

Space Invaders

By Emily Munro



The Drouth has moved from Document to Utopia, and it seems entirely apt that this should be given how many traces of imagined 'no places' lie documented, in vaults, on pages and on screens. One such source can be found in *The Film In National Life*, a report published in London in 1932 which takes as its subject matter the service of cinema to 'social progress'. This document of British cultural politics, which represents policy in as much as some of its recommendations (like the establishment of a British Film Institute) were carried out, features Empire as a prime concern. The report rejects government control of the film industry as 'unnatural, unhealthy, and not in the national tradition' (an indictment of Soviet politics more than anything else) and is firm in its rejection of censorship of film content. However, the rhetoric changes with the topic of *The Cinema and the Empire*. With reference to another report by Sir Hesketh Bell, *The Film in National Life* states: 'The success of our government of subject races depends almost entirely on the degree of respect which we can inspire' (p.133), a position fairly indicative of the general attitude of the Colonial Films Committee to the role of film in the British colonies. The report states: 'The Dominions are self-governing nations of British or European stock, some of them, like ourselves, having the care of backward races ... The Dominions can supply us with valuable material for our schools [films documenting daily life], and in return we should send them films which worthily represent our culture. The backward races within the Empire can gain more and suffer more from the films than the sophisticated European,

because to them the power of the visual medium is intensified. The conception of white civilisation which they are receiving from third-rate melodrama is an international menace ...' (*The Film in National Life* 1932 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.) p.126). The anthropological gaze here positions the colonial subject and mediates their cultural value, transforming the ordinary into 'valuable material' for educational settings while all the time emphasising 'Wondrous Difference' as entertaining spectacle (reference to Alison Griffith's fascinating book *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* 2002 (New York: Columbia University Press)).

Ah, travel. Oh, exploration. A fantasy cultural space of authenticity is occupied by the ethnographer-cinematographer. It is fantastical because they have travelled to be *there*, creating a contact zone for the meeting of different kinds of cultural expression and its production and consumption by the participating parties. They document, but the trace left is their own intervention and vision as much as it is a source of cultural knowledge. In a documentary on her life, Claire Denis (a white French filmmaker who grew up in Cameroon, her father a colonial administrator) describes the end of the French colonial period as one 'where things began to delete a little, where certitudes disappeared' ['où les choses se *delete* un petit peu, où les certitudes s'en vont'] (cited in Martine Beugnet 2004 *Claire Denis* (Manchester: Manchester University press) p.8). The 'delete', a swift process of forgetting, was augmented after decolonisation by



nostalgia – distorted remembrance of the good old days where a spade was a spade, and a subordinate not much more than the same. In the 1970s, after a time of silencing correspondent with successive waves of African independence, the colonial theme re-emerged in French cinema with the heritage film where the exoticised colony served as ‘colourful’ backdrop to a plain familiar white drama. Thereafter, depictions of multi-ethnic France appeared in the 1980s followed by the critical, social realist *banlieue*, or ‘suburb’, cinema in the 1990s, of which *La Haine* (dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, France 1995) is possibly the best-known example (Beugnet pp10-13). In the course of these French post/colonial representations, the delete was augmented and then supplemented by degrees of knowledge, a ‘for the record ...’ of France’s geo-political and cultural interactions with peoples from other continents. Deletion-augmentation can be seen as a decolonisation symptom. The former coloniser continues to define themselves positively in comparison to the negative or weak attributes of the colonised in a manner which serves to absolve them from the crimes of imperialism while at the same time reinforcing the impact of these.

Katarzyna Marciniak, an émigré to the United States who has worked as a translator for the US Immigration and Naturalization service, examines in her book *Alienhood* the dual connotations of the word ‘alien’ in North America, meaning both immigrant and extraterrestrial creature. She explains her fascination with a piece of American tourist paraphernalia obtained on a visit to the American Museum of Natural History’s Rose Centre for Earth and Space. The object, given in place of an entrance ticket, was an ‘Official Cosmic Passport’, a mock access-all-areas slip to explore the universe. In the context of Marciniak’s book, the card puts one in mind of the Cold War and discursive struggles over the ownership of ‘space’ powered by an imperialist logic where who conquers first may claim and exploit. For Marciniak, the invitation to become a ‘citizen of the cosmos’, as inscribed on the card, conceals the imperial ambitions of the United States ‘to extend itself beyond all imaginable borders’ while invoking the idea of a hypercosmopolitanism (Katarzyna Marciniak 2006 *Alienhood. Citizenship, Exile and the Logic of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) p.58). Her questioning of the rhetoric used in this seemingly innocuous child’s prop is informed by her insistence that border-crossing not be imagined as purely liberatory given the acute limitations which are placed upon migrants and the absence of a universal immigrant experience.

At this year’s Edinburgh International Film Festival, I spoke to the directors of two French films that confront migration in very different ways. If the dominant course of French cinematic representations

of the colonial legacy has been first to reaffirm the agency of France abroad and then to depict its shadowy reflection, the disenfranchisement of the naturalised or *jus soli* foreigner within France itself, these two films have been made with an awareness of both and approach immigration knowledgeably. *Birds of Heaven* (Les Oiseaux du ciel, dir. Eliane de Latour, France/UK 2005) interweaves the émigré experiences of two friends from Côte d’Ivoire. One of the men, Shad (played by English actor Fraser James), has through good fortune managed to sustain his travel through Europe, while the other, Otho (Djédjé Apali), has been returned to Africa and, as a consequence of his empty-handed arrival, dejectedly regards himself as an outcast. When Shad returns home to marry Otho’s sister, admired and bedecked in symbols of European prosperity (new, flash clothing, a mobile phone), Otho refuses his offer of money. Despite accusing Shad of being ‘blinded by Europe, ashamed of Africa’, we are left in no doubt that Otho will reattempt the passage to paid labour in Europe. *Hotel Harabati* (De particulier à particulier, dir. Brice Cauvin, France 2006) examines a French couple as they deal with everyday family life amid a political climate of paranoia. On finding a cash-filled bag left behind by an Arab gentleman in a railway station, the couple choose not to take their planned holiday to Venice and become increasingly separate and insular. Unable, or unwilling, to locate the bag’s owner, it remains in their apartment until the wife (Hélène Fillières), now pregnant, traces the currency to Syria and departs unannounced with their two sons where she is eventually pursued by and reunited with her husband (Laurent Lucas).

In *Hotel Harabati*, made contemporaneously with and reminiscent of *Hidden* (Caché, dir. Michael Haneke, France/Italy/Germany/Austria 2005), narrative is unfurled in a deliberately opaque fashion. Nothing is quite what it seems and disorder, which by turns suffuses the characters’ environment, manifests itself firstly in seemingly serendipitous happenings before one realises it is being deliberately sought out and created by the protagonists themselves. Cauvin’s initial idea for the film was to create a portrait of a woman with children. On a bright summer afternoon, sitting on a park bench, he noticed a mother in pyjamas playing with her kids in their apartment. Fascinated, he revisited the place frequently but for most of the summer the shutters of the apartment were closed. Only in September was the exact same scene repeated, on a sunny day. This observed, personal playfulness is recreated in the film and the mother’s bond with her children is explored as they conspire (for the children, a game, for the mother the sign of a more unsettled mental state) to hibernate in the apartment and avoid any outside influence. The resulting expression of family is one where protectionism breeds secrecy and vice versa, and where parents are alienated from one



another as a result of their own selfish exploration or personal strictures. And no wonder. Their friends are obsessed with mortgages, granny has an interior design fetish which she'd like to exercise on them, and they're being pursued by memories and photographs from a European holiday they think they never took. And then there are the terrorists.

From an early awkward exchange in the station with the owner of the bag to the departure from France towards the end of the film, paranoia and presumption reigns. This is not only evident in the protagonists' and, in particular, the husband's unease at the news reports around him, but also in the way the film teases us with its deliberately enigmatic placement of characters and signifiers which spark our own damaged imaginations. An Arab man leaves a bag behind in a train station: is he a terrorist? The bag's full of money: perhaps he was a diplomat, or an opium dealer? A scene containing a radio announcement on a planned bomb attack is followed by a sequence where the couple are house-hunting. From the window of one seemingly ideal apartment the husband watches as a parcel is left outside the synagogue across the street. While nothing's said, he's expecting what we're all thinking will happen. Our interpretations of these set-ups are predictable. Although the film references September 11th 2001 in a *Le Monde* headline, the script was written before this apparently pivotal catastrophe. Cauvin told me that while he couldn't avoid the 11th September once it had occurred, the script was already invested with the tensions surrounding terrorism following a series of bomb threats and attacks in France, including the Paris metro bombing in 1995 for which an Algerian group was held responsible.

Cauvin has presumed that his audiences' cognitive responses to films and media are well trained. Our understanding of the devices of plot construction and the discourse of current affairs enables us to shift from signifier to signified and from cause to effect with impeccable swiftness. If he's right then we are a long way from trusting in the ability of films to say something unsuspected and surprising about our current political reality – our expectations are blindingly low. It is this which *Hotel Harabati* attempts to disrupt, closing on an idyllic, pastoral Syria having earlier depicted the husband's ecstatic discovery of the Jewish part of his identity, explored in his boyish love affair with a young, male Jewish music student. The film does this problematically given the record of France's and Israel's relations with Syria and, indeed, the choice of Syria as romantic backdrop for the film's closure is unexplained, save for the label on the family's pot of gold and some historical understanding of the country being under French Mandate from 1918 to 1946. However, Cauvin's intentional contrast of a grim, superficial and paranoid



France with a warm, friendly and above all open Syria works alongside the enigmatic structure of the narrative as a wagging finger telling us off for our limited imaginations and fearful, po-faced anticipation.

The conundrum of utopia, now somewhat worn, has been repeatedly presented and represented since its introduction by Thomas More: the good place or no place? For Ruth Levitas, a scholar of utopia, the problem finds answer in the merger of both *eutopia* (the good place) and *outopia* (no place), giving form to 'a good, but non-existent and therefore impossible society' (Levitas, R. 1990 *The Concept of Utopia* (New York: Phillip Allan)). In *The Principle of Hope*, which Jewish socialist Ernst Bloch wrote in exile from Germany during the Second World War, the daydream is described as both escapism and resistance. '[N]ot content just to accept the bad which exists' (Bloch, E. 1986 *The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd) p.3), the daydreamer is a potential revolutionary. Utopianism may be an imaginative agent for social change.

How one responds to 'Land of Freedom', currently held in discursive limbo between those who believe the phrase stands as a defensible principle of value and those who regard it as the offensive trope of an unjustifiable regime, says much about one's understanding of the States as either utopian possibility or dystopian principality. It is both, of course, or at least its symbolic prowess has managed to convey how the one may be merely the flip side of the other depending from which side of the field you're watching. And, a source of comfort for everyone, both are imaginary – the final hand has not yet been dealt. Narratives of migration are at once perspectives on the good, the bad and the no place. Where migration can be seen as the result of a colonial encounter, the theme must always be one of negotiation between the often desperate impulse toward a better future and the continuing experience of a painfully unsatisfactory reality.

Birds of Heaven follows on from the director's earlier feature film *Bronx-Barbès* (dir. Eliane de Latour, France 2000), set in the ghettos of Abidjan. Based on research on Ivoirian migrants in Abidjan, Spain, Britain and France, the film depicts both highs and lows of surviving illegally in Europe. Eliane de Latour, who



began her career as an anthropologist before moving into documentaries, describes herself as 'strongly incast', justification enough for wanting to travel and engage with people and characters who might be seen in certain situations as outcasts. Her films are, she agrees, often about the paradox between life as a struggle and hopefulness within that struggle. For de Latour, the optimism of the central Ivoirian characters in *Birds of Heaven*, one a Catholic and one a Muslim, can be explained by their faith in God: 'I wanted to show that migration can be reduced to just an economic problem in the media but it's much more complex, it's a big risk.

I wanted to show that they are dealing with big dreams of modern mythology, belief in oneself and in God is very, very important. That they can come back to their country as men and not like a wreck, hoping that one day they can be big enough to support their brothers, sisters and parents. I wanted to show it by the

positions of the two characters, Otho [in Abidjan] and Shad [in Europe]; Otho is training and Shad is doing. That's the same thing, the same phenomenon.'

Shad and Otho share these dreams at a time when Côte d'Ivoire has been unstable for some while, partly as a political reaction to immigration from Mali and Burkina Faso to the North. de Latour's decision to depict the men's faith as binding them together rather than as a source of conflict undermines the perception that the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire can be understood in terms of North (Muslim) versus South (Christian). Filming on location was straightforward, helped by de Latour's good relations with the country's President Gbagbo who admired *Bronx-Barbès*, a morsel of knowledge which journalists could pounce upon and which can only complicate a reading of the film. The picture of Côte d'Ivoire offered in the film is a peaceful one yet tension in the country remains and over the past year elections have been postponed twice. de Latour further invests at times in the myth of a global African family. 'You are black, I is black', as one character puts it, generously gifting his tape recorder to Shad having only just met him on a train, stands for more in this film than religion or nationality. Like *Hotel Harabati*, the spiritual homeland is idealised to an extent, the apotheosis of which occurs in a scene where Shad's white French companion Tango is killed trying to save Shad's passport in an arson attack on the apartment where Shad and Tango's lover stay. Having smashed her head on a wall

featuring a fresco of Africa, trying to escape, Tango's body is tended to by her girlfriend (Sara Martins) who remarks that the soot from the fire has made her 'all black' and that now she can travel to the world she wanted – by association heaven/Africa.

The omission of Côte d'Ivoire's specific political circumstances is difficult to understand, particularly in a film about Ivoirian migration, but the film is all the same full and multi-layered. Part of the film's depth comes from the casting of Fraser James, an English actor, in the lead role of Shad. This decision

saw the Shad of the script transform from being an Ivoirian by birth to becoming a Liberian settled in Côte d'Ivoire in order that James' French accent and fluency in English be explainable. The knock-on effect to interpretation is striking. Shad's father, a holy man and teacher, is mute and deaf and has a child interpret for him, suggesting the

silencing of the word of the father and the agency of a new generation. When Shad moves from England to France, he switches between languages (supposedly to make things a little easier on Fraser who had to learn French from scratch for the film), creating a sense of Shad's shifting subjecthood and adaptiveness to new spaces. At home, a young man called Baudelaire listens to Shad's fanciful and boastful tape recordings on glorious Europe and imagines his own future success abroad while the reality of Shad's struggle to survive day to day serves as a dim counterpoint. The presence of Otho in Côte d'Ivoire while Shad is in Europe, although supposedly the manifestation of his failure, is a predominantly positive one. In some senses he is a role model, if flawed. His role is often punitive, reprimanding a tailor friend for using his talents to sew fake designer labels onto clothes and scolding an aid worker for handing out second-hand T-shirts from Europe as charity rather than supporting local manufacturing. In the scene with the aid worker, Otho must hold up high in the air a shirt with a picture of David Beckham on it (the film is especially critical of a misguided African materialism) so that the children stop fighting over it. As he does so he encourages the kids to sing along with him: 'Who is the master and who the slaves?!' At the same time he inspires the tailor to create his own line of clothing and reassures him that he will bring back money from his next journey to Europe so they can build the business. It is placement that interests de Latour more than the literal movement of migration: 'We always talk



about the journey, but I don't think we need it.'

One can commend the filmmakers for telling stories which are engaged with contemporary experiences of migrancy, but I nonetheless sense that both films are caught short by a certain, though non-deliberate, smugness. This self-satisfaction is best characterised by French literature scholar Antoine Compagnon who in 1990 stated: 'Seen from abroad, from America, Asia, Africa, Australia, without its particularities being lost, Europe exists ... Europeans do not believe in Europe, but those who do not have it miss it and long for it.' ('Mapping the European Mind' (1990) in Duncan Petrie (ed.) 1992 *Screening Europe* (London: BFI) p.108). Homi Bhabha has criticised western European criticism for 'a familiar manoeuvre ... where, having opened up the chasm of cultural difference, a mediator or metaphor of otherness must be found to contain the effects of difference ... The Other is cited, quoted, framed ... in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment.' (Homi K. Bhabha 1994 *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge) p.31). The challenge in these terms is to speak of difference without evoking the idea of a knowable Other, as observed and inactive object, and I am not wholly convinced that these films tackle this.

Considering Islam in the context of ideas about European identity, Talal Asad has cited a poll in which it was revealed that in 1992 two-thirds of the population in France 'feared the presence of Islam in that country', feeling it incompatible with principles informing the French way of life (Talal Asad 2002 'Muslims and European Identity: Can Europe Represent Islam?', in ed. Anthony Pagden 2002 *The Idea of Europe from Antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p.209). He goes on to suggest that the idea of a European identity has been, and continues to be, the result of anxieties surrounding the place of those regarded as non-Europeans (p.211). Take another view on Europe, that of Compagnon who writes that, philosophically

speaking, Europeanness is characterised by doubt and that this is reflected 'in the particular form of masochism or guilt which is the other side of colonialism and which now leads us to take the blame for everything that went wrong in the world, and to ignore or deny that colonialism was not only destructive' (Compagnon p.111). The stress on mobility in the European Union through legislation guaranteeing the 'free movement' of persons, goods and services which has been developed since Compagnon's apologia must, then, be a strain on the self-flagellating elite who will feel so much worse with the burden of this added privilege. Sarcasm aside, even this emphasis on liberty and transnationalism has revealed just how much the ideal of Europe is structured by, and falling under pressure from, notions of who belongs and who should remain an outsider.

The restrictions placed by most EU members on migrants from the so-called 'A8' countries (those who acceded to the EU in 2004 with low per-capita income levels comparative to the other EU member states) demonstrates how strongly the Union is lead by economics, and how figures can be relied upon to generate suspicion. In relation to Romania and Bulgaria, the Home Office presently holds up its eternal balance sheet, stating slyly 'but we didn't do it with Poland', as if that served as dues paid to 'poor' Europe. Homi Bhabha asks that difference be recognised as a process whereby the culturally knowable (through the anthropologist's gaze) becomes the culturally knowledgeable. The other culture is authoritative. The outsider is no longer simply observable but an active agent and, by questioning our own sense of authority and prior understanding, unsettles the oppositions which we sometimes cling to so that we might put the world in order: 'The time of liberation is ... a time of cultural uncertainty [and of] representational undecidability.' (p.35). It is when we no longer can speak of 'Us' and 'Them'; the 'good place' and the 'bad place' are *outopia* (no place). It could be right now.

