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Contemporary French Cinema
Lecture 3 – 13 October 2020

Intouchables

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Directors: Olivier Nakache & Éric Toledano, 2011; **screenplay**: Olivier Nakache & Éric Toledano
Cinematography: Mathieu Vadepied; **editing**: Dorian Rigal-Ansous; **music**: Ludovico Einaudi
Leading parts: François Cluzet (Philippe), Omar Sy (Driss), Anne Le Ny (Yvonne), Audrey Fleurot (Magalie), Clotilde Mollet (Marcelle)

Awards: Winner of one César (Best actor for Omar Sy) in 2012 (9 nominations); according to IMDb the film received 38 international awards, most often the 'Best international film' award.

Olivier Nakache & Éric Toledano
Born respectively in 1973 and 1971 in France, met in 1995 (first short-film). Have directed several feature films: *Je préfère qu'on reste amis…* (2005), *Tellement proches* (2009), *Samba* (2014), *Le sens de la fête* (2017), *Hors normes* (2019).

QUESTIONS

On stereotypes
'Stereotyping is marked by a principle of ambivalence. The stereotype facilitates the transmission of ideas, and concepts, but it does so by freezing a certain stage of the production of the text' (Mireille Rosello, 1998, p. 23).

> Richard Dyer's image of vicious circle: 'The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group as if that argument arose before and independently of the stereotype. Yet, for the most part, it is from stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups' (*The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 1993, London: Routledge, p. 14).

'Stereotypes come with a high power of persuasion, circulation, and memorization' (Rosello, p. 29).
'(…) treat stereotypes as respectable narratives (…) as valuable objects of study rather than as laughable exaggerations and obvious falsehoods' (p. 31).
'It may be crucial to verify which values are involved in [my] criticism of stereotypes. Stereotypes are easy to identify, quote, and denounce, and yet they are impossible to eliminate (…) Those who loudly oppose stereotypes may be their best allies, their best chance of survival' (p. 33).
'Using and exposing stereotype are the two sides of the same act of enunciation' (Anne Herschberg-Pierrot, *'Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues' de Flaubert*, 1988, Lille: Presses universitaires de Lille, p. 24).
'The decision to denounce a stereotype leads inexorably to a moment when the stereotype has to be uttered and that even this type of meta-utterance, this distanced repetition of a framed

stereotype involves a minimum, unconscious yet unavoidable element of allegiance. If we included stereotypes in our conversation even as examples, even as the target of our jokes, others could be primarily sensitive to the presence of those questionable statements; their interpretation of our position may then complicate what we take as unambiguous criticism' (Rosello, p. 36). → The reference to a stereotype is a stereotype.

→ Does calling attention to stereotypes by placing them in a position of centrality increase their ability to self-transmit?
→ What to do? Should the culture representatives (directors, screenwriters, actors, etc.) remain silent (i.e. no longer create)?

Ethnicity and community
According to Moine (2018), there is a delicate balance between enunciating steereotypes and denouncing them; this tension is inevitable in *Intouchables* because the two leading roles are contrasted in every possible way (socially, politically, physically, and racially – see the film's poster).
→ In what way(s) could *Intouchables* be nonetheless considered 'more progressive' than *Bienvenus chez les Ch'tis*? (think beyond the narration which is very 'binary')

Tropes from blackface tradition and minstrel shows. The use of American tropes for representing blackness can be considered an example of what Catherine M. Cole called 'transnational blackface'. Etienne Balibar has written about the 'recolonization' of social relations with respect to immigrants and foreigners living in contemporary France (*We, the people of Europe? Reflections on transnational citizenship*, 2004, pp. 38-42). According to Cole, 'the very act of impersonation seems to hold promise as a means of performative self-actualisation' (see her chapter in Stephen Johnson, *Burnt cork: traditions and legacies of blackface minstrelsy*, 2012, pp. 223-257).
Régis Dubois: French cinematic stereotypes of blackness tend to stress the exoticism of black characters and their bodies
→ Can you spot such stereotypes in *Intouchables*? Let's discuss.

Despite its flaws, *Intouchables* does succeed in bringing issues of multiculturalism and discrimination in public conversation through a popular medium. In the French public sphere, American culture has long functioned as a model for the exploration of such issues because French politics and social sciences have long relied on a universalist conception of the citizen that elides the question of race (Pap Ndiaye, *La condition noire: essai sur une minorité française*, Paris: Gallimard, 2009, pp. 37-40).

→ *Intouchables* is situated in the same uncomfortable territory as the blackface and neo-minstrelsy tradition itself, namely in the volatile mixture of racism, discomfiting laughter and populist rebellion that seeks to visualise the links between race and inequality in contemporary France as a provisional step in generating a desire for change (David Pettersen, 2016, p. 67).

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