

How to cite this review:

Rasle, Nicolas. "Couscous (2007)." (Film Review). *Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe*. 15 December 2009. Web. Date accessed.
<<http://www.migrantcinema.net/>>.

Film Review: *Couscous* (2007)

Nicolas Rasle

NB: This review gives away the film's storyline.

Abdellatif Kechiche's *Couscous* marks a departure in Maghrebi French cinema (if it can so be labelled), for it is a film which takes up a number of themes characteristic of its predecessors – the portrayal of immigrant labour, family structures, hybridisation of cultures and an uneasy relationship with the French establishment – and gives a fresh perspective on them. It revels in complicating, if not entirely abolishing, stereotypes, both of Maghrebis in France and of Maghrebi film in France: its representations continually tease our expectations. Indeed, even the original French title, *La Graine et le Mulet* (The Grain and the Mullet), invites a number of readings. *Le Monde* suggested that *La Graine* stands for the second generation, "plantée sur le sol français" (planted into French soil, Douin 2007), while, *le Mulet*, an abundant Mediterranean fish noted for its resilience and as a staple of the working classes, signifies the first generation, the tireless manual labourer or, to take the metaphor still further, the mule. Interestingly, while the original title carries an interrogation of the now-familiar process of immigration into France, the distributors in the US, that great nation of immigrants, reworked it as a benign force (*The Secret of the Grain*). Those in the UK meanwhile, which has had a not incomparable experience of immigration related to former colonies, chose to dispense with it altogether, referring instead to food alone. Arguably, however, the film is not primarily – let alone exclusively – about food at all.

The film's protagonist, Slimane, is an ageing North African shipbuilder on the docks of an unnamed Mediterranean French town, which French audiences might recognise as Sète. He is the father of many children, now grown up with their own children. He is divorced from his first wife, Souad, whose *couscous au poisson* (fish couscous) is legendary, and lives at the bedsit of a younger companion, Latifa. Slimane is unable to work at the speed he is told is required. When he is made redundant, he realises that he has nothing to leave behind for his family and embarks, to the scepticism of both the town's elite and his own community, on a plan to turn a rusty old boat into a quayside couscous restaurant. Aided by Latifa's spiky daughter Rym, who treats him as a father, Slimane's mission involves not only leaving behind future prospects for his family, but in claiming a permanent and visible place for himself and his community in the French landscape. The choice of a boat is interesting however, since it is both eminently movable and refrains from actually encroaching onto the land itself.

Couscous' portrayal of Slimane's and his family's travails through French local administration and officialdom continually toys with our expectations of being French-but-not-quite (or white), and in particular being of Maghrebi origin in a modern France which continues to struggle with the recognition of difference, but which has undoubtedly progressed from the overt racism of preceding decades.

Slimane and Rym are turned in circles by the town's bureaucrats, often with hints of discrimination and thinly veiled racism, which refer to stereotypes but remain inconclusive - "you want to work in a sector where the rules of hygiene are very strict... in France, at any rate" - and to which the protagonists never react explicitly either. It is significant that Kechiche's characters, particularly Slimane's children, whilst celebrating and continuing their North African traditions, are also firmly and comfortably integrated into a 'French' way of life. They have 'mixed' marriages, work in unionised sectors, speak with the distinctive southern French accent, drink alcohol and eat with the family on Sundays. Crucially perhaps, Islam is barely present and when it does appear, it is demoted to a merely cultural trait; Rym and the old regulars of Latifa's bar declare "Inch'allah!" with a beer in hand. Given that Republican secular values continue to clash with those of Muslim communities, such as in the controversy over the wearing of veils in schools (Leclair 2009), it is interesting that Kechiche chose to dispense with this obstinate and divisive marker of difference in contemporary France.

It is Kechiche's nuanced and perhaps intentionally non-adversarial depiction of otherness and integration that allows the film to highlight its more universal themes, family and food, and hence speak to a wider audience. Earlier films by *beur* filmmakers such as Mehdi Charef's *Thé au Harem d'Archimède* (1985) and Karim Dridi's *Bye-Bye* (1995) have tended to highlight the cultural and identity *malaise* of the second and third generations of Maghrebi French youth and their encounters with unconcealed and sometimes violent racisms. While many *beur* films have struggled for recognition, *Couscous*' unembellished *cinéma vérité* style and its humorous picture of family life centred around good food gained the film both critical and popular acclaim.¹ Kechiche's use of mostly non-actors for his cast also recalls Italian neo-realism. This is most apparent in the choice of Habib Boufares. With his craggy and weathered visage, he plays the stoic and reserved Slimane, being reminiscent of the Pontecorvean process of casting non-professional actors based on their faces (Boufares had been a colleague of Kechiche's construction worker father). Similarly the choice of ugly-beautiful first-time actress Hafsia Herzi to play Rym seems to have been made with a desire for realism in mind, and she indeed performs with a raw intensity that appeals to our belief in her 'authenticity' as a character.

Treading the line between artistic expression and popular appeal, Kechiche's drawn-out scenes and hand-held camera linger on close-ups of the characters' faces, inviting us to engage with them and their experiences. A number of emotional scenes, depicting the complication, if not abandonment, of traditional family structures in modern French society, drag themselves out far beyond their narrative function. The information they provide is repeated *ad nauseam* by the characters in a test of the audience's patience. These *longueurs* serve to intensify the multiple sub-plots, tied together by the web of extended family, but also to frustrate our anticipation of the main story's climax, lending a dramatic function to such 'artistic' elements. There is, however, a pervading sense of documentary ordinariness throughout the film, which contains a number of lengthy family scenes where the dialogue does not advance the narrative, but paints instead a more holistic picture of the specific world that is being portrayed. The dialogue is sometimes suspended for long moments, and then everyone cuts across one another in a good-humoured banter which has an improvised and 'natural' feel.

¹ The film received four Césars and had over one million spectators (CNC 2008).

While the story of *Couscous* undoubtedly goes well beyond the subject of food and family alone, one might also view the film as essentially structured around two particularly protracted dinner scenes, where the anticipation and gratification of Souad's *couscous royal* is drawn out, the characters' hunger and satisfaction providing the points of tension and resolution. The food dictates the rhythm of the dialogue and the sounds of munching, lip-smacking and finger-licking are all emphasised in a bid to sensualise the scenes and entice the audience's imagination of the flavours. Indeed, Kechiche reportedly made the actors fast before the dinner scenes, so that their enjoyment would come across more realistically (Chrisafis 2007). In particular the final, climactic denouement of the restaurant's opening night lasts an agonising hour, the filmic tempo appearing to slow down almost to real-time, even as the North African music speeds up and up. The climax of Rym's hypnotic belly-dance serves to divert the guests' attention from the non-appearance of the *couscous au poisson*, but also to claim a space for herself in Slimane's family and to affirm and celebrate her otherness to an elite white French audience. The link between the sensual pleasures of food and sex could not be made so clear as the film's close-ups are now trained upon her shaking, and later sweating, stomach, entrancing the hungry, drunken guests.

Rym's belly-dance is an act of self-exoticisation which defies the concerns of postcolonial theorists and is symptomatic of a film in which cultures originating in North Africa have uncontroversially become an aspect of contemporary French culture, to the point of becoming indistinguishable from it. To that end, it is interesting to note that couscous, in the manner of chicken tikka masala in Britain, has in fact become one of the favourite dishes of the French, sitting alongside such 'typical' dishes as *moules marinières* and *blanquette de veau* in surveys ("Quel est le préféré?" 2007). The use then of couscous as a factor to carry the film's intrigue is well-observed by Kechiche, since he could reasonably expect a broad section of the French population to identify with the delight taken by the characters as they *dégustent* the food brought so prominently to the fore of the film by a mixture of intimate close-ups and amplified sounds. Such a unifying factor is perhaps indispensable in the film's bid to place itself, and its characters, firmly and permanently into the French national paradigm, without resorting to the more confrontational and controversial tactics of *beur* and *banlieue* cinema. Indeed, as Kechiche has commented: "For me the family I describe is French – even if its origins lie elsewhere; it is French." (quoted in Erlanger 2008)

Filmography

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Thé au Harem d'Archimède, dir. Mehdi Charef, Wagram Vidéo, 1985.

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This film review was created as part of a [module on migrant and diasporic cinema](#) in Europe in the [MA Cultural Studies](#) at the University of Leeds (2009/10).