetics of racial conflict tally with contemporary understandings of the modern postcolonial French nation as one in which the category of the racial and ethnic 'Other' looms large in the collective cultural imagination. In her work on post-war French society, Kristen Ross explores the ontological and physical challenges that racial and ethnic 'Others' supposedly posed to the French body politic. According to Ross, post-war French citizens were obsessed with cleanliness and purity (for example, there was a huge boom in the sale of household and personal cleaning products during this time) to a degree that clearly reflected national modernisation and 'purification' efforts (1995, 11, 73, 151, 156).

This particular cinematic imagining of a pregnant minority woman suffering at the hands of a racist patriarchal enclave suggests a similar dynamic operative in the conflict between the minority residents of Clichy-sous-bois and the conservative police state glimpsed earlier in the film. Thus Yasmin's battle with the neo-Nazi family, in being set during the riots, connects her private pain immediately to larger structural and political forms of violence within the French national community.

The neo-Nazi family's obsession with Yasmin's 'purity' (or lack thereof) is thus characterised by the film in racial terms as the co-optation of her unborn child and 'blood' through involuntary marriage to Karl – horrifically evoking France's colonial history as one of forced communion and allegorical rape. (The experience of Eva, who like Yasmin is forced to marry into the family and bear its offspring, also evokes this history.) When this gesture towards France's violent colonial past is combined with the political ramifications of bearing witness to female suffering, an ethical mode of spectatorship arises in which audiences reject the clean, sterile, and 'pure' ontological and philosophical category of the absolute 'Other.' Instead, they can privilege a relationship of sympathetic and compassionate alignment with female and minority suffering (in this case, that of Yasmin and Eva) through affectively disturbing and impactful imagery.

In *Frontière(s)*, Yasmin's womb serves as an embodied site of female vulnerability and pain, both of which are caused by a sadistic and racist national regeneration project. However, Yasmin's physical body also

## *Sympathy for the Other*

functions as a significant source of her strength and determination in a manner that does not reduce her to a foetal carrier in the eyes of spectators. Yasmin is the only one in her group who manages to survive the gruesome co-optation efforts of the right-wing fanatics who demand her 'hospitality' as a lowly foetal carrier.

The opening of the film reinforces this political ambiguity of the womb by featuring sonogram images of Yasmin's foetus. This visual reminder of a now common form of medical intervention into the body of the pregnant woman (at a government hospital, in Yasmin's case) further aligns the regressive nation-state with the neo-Nazi family, particularly in their parallel efforts to control Yasmin and her potential progeny. Yasmin's womb and foetus are immediately not her own, but rather subject to the gaze and control of patriarchal and racist power structures. Even men who are politically and ideologically aligned with Yasmin, such as her brother Sami (Adel Bencherif), try to control her as a reproducing subject, telling her to 'Let the baby be born...You have something important to bring' – even though she desperately wants to abort her foetus at the beginning of the film. *Frontière(s)* is thus concerned first and foremost with aligning spectators physically, emotionally, and politically with Yasmin's subjective and gendered point of view, enabling them to 'see' her in Kaplan's understanding of the term. Just as Yasmin travels from the centre to the periphery of the nation, spectators effectively cross the border that separates their subjectivity from Yasmin in order to engage with her suffering through sympathy and solidarity.

*Frontière(s)* envisions the intersection of feminist spectatorship ethics and postcolonial critique by fostering a sympathetic co-existence with Yasmin as the minority pregnant woman trapped by racist captors. Aesthetic structures of alignment such as extreme close-up following shots employed throughout encourage spectators to feel a sense of physical and emotional proximity to Yasmin's suffering. Furthermore, the film encourages spectators to feel a sense of allegiance toward Yasmin by presenting her as – to borrow Carol Clover's definition of the resourceful female heroine in horror films – a 'Final Girl' (1992) who defeats neo-Nazis embodying racist elements in the national political environment. As a minority pregnant woman Yasmin already embodies the otherness under attack by a nation obsessed with racial and ethnic purity. In *Frontière(s)*, the pain experienced by the bio-politically Other pregnant female body encourages spectators to reflect sympathetically and critically on the racialised aspects of female suffering.

Yasmin, who at the end of the film is left screaming as the police arrest her following her escape from Father's clan, also embodies the female

characters discussed by Kaplan in her writings on media and feminist solidarity, in that such women oftentimes ‘find themselves up against a limit, a border beyond which they cannot cross, and positioned within a set of looking relations which define them negatively’ (1997, 11–12). Yasmin’s position is doubly binding, in that as a French-Arab woman she must simultaneously ‘carry the main symbolic weight of French identity, that of the French nation’ (Kaplan 1997, 166), while also being excluded from such a symbolic identity through her otherness. As a woman and postcolonial subject, Yasmin is thus positioned at the frontier of the national imaginary, a position with which spectators sympathise by being physically, emotionally, politically, and ethically aligned with her.

The highly visceral and disturbing affective impact of *Frontière(s)* and the sensitive, stylised affective approach of *Rachida* both encourage spectators to occupy several related ethical perspectives: an ethical position of sympathy in relation to female suffering, and of political awareness regarding postcolonial conflict and exclusion. These positions are constituted through sensual engagement with chaotic and unclean cinematic violence that conveys its political commentary in affective registers. Spectators’ intimate proximity to Yasmin, Rachida and Zohra throughout each film encourages a sympathetic alignment with their physical, emotional and psychological trauma, and specifically the trauma of women by focusing on attacks against the womb.

This ethical form of spectatorial solidarity with female postcolonial subjects onscreen is transnational in recognising the differences among subjects as essential to non-totalising and inclusive conceptions of subjectivity and social relations. Mohanty describes such a relation as an acknowledgement that ‘[d]ifferences and commonalities...exist in relation and tension with each other in all contexts. What is emphasised are relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist solidarity’ (2003, 521). Namely, a transnational and feminist mode of sympathetic spectatorship is not performed through those films that merely compel spectators to witness the suffering of female and postcolonial subjects, but rather in those such as *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)* that expose the asymmetrical power relations that underlie such suffering. Although *Rachida* and *Yasmin* are somewhat constricted by the lack of space for alternatives – existing within what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term the ‘cramped space’ of politically minor artists and art forms (1986, 17) – *Rachida* and *Frontière(s)* expose, deconstruct and critique the suffering undergone by contemporary minority women under masculinist and patriarchal regimes of bio-political conditioning and control.

## Sympathy for the Other

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austin, Guy (2012). 'Biological Dystopias: The Body in Contemporary French Horror Cinema.' *L'Esprit Créateur* 52.2 (Summer): 99–113.
- (2012). *Algerian National Cinema*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee (2002). *'Sympathy and Solidarity' and Other Essays*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Clover, Carol (1992). *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. London: B.F.I. Publishing.
- Cooper, Sarah (2007). 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas With The Dardenne Brothers', *Film-Philosophy*, 11:2, 66–87.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari (1986). *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Espinosa, Julio Garcia (1979). 'For an Imperfect Cinema.' *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 20: 24–6.
- Fanon, Frantz (1967 [1959]). 'Algeria Unveiled'. *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. Haakon Chevalier. New York: Grove Press, 35–63.
- (1967 [1952]). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.
- (1967 [1961]). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Hillauer, Rebecca (2005). *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers*. Cairo: American University of Cairo Press.
- Martin, Florence (2011). *Screens and Veils. Maghrebi Women's Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- McMahon, Laura (2012). *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis*. Oxford: Legenda.
- Minh-Ha, T.T. and Chen, N. (2000). 'Speaking Nearby.' *Feminism and Film*. Ed. Ann E. Kaplan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 317–335: 333.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (1984). 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.' *Boundary 2* 12.3–13.1 (Spring/Fall): 333–58.
- (2003). "'Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles.' *Signs* 28.2 (Winter): 499–535.
- Murphy, D. (2006). 'Africans Filming Africa: Questioning Theories of an Authentic African Cinema.' *Transnational Cinema, The Film Reader*. Eds. E. Ezra and T. Rowden. London: Routledge, 27–37.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. (1997). *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Nagib, Lúcia (1997). *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
- 'Nicolas Sarkozy Says France Has Too Many Foreigners.' *BBC News*. BBC, 07 Mar. 2012. Web. 08 Aug. 2013. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17280647>>.
- Ross, Kristin (1995). *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.
- Shohat, Ella (2003). 'Post-Third-Worldist Culture. Gender, Nation and the Cinema.' *Rethinking Third Cinema*. Eds. A. Guneratne and W. Dissanayake. New York and London: Routledge, 51–78.
- Smith, Murray (1995). *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

*Film-Philosophy* 20 (2016)

Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Getino (1997). 'Towards a Third Cinema.' *New Latin American Cinema*. Ed. Michael T. Martin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 33–58.

Spivak, Gayatri (1988). 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 24–8.

**FILMOGRAPHY**

Pontecorvo, Gillo (1966) *Battle of Algiers*. Italy/Algeria.

Gens, Xavier (2007) *Frontière(s)/Border(s)*. France.

Chouikh, Yamina Bachir (2002) *Rachida*. Algeria.