

# Nicklas Banke Jensen:

## When the past came back to haunt the French:

### Otherness, stereotypes, and structures of sympathy in *Caché* and *Un Prophète*

#### RESUMÉ

Denne artikel undersøger hvordan *Un Prophète* (2009, Jacques Audiard) og *Caché* (2005, Michael Haneke) anvender sympatistrukturer til at udfordre bestemte stereotypiske fremstillinger af 'fremmede' i Frankrig – i både historisk samt nutidig kontekst. Filmene anlægger vidt forskellige strategier hertil: *Caché* læses som en allegori over Frankrigs behandling af algeriere (særligt i kølvandet på Paris-massakren i 1961), og anvender et misforhold mellem *alignment*- og *allegiance*-strukturer til at udstille Frankrigs position ift. indvandrere som paranoid og hyklerisk. *Un Prophète* demonstrerer den relativitet, der knytter sig til national identitet, ved at *aligne* seeren med "den fremmede", som i narrativet viser sig at fortjene sympati.

#### ABSTRACT

This article investigates how *Un Prophète* (2009, Jacques Audiard) and *Caché* (2005, Michael Haneke) make use of sympathy structures to challenge stereotypes of 'others' in France – in both historical and contemporary contexts. The films employ vastly different strategies: *Caché* reads like an allegory of the French treatment of Algerians and uses a disparity between *alignment* and *allegiance* structures to expose the French attitude towards immigrants as paranoid and hypocritical. *Un Prophète* demonstrates the relativity connected to the concept of national identity by *aligning* the viewer with "the other", who shows himself in the narrative to be worthy of sympathy.

#### EMNEORD

Stereotyper, *structures of sympathy*, *otherness*, fransk film

#### KEYWORDS

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## Introduction

Fear of 'the others', racism, and changing cultural landscapes are hot topics in Europe right now and have been in post-9/11 discourse in general (Shaheen 2009, Higbee 2013). 2015 saw terrorist attacks in both Denmark (February) and France (January and November) perpetrated by 'home-grown' (or, at least, European-grown in the case of the November attacks) Islamist radicals; and, right now, Europe is experiencing what has been dubbed "the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War" due to the Syrian civil war (AFP 2015). These events are challenging public perception of immigration and nationality and adding fuel to a fire that has already been burning for many years, as evidenced by the rapid growth of right-wing anti-immigration parties in many European countries including both France and Denmark.

Issues such as these are in no way new to France, however, with the country's history as a major colonial power; and the subsequent violent separations from some of its former colonies (particularly, Algeria and Indochina) have strained many of France's international relations as well as rendered suspect many ethnic minorities living in France in the eyes of the 'native' French. The Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) is the most prominent example of such a separation — a war that saw extreme cruelty on both sides and ended with an embarrassing loss for the well-equipped French army against the Algerian guerilla forces. The war has had lasting effects on the French-Algerian relationship and has left the large (and growing) Algerian minority in France ambivalent with regard to their subjective sense of belonging — many of them are French citizens but do not feel wholly French and are not treated equally by the 'real' French (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques 2012).

Issues of identity have also played a large part in French cinema in recent years. The so-called *cinéma beur* and *cinéma de banlieue* have addressed issues of racism, culture, and belonging in numerous films since the 1980s when independent directors of Maghrebi descent started making films dealing with the position of people with immigration backgrounds in contemporary France. Mainstream French cinema has also taken up these topics; and, as the subjects for analysis in this article, I have chosen films that deal rather explicitly with French attitudes towards 'others', those non-included people living among 'us': *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005, France/Austria/Germany/Italy) by Austrian director

Michael Haneke and *Un Prophète* (*A Prophet*, 2009, France/Italy) by French director Jacques Audiard. *Caché* puts French hostility towards Algerians on display and frames it within the context of the 17 October 1961 Parisian massacre in which French police opened fire and are estimated to have killed several hundred people in a crowd of approximately 30,000 demonstrating Algerian immigrants – and, then, covered it up. *Un Prophète* does not address any particular historical incident but provides a fictional look at the conditions of a young Arab-French male in trouble with the law.

### Structures of sympathy and stereotypes in *Caché* and *Un Prophète*

Specifically, this paper investigates how *Un Prophète* and *Caché* make use of *sympathy structures* in order to challenge specific viewer understandings of stereotypes of ‘others’ and of France’s colonial past and current issues related to immigration.

‘Sympathy structures’ is a term coined by Murray Smith in *Engaging Characters* (1995) and relates to how viewer sympathies might be manipulated narrationally in a fiction film. He argues that viewers’ sympathies are determined by three factors: *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. *Recognition* is a kind of basic prerequisite for the latter two factors and refers to how the viewer understands a character to be the same character throughout a narrative even though the character is ‘interrupted’ by cuts and all sorts of developments such as fictional aging, etc. In most films (including *Caché* and *Un Prophète*), this is relatively unchallenging and, thus, not particularly important in terms of how ‘overall’ viewer sympathies form. Therefore, it will receive no further attention in this article. *Alignment* is a more central part of Smith’s theory as it relates to the scope of this article; the term refers to the ‘positioning’ of the viewer on two levels: *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access* – which characters does the viewer follow in time and space and which characters does the viewer have access to ‘read’ emotionally? Specific ways in which a film (and, in particular, *Caché* and *Un Prophète*, of course) establishes alignment will be discussed and exemplified throughout the article.

Typically, although not always, *allegiance* follows alignment; and, unlike the other factors of sympathy (according to Smith), it is not only a cognitive but also an emotional response. It is, perhaps, the factor in Smith’s model that most closely resembles the layman’s use of the term ‘identification’ in regards to

specific film characters: the phenomenon that Smith's model wants to explore and expand. Allegiance relies on the viewer making moral judgments about the various characters in a film, which leads to "preferential and hierarchized sympathies and antipathies" towards the characters (Smith 1995, 194) — viewers 'rank' them, so to speak, and sympathize with the characters who are *relatively* most *desirable* in the sense that the values, morals and actions of these 'desirable' characters align more closely with the viewer's own when compared to those of other (thus, more 'undesirable') characters in the fiction. This relativity is what explains how viewers might sympathize with gangsters, criminals (etc.) with whose actions the viewer would certainly not sympathize outside the fiction because their actions might be morally desirable *in the context* of the narrative (Smith 1995).

The reason for choosing *Caché* and *Un Prophète* is that the two films enjoy a somewhat similar status in the world of cinema (both are critically lauded, hold some mainstream popularity, and are made by internationally-renowned auteurs, which makes their voices relatively important). They also have significant thematic overlaps in how they deal with issues related to national identity, stereotypes and otherness. Both, as it will be argued, challenge stereotypes of the *other* — often, stereotypically portrayed as violent, brutal, lacking of empathy, uncivilized, religiously fanatic, and a general threat to Western culture (Shaheen 2009, Hall 1997) — although through vastly different approaches: *Caché* aligns the viewer with a white French protagonist, a privileged *insider* in society, and *Un Prophète* with an *other*, a young French male of Maghrebi descent. These alignment structures become very relevant in how the films manipulate and control viewer sympathy with their main characters.

### *Caché*

*Caché* premiered on 5 October 2005, only a few weeks before violent riots broke out in Clichy-sous-Bois, a Parisian *banlieue*, which soon spread to many other parts of France (and even as far as Germany and Belgium). Deemed the most violent since May 1968, these riots were caused by the accidental deaths of two teenage boys from the *banlieue*, who were fleeing the police (El-Tayeb, 2008). In this context, the release of the film was considered "prophetic" by (especially, international) critics, since such tensions and themes make up a large portion of the dramaturgical drive in *Caché* (Celik 2010, 65).

In *Caché*, the plot follows Georges Laurent, the host of a popular literary television show. Georges and his family (his wife, Anne, and their son, Pierrot) start receiving ominous videotape recordings made across the street from their house (and, later, of private conversations and more). Georges suspects the culprit to be Majid, an Algerian-French man whom Georges knew as a child. Soon, we learn that Majid's parents, who worked as farmhands on Georges' parents' farm, were killed during the aforementioned 17 October 1961 massacre in Paris, when several hundred Algerians were killed by the French police during a demonstration (Virtue 2011).

Georges' parents, then, wanted to adopt the now-orphaned Majid but were dissuaded by then six-year-old Georges, who lied about Majid having decapitated a rooster in order to scare him. Majid was, then, taken to an orphanage; and now, several years later, Georges claims to have almost forgotten about him until the videotapes start appearing. From this point, Georges' life slowly unravels as he loses control of his marriage (Georges suspects Anne of having an affair), his son (who goes missing) and his job (because his contract is in jeopardy). A series of confrontations with Majid (and Majid's son) follow, culminating in a final meeting between the two in which Majid kills himself in front of Georges. The last shot of the film shows Pierrot and Majid's son talking to each other outside Pierrot's school, leaving the mystery of who sent the videotapes unresolved.

#### *Alignment structure in Caché*

With a few notable exceptions, the viewer of *Caché* is aligned rather closely and exclusively with Georges in the sense that it is his experience we get to share. The viewer is *spatio-temporally* attached to Georges; we follow him around in time and space — we are generally not somewhere he is not. In addition to this, the viewer is granted *subjective access* to Georges' mind — for example, when his nightmare and the intimate memories of his past are shared with the viewer. Such a narrational alignment will often result in the viewer feeling sympathetic to the characters with whom we are aligned (creating *allegiance*), making the viewer an 'accomplice' rather than a witness to the character's actions. As briefly mentioned before, this only occurs if the character is deemed "morally desirable" in relation to other characters (Smith 1995, 188). In *Caché*, I will argue, Georges' actions seem gradually less morally justifiable as the narrative

unfolds despite our close alignment to him, which would conventionally function as a way of justifying seemingly immoral actions. In the beginning, he seems likable if, for nothing else, because these mysterious videotapes appear and he and his family seem to be in some sort of danger. Here, the film also plays against genre conventions: How often has the man in the family had to save his wife and children in thrillers and other crime fiction? Thus, Georges is easily assumed to be the hero of the narrative, which is emphasized by his general success in the world. Because of the viewers' very limited knowledge at this point, they are likely to "project [them]selves into their situation, and hypothesize as to the emotion(s) they are experiencing" (Smith 1995, 97), and the film utilizes these cognitive and generic mechanisms almost to force the viewer into an *empathic* relationship with Georges. Worth noting here is that, in Smith's terms, *empathy* is distinct from *sympathy* in that it does not require the perceiver (the viewer) to share any values or goals with the object of empathy – here, Georges -- and works at an unconscious and involuntary level (Smith 1995).

Witnessing his hyper-aggressive behavior towards Majid and his son, the viewer is encouraged to take a more skeptical approach toward Georges and what he embodies (the privileged 'native' French bourgeois). Because Georges' aggression seems to be the result of paranoid fantasies, Georges obviously sees Majid and his son as threats despite their non-threatening demeanor. And the film makes it obvious that Georges' paranoia is directed towards all non-whites – for instance, when a black cyclist nearly runs him over by accident and, then, receives an overly aggressive reaction from Georges (Jørholt 2016b). Just as Georges' past actions have had consequences for himself and Majid in the present day, so has the Algerian War had implications for how North African immigrants and their descendants are perceived in France (Jørholt 2016a); and that seems to be the case *Caché* is making: that Algerians and other non-whites are irrationally perceived as threats by the French. The non-resolution of the plot – that the sender of the mysterious videotapes is never revealed – raises questions about these perceived threats: how far they are justified or simply paranoid? Was Georges or his family ever really in danger?

Through this manipulation of viewer sympathy throughout the film, Haneke draws attention to the ways in which viewers might be compelled or even manipulated by the film's narration to empathize with morally undesirable

characters. And this attention might compel viewer reflection on their real-life sympathies with respect to the French-Algerian relationship and towards *others* in general. They might wonder whether their sympathy is with the morally desirable cause or whether it has been manipulated through media coverage and majority discourse into an irrational fear of outsiders.

### *Allegorical readings*

Several elements in the film seem to invite an allegorical reading of the narrative. One concerns the mistrust and violent treatment of immigrants and others who have not yet acquired 'insider status' in France as a whole. For instance, the fact that Majid is seen killing a rooster in Georges' nightmares (mirroring his childhood lies) becomes meaningful, considering the (Gallic) rooster's status as a symbol for France as a nation (Celik 2010). Roosters are also seen running around the yard when Majid is forcibly taken to the orphanage, and the image of the decapitated rooster can be read as expressing the fear of invasion from 'outsiders' that was prominent in France following the separations from its colonies (Jørholt 2016b), when a great number of immigrants arrived in France as a result of the Algerian War of Independence and a burgeoning demand for workers in the growing welfare state (Hargreaves 2007). Such fears live on in France (and the rest of Europe) even today, as evidenced by contemporary political discourse on (especially, Muslim) immigrants who threaten culturally dilution and 'native' culture (Thomas 2013). And nowhere in Europe is such discourse arguably more awkward, given how France has "prided itself on being the land of equality, founded on an abstract concept of universal citizenship which renders ethnic, gendered, religious or class difference irrelevant" since the French Revolution (Tarr 2005, 1).

Guy Austin reads Georges as embodying "the denial that has operated within French society in regard to Algeria. He is an allegorical figure whose personal demons represent the cultural phenomenon of *la fracture coloniale* [...] [who] incarnates postcolonial France: guilty, in denial, fearful, yet also powerful and violently assertive" (Austin 2007, 531). Although Georges was only a child at the time of his violent, unethical actions, his guilt stretches into his adulthood because he once again terrorizes Majid – for example, when he has Majid and Majid's son arrested based on nothing more than an unfounded suspicion that

they are behind the -- in Georges' eyes -- threatening video-tapes. This scene illustrates Georges' privileged position over the Algerian-French Majid, since the two police officers making the arrest seem to believe Georges' story credulously and do not give much room for Majid to explain. The camera tracks behind the three men (Georges plus police officers) as Georges leads them to Majid's door, giving the impression that the policemen are, practically speaking, Georges' henchmen rather than enforcers of any laws. In this scene, the film still aligns the viewer primarily with Georges, as we hear and see him casually give his explanation of the situation to his wife on the telephone before getting into the police car – in the front seat, of course, as yet another reminder of his superiority over these *others* (Jørholt 2016b). But, at this point, the film also lends space to reaction shots of Majid and his son being arrested – giving brief subjective access to their emotional state, aligning the viewer with the unjustly-treated Majid and his son. But this alignment structure is not sustained. Thus, I am not arguing that the film compels viewer allegiance to transfer to Majid – I argue that viewer allegiance simply ends as the viewer remains aligned most closely with Georges; yet, he is deemed unsympathetic. The famous final shot of the film in which the sons of Majid and Georges mysteriously meet and talk (without letting the viewer 'listen in' – the viewer is left to observe from a distance) seems to emphasize this end of both alignment and allegiance because the shot is held for a long time, yet the viewer is decidedly left outside of the action, unable to grasp the significance of this meeting, making it obvious that the viewer has no character with whom to engage or sympathize.

Even the title of the film carries a significant subtextual point about the Algerian-French relationship. Asbjørn Grønstad points out that the French word "caché" comprises the meanings of both 'hidden' and 'concealed', something not apparent and something deliberately stashed away. With the added meaning of *cache*, a term from computing (that is also used in French: *mémoire cache*) referring to a computer component that stores data so that it can easily be accessed later, the point becomes quite clear: that the film deals with issues deliberately hidden but still lingering somewhere to be accessed later (Grønstad 2012, 157). In the context of the film, this seems to allude to the handling of the aforementioned 1961 Parisian massacre that only gained (some) recognition as a massacre late in 1998; contemporary media reports counted only three casualties and, on the whole, misrepresented the episode (Celik



2010). This “end of amnesia” of which the official recognition of the event is part accelerated in the 1990s. Yet, only a few French films have addressed the 17 October 1961 massacre<sup>1</sup> or even the Algerian War of Independence, and most of these have done so understatedly rather than directly (Durmelat 2011). In some cases, films that have dramatized the Algerian War have met with protest – typically, by French nationalists, as happened with *Hors-la-loi* (2010, Rachid Bouchareb), and distribution has been repressed by authorities, as happened with *La Battaglia di Algeri* (1966, Gillo Pontecorvo) (Jørholt 2016a).

The reception of *Caché* has been read as indicating that the French nation does not yet fully accept responsibility for its gruesome crimes against Algerians. French critics unanimously understood the film’s guilt theme as a universal or European concern instead of as a comment on the nation’s role in this specific event, the Parisian massacre, which is what the foreign critics emphasized. However, as Ipek Celik notes, the timing of the film’s international release, a few weeks *after* the *banlieue* riots had broken out, surely contributed to this reading although it does not completely explain its absence in French press (Celik 2010).

### *Un Prophète*

In Jacques Audiard’s *Un Prophète* (2009), we meet Malik El-Djebena just as he is entering prison to serve a six-year sentence for some unspecified violation (it is later hinted that Malik had attacked a police officer). Then-19-year-old Malik has a hard time adjusting to prison, and it is not made easier when he is approached by a gang of Corsican mafia members (also inmates of the prison), who want Malik to kill Reyeb, an ‘Arab’, like Malik, who is going to testify in a case against another Corsican mafioso. Unlike the Corsicans, Malik can gain access to Reyeb because he is held in the Muslim part of the prison. His life threatened by the Corsicans, Malik kills Reyeb and, consequently, becomes a semi-initiated member of the Corsican prison gang. The ghost of Reyeb starts haunting/following Malik, however, as he starts doing small chores and assignments for the Corsicans while also attending the prison school, where he

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<sup>1</sup> French films that deal with the Parisian massacre include *Octobre à Paris* (1962, Jacques Panijel, which was immediately banned and not released theatrically until 2011), *Vivre au Paradis* (1998, Bourlem Guerdjou), *Nuit Noire, 17 Octobre 1961* (2005, Alain Tasma), and *Hors-la-loi* (2010, Rachid Bouchareb).

meets Ryad, who helps him learn to read and write French. He uses these newly-acquired language skills to learn to understand Corsican by studying dictionaries, which he uses to get insider information on the Corsicans by eavesdropping on private conversations. César Luciani, the leader of the Corsican prison gang, soon sees potential in Malik; and, when Malik is granted leave days from prison, he uses them to help César conduct 'mafia business' outside prison. The exact nature of how Malik helps César is generally left unexplained, but it is implied that Malik's help is very valuable to the Corsican gangsters.

When Malik prophetically warns Brahim Lattrache, one of Luciani's associates outside of prison, of an imminent crash with a deer while riding in Lattrache's car, Malik earns his moniker, *The Prophet*, and impresses Lattrache so much that he agrees to do business directly with Malik instead of the Corsicans. Malik has come up in the world now; and, when César asks Majid to kill the Don of a rival mafia gang, Malik and his now-accomplice Ryad agree but, instead of following orders, kill the Don's bodyguard and leave him in a van with a member of César's Corsican mafia in a violent demonstration of Malik's newly-found power. After this, Malik completely rejects the Corsican mafia and serves the rest of his sentence as a leader of the Muslim inmates, with César now reduced to a powerless has-been. In the film's final shot, Malik is released from prison and greeted by Ryad's wife and daughter, whom he has come to know during leave days spent with Ryad, who has recently died of cancer. This little pseudo-family is followed by an entourage of cars driven by fellow Muslims in a sign of respect since Malik has now assumed the role of leader in this Muslim community.

#### *Structure of sympathy in Un Prophète*

Much like in *Caché*, the film aligns us very closely with the protagonist. The viewer shares Malik's dreams/hallucinations, is present when and where Malik is, and generally has access to the same information as Malik. But, whereas *Caché* used this alignment structure to question the viewer's own morals — and cinematic conventions, *Un Prophète* uses this alignment in a more conventional way as it encourages the viewer to feel an allegiance with Malik. This allegiance is achieved because the close alignment with Malik reveals him to be *more* morally desirable than other characters in the film (instead of less as is the case

with Georges in *Caché*). As Murray Smith points out, it is not so much being aligned with characters that makes the viewer sympathetic to them so much as what is revealed through this alignment (Smith 1995, 223).

I will provide a concrete example of a situation in which the viewer's alignment with Malik contributes to viewer sympathy: In the climactic scene in which Malik hazardously jumps into the Don's car and quickly kills his bodyguards and drags out the Don himself, Malik temporarily loses his hearing because of the loud gunfire. The viewer is so perceptually aligned with Malik at this point that we also 'lose hearing' and cannot hear Ryad saying to 'us'/Malik, the soundtrack being muted except for a clicking sound and Malik's breath. Here, we are inclined to sympathize with Malik, despite his murderous actions, because we are so closely aligned with him that we almost 'become' him at this point. We are anxious for him because we have seen his nervousness leading up to his taking action and because 'our' loss of hearing (and the camera's close framing) makes it difficult to comprehend the situation entirely: Are we still in danger? Will police show up? Did we actually get away with it? Yet, we do not feel especially sympathetic towards the victimized mafia boss — which is not as impossible as it might sound; think, for instance, of Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007, David Chase) because, in *Un Prophète*, we have seen how mafia bosses (César) treat our protagonist.

#### *Malik as an 'other'*

By aligning the viewer with Malik in this way, the viewer is allowed to experience life through the eyes of the 'other'. And Malik is most certainly 'othered' (Bhabha 1994): Not only is he visibly non-white, he is also a criminal — and, at first glance, he seems to confirm many stereotypes easily (Hall 1997, Bhabha 1994, Higbee 2013). He is illiterate, susceptible to violence, and he quickly becomes 'a servant' when forced to by César. This power relationship between Malik, an 'Arab', and the Corsicans comments on the issue of otherness because, in prison, the Corsicans are obviously considered more 'white' and, on the whole, less 'othered' than the Arabs and African Muslims (who are grouped together).

An example of this is found in how the Corsican inmates initially enjoy unique benefits and freedoms and even have a degree of control over the prison guards, who might be argued to represent the 'native' French majority, despite

the fact that Corsica has obviously had a *very* strained relationship to France, now and historically (Soysal 1996). But even these ‘somewhat othered’ Corsicans have the power (socially and symbolically) to control Malik, who is more othered despite being quite ‘French’: Malik is quite literally a child of the French nation, growing up without his parents in state institutions. While he does speak Arabic and carries a name of Arabic descent (*al-Malik*, ‘the King’, being one of the 99 names of Allah), his Muslim identity is not his by choice as much as it is forced upon him by the prison guards — as evident from the first scene of the film in which a prison guard asks him about his religious beliefs (if he eats pork, prays, etc.) to which Malik provides confused answers as if he has never before given thought to these issues or does not understand their relevance (MacDonald 2012). Witnessing our protagonist being so unfairly treated certainly contributes to our moral assessment of him in relation to the other characters – in other words, it helps establish viewer allegiance with Malik.

Thus, at the beginning of the film, Malik is, in some ways, comparable to Majid in *Caché* in that they are both orphaned and othered, but the two characters obviously take very different paths in the respective films. Malik in *Un Prophète* comes to embody and confirm the same paranoid fantasy of the other, reversing roles and overtaking the position of power that, in *Caché*, was the result of Georges’ paranoia and repressed guilt. In *Un Prophète*, the fantasy manifests itself in reality (although not without being challenged along the way) when Malik, as a “placeholder for the other-than assimilated immigrant” (MacDonald 2012, 562), inverts this colonization trope during the course of the narrative as he plots against and, ultimately, humiliates the unsuspecting César. And, in this context, I read the Corsican mafia boss as an emblem of France even though his heritage is not entirely French; and I think this is intended by Audiard, who is explicitly interested in exploring the social and ethnic fractures that, according to him, threaten national unity (Pezzella & Rossi 2011). In a film that does not have any insider-French (main) characters *per se* (by which I mean, for instance, a character like Georges, who is white, bourgeois, and ‘native’), the Corsicans become the film’s ‘most French’ characters in that they look French and, of course, *are* French (citizens), given that Corsica is formally a part of France. And, in this way, the film encourages its viewers to question what it means to be French since Corsicans, in some contexts, will be considered outsiders and, in other contexts (this), insiders,

suggesting that there is nothing *given* about national identity and that it is not so much something inherent in a person as something imposed on a person by social mechanisms.

This filmic construction is very much in line with Benedict Anderson's reflections on nationality in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities* (2006), first published in 1983. Anderson suggests that nationality (and nationalism) are "cultural artefacts of a particular kind" rather than any actual and objective belonging (Anderson 2006, 4). Instead, he describes belonging to a nation as something intangible – perhaps, emotional, and his theory is very useful, for instance, for understanding the mechanisms behind the fact that many second-generation immigrants choose to get French citizenship and feel 'French' and, yet, feel they are not seen as French by those around them<sup>2</sup> (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, 2012). Hence, *Un Prophète* seems to suggest that nationality is, indeed, something constructed and context-specific, which also evokes questions as to the rationality of the segregation of ethnic groups since these groupings are constructed based on non-objective ideas of belonging. Yet, in prison, they are very real: there is almost no mixing between the Muslim and Corsican group, and Malik is seen as a traitor for socializing with and working for the 'wrong' side. Malik's escalating violence grows from this segregation in that it is the segregated structure of the prison that forces him to become an assassin for the Corsicans in the first place, and it is his 'in-between' place that allows him to rise to the top of criminal hierarchy, using language – a common marker of national identity – as a weapon against the French.

### **Negotiating otherness and challenging viewer attitudes**

In 1882, Ernest Renan famously claimed that: "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartoholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century" (Renan 1990, 11). Benedict Anderson calls this claim

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<sup>2</sup> 38% of immigrants and 67% of the descendants of immigrants feel they are seen as French, according to quoted survey.

“bizarre”, pointing to the fact that Renan mentions the events without explaining them, which assumes reader familiarity with them even as they have forgotten them (Anderson 2006, 200; Jørholt 2016a). Anderson talks of the “reassurance of fratricide” in this context — that contemporary Frenchmen are bound together by this historiographic narration of aggression between groups divided by religion and culture, groups that certainly did not consider themselves as French. This functions as some kind of historical ‘ellipsis’ in that it leaves out the historical context in favor of a contemporary understanding of the events, and this sort of elliptical narration is something that Anderson considers essential to the question of *identity*. His argument goes that, because “all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias” (Anderson 2006, 204), exemplified by the fact that persons need help to recognize themselves in childhood photographs, identity cannot be remembered but must be narrated. If we accept this notion, it is easy to see why media (including film) might be said to play a very important role in the continuous negotiation of national identity.

In *Caché*, the issue of fratricide is present in a quite literal sense since Georges’ actions indirectly lead to Majid, his could-have-been adoptive brother, killing himself. And, if we read the film allegorically, as a narrative dealing with the strained Algerian-French relationship generally and the 1961 Parisian massacre specifically, it is tempting to ask, as Sylvie Durmelat does, whether the massacre could ever be retold as a fratricide, a “civil war of sorts”, rather than as a genocide committed by a colonial power (Durmelat 2011, 103).

*Caché* remembers the 17 October 1961 massacre indirectly, and the viewer is encouraged to lose sympathy for the French handling of events and “disidentify from an oppressive national community” (Durmelat 2011, 103). Thus, the film might be considered part of a trend in recent European films that have sought to “counterbalance the dominant difference discourse by focusing on what people of diverse ethnicities may have in common, rather than on what sets them apart” (Jørholt 2015, 172) in that the film focuses on the past that Majid and Georges share and, arguably, employs what Jørholt dubs a “reversal strategy” for emphasizing this sameness. The reversal strategy is one of five strategies identified by Jørholt that films might employ to emphasize sameness over difference when dealing with multi-ethnicity and the like. The basic principle of the strategy is to place a member of the majority in a position

commonly held by a member of the minority. Often, it is done for comic effect, but that is obviously not the case in *Caché*. And, perhaps, the way in which I will argue that the film employs this strategy is not quite what Jørholt intends to describe because Georges and Majid are seemingly in positions that only confirm the stereotype: Georges is rich and successful, whereas Majid lives in a very small, dirty apartment, wears ragged clothes, and is on the brink of suicide. By exposing Georges' guilty past and his hyper-aggressive behavior towards those he has wronged, the film leaves no doubt about the fact that, morally, Majid has the high ground, which, in itself, subverts somewhat the dominant, majority (post-9/11) discourse, which has increasingly framed 'foreigners' as having evil intentions towards Europeans/Westerners rather than focusing on the behavior of the insiders towards the others (Loshitzky 2010).

Malik in *Un Prophète* also subverts some aspects of the stereotypes of Arabs. In Hollywood films, Arabs have traditionally been (and are still) portrayed as "Public Enemy #1—brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural 'others' bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners" (Shaheen 2009, 32). This Hollywood stereotype, of course, is not exactly the same as European stereotypes of Arabs, but Shaheen states that the American caricatures are derived from pre-existing European representations (2009, 43). Due to the country's colonial past and, hence, more direct contact with Arab immigrants, this stereotype has not been as pronounced in France although it has, arguably, gained in prominence in response to the post-9/11 discourse. I argue that, although Malik might superficially be considered "public enemy #1", the narrative shows he is not heartless, fanatic, money-mad or bent on terrorizing the French. By forming an allegiance between the viewer and Malik, the viewer is compelled to consider his violent actions justified and explainable. The film challenges the stereotype by informing the viewer that this crime leader-to-be had to resort to violence because of pressure from the 'insiders', the French/Corsicans, who exploited his outsider status for their own gain but were ultimately outsmarted, which led to their fall. And it is precisely because of his in-between status that Malik is able to murder Reyeb in the first place and, later, undermine the Corsicans.

Rather than escaping stereotype entirely, however, *Un Prophète* inverts some aspects of it, but Malik is still trapped in the other extreme: He is not *bad* in the

context of the narrative (as his actions are narratively justified); he is not a religious extremist; and he is not inherently against law and order *per se*, but he does exploit the French penal system by spending leave days from prison committing new crimes. By using these leave days to establish new relationships, he ends up in a favorable position after having served his sentence – with a family waiting for him on the outside and as newly-appointed leader of an influential crime gang. Thus, he confirms the part of the stereotype that is evident from current political discourse on ‘foreigners’ exploiting European welfare systems for their own gain, which portrays these others as threatening (Silverstein 2004, Kristensen 2016).

On the surface, Malik is almost an embodiment of the most extreme stereotype of Arabs (Hall 1997, Durmelat 2011): He murders, cheats the French state (particularly, its penal system), and becomes involved with other Arabs in a crime gang that excludes the French and functions as a sort of parallel community that is unable or unwilling to assimilate. He is also highly efficient – and the film reveres and aestheticizes his efficiency, notably in the climactic scene in which, against all odds, Malik manages to kill the mafia don’s bodyguards in the car. This illustrates a kind of *fascination* with the *other* that is another integral part of the concept of stereotypes (Hall 1997). Malik embodies the exact reason ‘native’ French (such as Georges in *Caché*) would not want such ‘outsiders’ in society: Who would want a highly-efficient, murderous criminal unwilling to assimilate in their society? However, in this narrative, he is not only that: He is also our hero and protagonist, and we recognize that, in many respects, he is very much like everyone else -- insecure when he first arrives at prison, moderately religious at best, and with a healthy appetite for learning new things (in prison school). So, the viewer’s understanding of this stereotyped *other* about which one likely hears much talk in the news every night has been subverted since the film does not “*reduce* everything about the person to those [stereotypical] traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity” as is hallmark of stereotypes (Hall 1997, 258).

So, while *Un Prophète* does not sustain the simplistic stereotype of majority discourse, I argue that it tries to challenge the prevailing stereotype not by avoiding it or reversing it as *Caché* does but, rather, by going beyond the surface, letting the viewer become Malik’s accomplice, emphasizing how his



actions are justified and similar to the way any person ('insiders' or 'outsiders' alike) would behave in like circumstances — emphasizing sameness over difference.

### Summary and concluding thoughts

Both *Caché* and *Un Prophète* deal with national identity, otherness, and racism to a large degree; and both seem to want to suggest that the stereotypes of the 'other' (Bhabha 1994, Hall 1997, Higbee 2013, Shaheen 2009) must be challenged. They take different approaches, however: *Caché* aligns the viewer with the 'native' French bourgeois Georges, whose past comes back to haunt him because he rejected Majid, the *other*, in order to enjoy the benefits of his parents' attention alone. Now an adult in a privileged position, Georges still feels entitled to his position of superiority and acts aggressively towards Majid, who has had a rough life on the outskirts of society. The film reads as an allegory for how the French have dealt with ethnicity issues in general; and, thus, it exposes the randomness and unfairness of the French treatment of Algerians – particularly, in regard to the handling of the 17 October 1961 massacre in Paris but, read in a larger perspective, also in regard to the handling of France's former colonies in general. Read in light of Benedict Anderson's concept of *reassurance of fratricide*, *Caché* seems to suggest that the best way forward is to unearth the past, recognize and admit to the wrongs committed on both sides in order ultimately to forget the past so that, with time, the violence can be remembered as a 'family feud' rather than as a clash between incompatible cultures. The film, thus, tries to subvert the stereotype of the evil Arab by exposing it, literally, to be the paranoid dream of the French and reversing it by positioning Majid on the moral high ground with Georges' paranoia and repressed guilt as the real sources of dysfunction, which almost end up tearing him and his family apart. In the process, *Caché* makes a comment on the role of media in the construction of otherness when it reverses the cinematic convention of letting the *allegiance* of the viewer follow the alignment structure by using the filmic convention of a protagonist being harmed as point of departure for a slow deconstruction of the viewer's sympathy. Georges becomes increasingly morally undesirable as the narrative unfolds.

*Caché* arguably avoids portraying the stereotype in that the usually stereotyped other (Majid) is not shown to confirm any of the traits usually ascribed by the

stereotype — he is not innately aggressive, uncivilized, a fanatic or a threat (Hall 1997, Shaheen 2009) to Georges even though Georges thinks so. *Un Prophète*, on the other hand, takes a very different approach. The protagonist, Malik, embodies the stereotype of the brutal, criminal, the highly-efficient killer of the French. But, through our close alignment with Malik, we learn that his ‘otherness’ is, in fact, a role that he is forced into by outside pressure from the French nation. The narration forms a close bond of *allegiance* between Malik and the viewer; and, thus, the viewer is invited to reflect on the elements of his condition as an othered French citizen that lead to his becoming a crime leader. And, even as he has risen to the top of the criminal hierarchy, he is still depicted as a very humane character, forming positive relations with his new family and being interested in learning and improving. Once again, as in *Caché*, the *other* holds the moral high ground -- in part, because the narrative justifies Malik’s violent actions. So, *Un Prophète* also avoids sustaining the stereotype even though it (superficially) depicts it. This is but one way in which the film negotiates concepts of belonging and identity — another would be the role of the Corsican prison gang, which enjoys privileges because of their ethnicity compared to the Muslims in prison. In this way, the film illustrates the point that belonging is not a given or something objective but, rather, something intangible and contextual, imposed through social power structures rather than by some natural law, something that is up for negotiation and revision.

Even though neither film accepts the prevailing stereotype of the other, however, there is still a risk of sustaining the very same stereotype because, as Mireille Rosello states, even *denouncing* a stereotype is *mentioning* a stereotype, and what stereotypes feed off is *repetition*. No citation of a stereotype can be “innocent” (1998, 38). If we assume this argument to be true, it becomes evident why majority discourse can be so harmful even if it does not intend to be and why the media must be wary of their role in repeating these representations; Rosello goes on to say that stereotypes are more telling of the stereotyper than of the stereotyped: “If the stereotype is indeed the stereotyper’s self-portrait, we should then remember that when a whole ethnic group is diabolized, there is a distinct possibility that the source doing the diabolizing has gone seriously mad, become dangerously paranoid” (Rosello 1998, 17). This seems to be precisely the point *Caché* is trying to make; and, even if the two films, by playing off of stereotypes, risk sustaining them, the best approach to this conundrum would surely not be to avoid the stereotypes altogether. The subject matter of

the films would be impossible to address without touching on these stereotypes. The films play their part in recognizing how stereotypes and hostility come into existence and make the case that old grudges must be left behind, so that a new, shared future may be created.

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