In hospitable landscapes: contemporary French horror cinema, immigration and identity

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ABSTRACT
The rebirth of French horror cinema at the start of the twenty-first century coincided with a critical moment in the country’s debates on immigration. The Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) called for cultural assimilation and integration from its immigrant population, but there was also a growing trend in the party towards a more hard-line approach. This article uses Jacques Derrida’s writing on hospitality to propose that the politics of the UMP and questions of identity, immigration and assimilation are key to the renewal of French horror cinema in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It argues that the films Sheitan (Kim Chapiron, 2006), Frontière(s) (Xavier Gens, 2007) and La Meute (Franck Richard, 2010) represent the white French anxiety over the nation’s political move towards the right (as opposed to a fear of the immigrant Other directly), reading these horror films as exhibiting the tension between tolerance and hospitality key to Derrida’s writing. Therefore, this article proposes that the negative depiction of white rural communities, the inclusion of characters of immigrant descent and the emphasis on ‘hosting’ locations such as the hotel and the roadside café reveal a country working through its position as a host nation within Fortress Europe.

Xavier Gens’ 2007 film Frontière(s)/Frontier(s) opens with an image of a foetus in-utero. Over the grainy ultrasound footage, the film’s protagonist introduces herself: ‘[Je] m’appelle Yasmine. Je suis enceinte depuis trois mois. Un jour quelqu’un a dit que tous les hommes naissaient libre et égaux en droit. Le monde dans lequel je vis est tout le contraire. Qui voudrait naître pour grandir dans le chaos et la haine ?’

The opening credit sequence rolls, combining found footage imagery of protests and riots with fictional news reports, to depict the election success and entry into power of a far-right French government. Cars are burnt, people fill the streets in protest and lines upon lines of police officers charge as if into battle. Gens said he was inspired to write the screenplay after the 2002 French election, when Jean-Marie Le Pen’s far-right Front National came second to Jacques Chirac’s conservative Rassemblement pour la République (Amner 2007). The majority of the found footage is from the later 2005 French riots, drawing a clear link between the fictional world of a film set in the near future and the real world of a French audience.

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The use of footage from the 2005 riots in Frontière(s) is representative of a much wider political seam that runs through French horror cinema of this period. Initial scholarly writing on these films was quick to position them in relation to French society, providing readings of the films as expressing fears surrounding immigration and the loss of French cultural identity due to the influx of foreign Others. Ben McCann argues that the physical destruction of the body in these works ‘allegorizes fractures in the national body politic’ (2008, 227). He contends that a number of these films are ‘engaged in a fascinating dialogue with recent political and social events in France, grafting metaphors of border porosity and domestic invasion on to their narratives of visual excess’ (226). Likewise, Marc Olivier refers to the resurgence of the home-invasion film in the country as French ‘border horror’, aligning the common figure of the pregnant protagonist with both the home and the nation itself (2007). In his review of À l’intérieur/Inside (Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo, 2007), where the home of a young woman called Sarah is invaded by a nameless woman who wishes to steal the unborn child from her womb, Olivier argues that the threat to the protagonist’s maternal body stands as a double for the threat to Paris from the rioting youth of the banlieue. Sarah herself watches these events unfold on television, with Maury and Bustillo utilising some of the same found footage that is included in the opening of Frontière(s). Olivier argues that when the unnamed woman enters the house and begins her battle for the baby, Sarah’s body is transformed into a fortress that – like Fortress Europe – continually suffers attack and the threat of invasion: ‘City. Home. Womb … The borders between inside and outside, between the private and the public reveal their vulnerable permeability’ (2007). Both scholars argue that À l’intérieur and an earlier film Ils/Them (David Moreau and Xavier Palud, 2006), where a young French couple living in Romania find their house – and their lives – under threat from local youths, reveal a fear of the foreign Other threatening the border of the home/nation. However, moving beyond these two examples allows for a more nuanced understanding of the connections between French horror films of the first decade of the twenty-first century and the politics of contemporary France. Dubbed ‘Sarkozy horror’ by the film critic Neil Young (2008), films such as Sheitan/Satan (Kim Chapiron, 2006), Frontière(s) and La Meute/The Pack (Franck Richard, 2010) contain a number of themes that engage with the political rhetoric of the time, implicitly and explicitly exploring the position of France as a ‘host’ nation, having both an established immigrant community and an incoming flow of sans-papiers. From protagonists of black, Asian and Maghrebi backgrounds, to an abundance of hosting locations such as hotels, holiday homes and roadside cafés, as well as multiple home-invasion narratives and pregnant women under threat, horror cinema of this period is saturated by questions of nationhood, borders, ethnicity and immigration. This article will utilise Jacques Derrida’s writing on hospitality – work rising out of the same political and social context – to explore the relationship between host and visitor, nation and immigrant, that can be read into these films.

Ouvre-moi ta porte … que je t’ouvre le ventre

The relationship between hosting – or hospitality – and the nation is one that occupied much of Derrida’s thought during the last decade of his life. Taking into consideration the actions of the European Union and the 2003 Iraq war, as well as the treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers more generally, Derrida’s writing on hospitality brings together the philosophical works of Kant and Levinas with the realities of Fortress Europe.
Of Hospitality (2000) is formed of two seminars by the philosopher delivered in 1996 that unpack the ‘question of the foreigner’. Or rather that should be ‘the question of the foreigner’ and ‘the question of the foreigner’, for as part of the philosopher’s poetics of hospitality Derrida explores how the foreigner gives rise to a question of both self and Other; that the foreigner is a question themselves, and that they pose a question to us and in doing so put us into question. He presents two heterogeneous figures of hospitality: a conditional hospitality that subjects the foreigner to the laws of the host, and an unconditional hospitality that welcomes without question. These two forms of hospitality do not simply contradict each other but instead operate in a ‘non-dialectical antinomy’ (2000, 77, 2005). Unconditional hospitality is the Law of hospitality: a more Levinasian understanding of hospitality where the Other’s arrival should not be expected, nor should they in any way be assimilated (such as by being addressed or subjected to the laws of the host/state). In contrast, conditional hospitality refers to the laws or ‘pact’ of hospitality that in some way subjects the stranger to the laws of host, from the greeting of the foreigner to the protection of one’s home.

In an interview with Giovanna Borradori, Derrida draws out the important difference between hospitality and tolerance. Tolerance may at first seem like a charitable act grounded in Christian virtue. However, as Derrida explains, tolerance is focused on the self, always positioning the self first, and as such is the opposite of hospitality. Tolerance suggests a limit, an amount that can be tolerated before one’s charity is exceeded:

If I think I am being hospitable because I am tolerant, it is because I wish to limit my welcome, to retain power and maintain control over the limits of my ‘home,’ my sovereignty, my ‘I can’ (my territory, my house, my language, my culture, my religion, and so on). (In Borradori 2003, 127–128)

Derrida proposes that beyond the religious origins of the word, tolerance now has a new home within the language of immigration, namely the phrase ‘seuil de tolérance’ in France, which describes the supposed limit at which the country can no longer accept immigrants or strangers from abroad. Such terminology entered French political debate in the early 1990s, and President François Mitterrand himself uttered it during a television broadcast in 1992. This idea suggests that a nation can only welcome or host a finite number of immigrants before things break down, before tolerance is exceeded. Prime Minister Michel Rocard, for example, famously announced: ‘La France ne peut pas accueillir toute la misère du monde’ (Kastoryano 1996, 59). Derrida rejects such speech as ‘organicist rhetoric’, which replaces a religiously grounded understanding of tolerance with a more biological one (as quoted in Borradori 2003, 128). The word ‘tolerance’ in this context suggests a body that can only tolerate the invasion of the foreign Other up to a point, and imposing restrictions that protect the ‘health’ of the body. As such, tolerance rests on conditions and control, and it is this extreme form of conditional hospitality that is increasingly utilised by European nations in the hosting of immigrants. Derrida explains: ‘We offer hospitality only on the condition that the other follows our rules, our way of life, even our language, our culture, our political system, and so on’ (2003, 128). Hospitality becomes conditional on assimilation. We might welcome the foreigner into our home and ask, ‘What is your name?’, but by doing so we are addressing the foreigner and through this interrogation we force them into a relationship subject to the laws of the host. Derrida proposes that in contrast, unconditional hospitality would neither address nor expect the
foreigner, a hospitality of ‘visitation rather than invitation’ (2003, 129). He acknowledges that this form of unconditional hospitality – the Law of hospitality – is of course impossible in real life, let alone able to be practised at the level of the state. This Law cannot become part of the laws. Yet Derrida proposes that without the idea of unconditional hospitality, we would have no concept of hospitality itself, nor of the importance of maintaining the alterity of the foreigner who enters our lives without necessarily having been welcomed or invited. In order to maintain the dignity and alterity of the foreigner hosted by the state, the laws of hospitality must recognise the Law of hospitality, aiming to be as ethical as possible when subjecting the foreigner to its conditions.

But this question of alterity is a sticking point in French politics, which operate through a system of assimilation rather than multiculturalism. Assimilation is part of the expectation of Republicanism, that everyone must be subject to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity once they have entered French society. As Jane Freedman notes, ‘It is a notion which stems from the belief that citizenship should be founded on a high level of cultural cohesion, and that if immigrants wished to become French citizens they should respect French culture and values’ (2004, 26). After the Second World War the focus on assimilation moved towards integration, to mark a step away from France’s colonial legacy and the requirement for colonised peoples to be assimilated into French culture in order to receive citizenship. Assimilation necessitates that the immigrant adopts the ways of the host nation, whereas integration incorporates those of different backgrounds into the nation as equals. However, assimilation has reappeared with renewed strength in the twenty-first century as an answer to the ‘threat’ posed by Islamic extremism, which many in Europe argued was partly enabled by multiculturalism (Freedman 2004). Mirroring a 1980s slogan used by Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 1980s, ‘La France, aimez-la ou quittez-la’, Nicolas Sarkozy declared to the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) in 2006: ‘If there are people who are not comfortable in France, they should feel free to leave a country they do not love’ (Marthaler 2008, 391). This is just one example of moments where Sarkozy’s hard-line rhetoric targeted France’s immigrant population as outsiders or Others within the French Republic.

**Sarkozy horror**

In the early 2000s Sarkozy positioned immigration at the centre of French politics in an ultimately successful bid to draw voters from Le Pen’s Front National. The success of the Front National at the 2002 presidential election made it clear that the policies of those on the centre-left and centre-right were perceived as being too lax when it came to immigration. During his time as Minister of the Interior for Chirac’s government and throughout his presidential campaign, Sarkozy kept a security-driven immigration model at the forefront of French politics. In an address to his party in 2005, he declared that ‘France can only remain generous if those who are here in violation of our rights and laws are returned home’, positioning France as only a ‘host’ for these interlopers (their home being elsewhere) (Marthaler 2008, 389). But it was the second- and third-generation immigrant West African and Maghrebi young men of the banlieues who particularly attracted Sarkozy’s ire. Building on an earlier racial stereotyping of African immigrant mothers as ‘breeders’ and leveraging the supposed financial toll polygamous families from West Africa had on the state, Sarkozy blamed the social unrest of 2005 on these African youths. When speaking to
In L’Express he stated that those responsible for the riots were ‘French by law’ but ‘polygamy and the [lack of] acculturation of a certain number of families [made] it more difficult to integrate a French youth of African descent than a French youth of another descent’ (Raissiguier 2010, 89). Here the ‘failure’ of parents to properly acculturate, or rather assimilate, their children into the French way of life was presented as creating violent young men who were a direct threat to France.

By opening its narrative with images of the 2005 riots and the voice of a young woman of Maghrebi descent expressing the injustice of an unequal society, Frontière(s) unequivocally positions itself from the outset in relation to concurrent debates in twenty-first-century France. The riots of 2005 had two catalysts: the death of two young men – and the injuries of a third – as they hid from the police, and comments made by Sarkozy about the people who live in France’s banlieues. However, they also signalled a much broader discontent. Whereas many social commentators dismissed the riots as the actions of delinquents rebelling against the Republic and the French people, there is another strain of thought that saw these events as being a form of political protest (Moran 2011). The riots saw young people (predominantly the descendants of immigrants) take to the streets in order to demonstrate against police harassment and high youth unemployment, but also, as Michel Kokoreff has argued, to protest against a lack of recognition of their position and proclaim a profound need for justice, equality and respect (Kokoreff 2009). The riots called into question France’s championing of the assimilation of immigrants and the idea of the country being a ‘colour-blind’ Republic. Didier Fassin writes that:

What was unexpected … was the opportunity the riots gave French society for a public confession of the long-denied policies of economic inequality, residential segregation and racial discrimination towards a part of itself not recognized as entirely French. Suddenly, a previously unacknowledged colour bar was discovered. (Fassin 2006, 2)

In other words, these ‘foreigners’ within France – the foreigner who had already been hosted – forced the country to question their own policies, values and beliefs. Or in Derrida’s words, it is as though ‘the foreigner were being-in-question … But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question’ (2000, 3).

This call to question both self and nation is key to Frontière(s). After its explicitly political opening credits, the film shows a group of friends on the run from the police. They split into two groups, arranging to meet at a rundown hotel on the French border that turns out to be owned by a family of Nazi cannibals under the dominating control of their fascist patriarch Von Geisler. The four friends are of varied ethnic descent. Yasmine and Farid are Maghrebi, and Farid makes references to his own Islamic faith. In contrast, Tom’s and Alex’s ethnicities are not defined, yet they are constantly interrogated by their host about the ‘purity’ of their backgrounds. The three male friends are all swiftly killed with only the pregnant Yasmine being spared, and in a rather questionable plot line (due to her ethnicity), she is forced to become the wife of one of the sons in order to improve the family’s bloodline and create a ‘pure’ race. Her own pregnancy is seen by the Von Geislers as a good omen – countering her Magrebi descent – and she is married into the family against her will. Therefore, in Frontière(s) a clear line is drawn between the protagonists of varying ethnicities on the one side, and the Nazi family and the oppressive state on the other (the family and the state
presenting two different forms of fascism: one overt, the other covert). While Von Geisler’s family actually does kill three of the friends, it is suggested that the new far-right state is potentially just as deadly. In the opening stages of the film Yasmine takes her dying brother to a hospital, but the staff are more intent on alerting the police to the presence of two young people from the banlieue than saving Sami’s life. The film’s conclusion is also open to interpretation. Yasmine manages to escape, only to come across a police road block. The film ends with her standing soaked in blood, her hands raised as the police move theirs to their gun holsters. Without the film’s introductory scenes this could be seen as the moment where she is saved, but instead the suggestion of police brutality under the orders of the newly established far-right government seen in the film’s opening sequence implies that she is now back in the hands of the deadly and oppressive system she originally fled from.

In her brief appraisal of the film, Alexandra West proposes that Gens uses the Von Geisler family to interrogate the country’s own history of its role in the Second World War and the Occupation, and their legacy, with the film ‘offering a critique of France’s present as well as its past’ (West 2016, 134). Such a reading supports the proposal made here that the French horror films of this period are more concerned with questioning the self/host than with exploring any fear of the Other (be that Other German or Maghrebi). Yasmine’s appearance in the second half of the film can be read in terms of a desire to provoke national self-reflection. In order to make her ancestry less offensive to Von Geisler, his French daughter-in-law Eva shaves off Yasmine’s thick dark hair. Eva was herself kidnapped by the family but has now assimilated to their way of living and is happily married to one of the sons. She has a number of children, yet these offspring are ‘mutants’ with physical and mental disabilities, forced to live in the abandoned mine that lies beneath the property and fed only on the flesh of the family’s victims. Eva’s complicity in the Von Geislers’ actions is noteworthy. When Eva cuts off Yasmine’s hair, she resembles one of les femmes tondues, the women accused of having relationships with German forces during the Occupation. After the end of the war these women were punished by having their hair shorn off and being paraded through the streets of their home towns. This visual reference moves the focus from the German oppressor to French involvement in horrific wartime and post-wartime acts.

As such, Von Geisler and his family stand as a warning against a failure to learn from the past, and the increasing political move to the right seen in France during the early twenty-first century. Although the average French citizen might abhor the idea of being fascist and see Nazism as evil, they had increasingly been tempted to vote for a party which expressed a similar nationalist ideology, and now more mainstream parties were following suit to entice such voters back. One reading of this film could see the white French fear of the Other being played out on the immigrant body, which is subjected to the violence its presence threatens. However, particularly when taking into account Gens’ motivation for making the film, this argument falls flat. Instead, the audience is encouraged to side with Yasmine – and therefore other French immigrants – against the far-right oppressor. Frontière(s) can be read as a call for white France to question the direction in which it is moving politically, an anxiety-fuelled Derridean questioning of the white self elicited by the figure of the ‘foreign’ Other. Rather than a fear of the foreign Other’s invasion of the white French national body, the film expresses a fear of the potential future direction that body might take.
In the film the events are split between two locations owned by the family: the hotel and a farm built on top of the aforementioned abandoned mine. In the same manner that the friends from the city are the only guests at the rundown hotel, the mine is no longer active, and the farm and its land are in disrepair. This once fertile and prosperous landscape is now barren, and any unsuspecting guests at the hotel butchered in the farm’s dirty outhouses to be consumed by animals and humans alike. Therefore, *Frontière(s)* taps into two vastly different cinematic traditions: the hillbilly horror trope often seen in post-1960 American horror and – as Tim Palmer argues – the French cinéma rural narrative, where city dwellers visit the countryside and learn something new about themselves in the process (Palmer 2011). *Frontière(s)* is just one example of a number of French horror films of this period where young suburban men and women leave their homes only to find violence, death and depravity. These events are played out in various hosting locations: hotels, holiday homes and roadside cafés. The visitors of these locations all become victims of their white hosts who seek to gain something from their demise, whether that is sustenance for their families or a means to procreate beyond their stagnated gene pools. Aesthetically, the countryside that surrounds these hosting locations is very similar. These are not the marvellous landscapes and well-kept houses of *douce France*, but bleak fields and rundown buildings saturated with blood, mist and mud (like those from *Frontière(s)* shown in *Figure 1*). In these films, the France that exists beyond the city is far from one that would inspire national pride.

The ‘hosts’ who occupy these barren locations are represented as dangerous and backwards: often cannibalistic and inbred, always deadly. In Kim Chapiron’s horror comedy *Sheitan* for example, four friends of French, Algerian, African and South-East Asian descent (*Figure 2*) meet a girl called Eve at a nightclub and travel back to her rural home where they meet the local inhabitants. The friends are intended to be sacrifices to Satan at the hands of Eve’s housekeeper Joseph and his sister-wife Mary (both played by Vincent Cassel). Not only are Cassels’s characters quite obviously deranged and incestuous, but the rest of the young white French population of the area are also represented as being sexually promiscuous, potentially incestuous and, somewhat problematically, with a number of the young males having physical or learning disabilities. This detail mirrors

![Figure 1. Rural France in *Frontière(s)* (Optimum Releasing).](image-url)
the inability of Von Geisler’s children to create satisfactory heirs. Therefore, there is a clear divide between the (often immigrant) city dwellers and their white French yokel hosts, with the latter being portrayed as inbred, depraved and deadly. This development came at a time when French politics was dominated by right-wing calls for assimilation. It poses the question: with whom are these French immigrants from the banlieue meant to be assimilating?

**La Spack and assimilation with the famille franco-fançaise**

Von Geisler’s demands that Yasmine become part of the family form part of a wider interrogation of assimilation that runs throughout twenty-first-century French horror. The political seam visible in these works can be read as a push-back against the rhetoric of politicians such as Sarkozy and the UMP, expressing an anxiety over white France and a questioning of what it means to be French. For Derrida too, it is the alterity of the foreigner and the issue of assimilation that act as the linchpin of conditional and unconditional hospitality. In *Of Hospitality* he writes that when the foreigner is received, the first demand is the question ‘what is your name?’ but that also this simple request positions the foreigner as responsible before the laws of the host. Derrida argues that it is with this first question that hospitality begins, but that it is also the first act of violence against the visitor. For someone to be foreign they can have nothing in common with the host, namely a common language. Therefore, one can only address a true foreigner in a language that is not their own. Subsequently, argues Derrida, if hospitality has to be requested then the foreigner is forced to ask in a language that is not their own: ‘Among the serious problems we are dealing with here is that of the foreigner who, inept at speaking the language, always risks being without defence before the law of the country that welcomes or expels him’ (2000, 15). Here Derrida moves from the philosophical to the political, grounding his investigation of ‘hospitality’ in the lived experience. But where
should the diverse protagonists of these ‘Sarkozy horror’ films and indeed the young people who took part in the 2005 riots be positioned in this schema? They speak the language and were born in the country. But does wider French society see them as French? The rhetoric of Sarkozy and the UMP suggests not.

In his article ‘Opposing Exclusion: The Political Significance of the Riots in French Suburbs (2005–2007)’ (2011), Matthew Moran argues that the riots were not a rejection of the Republic and French society, but rather a plea to be able to access the latter. He proposes that the young people who took part in these acts were challenging the call to integration continually being levelled at them, but which was never seen as achievable due to the socio-economic inequality of their environment. Through interviews with various young people from Villers-le-Bel involved in both the 2005 and 2007 riots, Moran highlights the recurring theme that these men and women see themselves as French, but that they still feel they are constantly being told that they must integrate more. This results in confusion and frustration. As Moran comments:

While processes of acculturation have occurred in the suburbs as successive generations of immigrant origins have become ever more deeply embedded in French society and culture, official discourse has failed to take account of this. For certain inhabitants in the banlieues, continued calls for integration represent an unattainable illusion: continuously voiced in public and political spheres and always demanding more of those in its sights, the notion of integration poses problems for the young people … in the sense that complete social access to the Republic appears to remain beyond reach. In other words, the term signifies a process without end which, ultimately, provokes and reinforces a realisation on the part of the young person that their position in the eyes of society is that of an outsider. (2011, 304)

These young men and women feel that in the eyes of the state and white France they will forever be the foreigner. Violence, Moran concludes, is the only means through which these young people feel that their voices can be heard by the politicians who claim to represent them, and to gain some form of acknowledgement from the public and political spheres they are continually called to inhabit, but forever barred from accessing.

John Murphy’s ethnographic field research also supports the claim that the actions of the people involved in the riots stemmed from the inequality they face as ‘foreigners’ in their own country. Murphy (2011) states how the young people he interviewed used the label franco-français (Franco-French) to distinguish white French people. He also records how it was common for friends to give each other nicknames based on their heritage, or to refer to people as ‘the Arab’ or ‘the black guy’ (such as is seen in Sheitan with the character Thaï). Yet at the same time those interviewed saw themselves as French and never used hyphenated identities such as franco-algérien or franco-marocain. Murphy argues that young people from the banlieues avoided these hyphenated identities because in contrast to the designation Franco-French these either suggest a cultural duality (i.e. being both French and Algerian), and such a duality conflicts with French Republicanism, or a biological element to identity. In contrast, outside of the banlieues the stereotyping of their inhabitants as unskilled non-European immigrants that were an internal threat to the country persisted. As with Moran’s research, Murphy concludes that the riots were not an attack on French society but a communal response to the inequalities these young people face and the lack of wider recognition of their issues. They saw themselves as French, yet to use Moran’s phrase they were the ‘internal outsider’, as though they were forever being asked the question ‘what is your name?’ (‘Are you French
like me or a foreigner?`). It is out of this inequality that the French horror films under discussion here arise. If the call to these young people is to integrate, then this would suggest a need to leave the banlieues and engage with the Franco-French way of life. But as previously argued, throughout the horror films released between 2006 and 2010 the countryfolk who should be seen as ‘quintessentially French’ (as well as the Franco-German descendants of Von Geisler) are represented as monstrous, inbred and deadly. Violence is the only means of survival for these young visitors.

This divide between the suburban visitor and the yokel host is seen in Franck Richard’s La Meute, where protagonist Charlotte is captured by a mother – known only as La Spack – and her son Max, to feed to a pack of mutants. These mutants were once miners, whom the locals believe went too deep into the earth and were therefore transformed to be a curse upon the land. They now live in the soil and only rise to feed on human flesh. La Spack treats these mutants as her own children, with them taking the place of Max’s brothers who were killed in a mining accident. She is depicted as a gun-toting, dirty, deranged and sadistic mother figure, with little care for the victims that she ensnares. In contrast to the notion often expressed by those on the right that immigrants are nothing but a drain on state resources, La Spack is (along with Von Geisler and Joseph from Sheitan) a ‘hosting’ parent feeding her monstrous offspring the flesh of innocent strangers. Furthermore, akin to the hotel owned by Von Geisler and his family, La Spack runs a desolate and dirty roadside café, frequented only by lost travellers, violent motorcycle gangs and one rather inept ex-police offer. Max approaches unwitting victims on the country roads and brings them back to the café, where they are captured, force-fed and then given over to the mutants. Although in this case Charlotte herself is Franco-French, another of La Spack’s victims is a young East Asian man with the word ‘tofu’ branded across his forehead, aligning the role of the victim with the foreign Other.

La Spack goes about preparing and butchering her victims with the same methodical lack of emotion and interest that she shows when mopping her café floor, draining their blood and hacking apart limbs as though they were any other animal farmed for meat. Her only slight expressions of joy come from smoothly dispatching a victim who has attempted to flee, or when making fun of Charlotte’s newfound imprisonment. Her matronly but dishevelled appearance perfectly matches the muted brown, grey and blue colour tones of the landscape in which she reigns supreme (Figure 3). As with the other films of this period, in La Meute there is a tie between the landscape and its inhabitants, both being tired and barren. A once prosperous community now lies in ruins, its ‘children’ – as Sam informs Charlotte – abandoned to die in the mines by the government. In contrast to the rhetoric around immigration and the numbers of ‘foreigners’ that the national body can tolerate, this is a community that is entirely Franco-French, yet more deadly and corrupt than those of the more diverse suburbs. As such, this (white) body is far from healthy, and, instead of having to ‘welcome’ the world’s misery, it creates it.

As with Frontière(s) and Sheitan, then, La Spack’s adopted children are the products of a corrupt, desolate land and its people. The lack of diversity in these social groups has created a rural population willing to engage in murder and cannibalism (and in some instances incest), resulting in stunted new generations. These racist and inbred families are far from the bourgeois and cosmopolitan values that young people from immigrant backgrounds are encouraged to replicate. But this raises the question of just who the
average – or ideal – French citizen is. Are they from the rural heartland of the country, which was also the foothold of the Front National’s resurgence? Or a cosmopolitan liberal, many of whom – as Sarah does in À l’intérieur – ignored or dismissed the plight of the immigrant-descended communities in the banlieues? Both Frontière(s) and La Meute address this issue of assimilation by providing glimpses of what such a transformation would look like in their closing moments. In Frontière(s), just as Yasmine is about to escape, she is faced by Von Geisler’s oldest daughter holding a shotgun. The unarmed Yasmine has no choice but to tackle the woman to the ground and is only able to kill her attacker by practising their depravity: she sinks her teeth into the woman’s neck and tears out her throat, mirroring the family’s cannibalistic ways and using them against her oppressor (Figure 4). Her assimilation into the behaviour of the Von Geislers may have saved her life, but the film emphasises the cost of this move to her sanity, and indeed her
humanity. In La Meute, director Richard also shows his heroine taking on the role of her attacker, but this time in a false ending that tricks the viewer. After the film’s climactic battle between the protagonists and the mutant miners, Charlotte is shown surrounded by the mutants with no means of escape. As one starts to devour her leg, a close-up of Charlotte’s face dissolves into a shot of the moon, before fading out to white. The film then apparently jumps forward in time, depicting a van pulling into La Spack’s café. However, it is now Charlotte herself behind the café’s counter, watching as Sam arrives with a young woman. Taking on La Spack’s role as matriarch, Charlotte is heavily pregnant and dressed in the same muted grey and brown tones as her predecessor. She draws deeply on a cigarette, an act that adds to the sense of grime and ill-health that pervades the location whilst subverting traditional ideals of pregnancy and motherhood. Sam leaves the young woman and enters the café’s toilets. The black shadow of the doorway allows for another fade-out and then a rapid fade-in of a close-up of one of the mutant’s faces, before it is replaced by a close-up of Charlotte’s own face, outside once more. She is not the new owner of the café but suspended upside down by chains and minus a leg, waiting for nightfall, the return of the mutant miners and presumably death. Her assimilation into La Spack’s way of life was just a dream.

It can be argued that these films actively seek to trouble the calls for assimilation and integration that are so often directed at the descendants of immigrants in France. They reveal the double standards of a nation that prides itself on the ideas of freedom and equality for all, but where many were voting for parties that put Franco-French rights first and demonised the ‘foreign’ Other as an internal threat. Viewed through the prism of Derrida’s work on hospitality, we can read the hosting locations in these films – the hotels, cafés and even homes – as microcosms of the nation itself: a place that should welcome the foreigner, but instead threatens their liberty. If France was represented in the political rhetoric of the period as being a body that could only tolerate so much, the depiction of the hosts in these films challenges the idea that this body was a healthy one to begin with, and as such calls for a reflection on the white French self. The Franco-French yokels in films such as La Meute and Frontière(s) are far from ideal specimens. They are dirty and depraved, eking out a meagre existence in desolate and mud-filled rural backwaters. Rather than tolerating the Other they consume them, but this incorporation has only exacerbated their corruption. In other words, these hosts who consume and destroy are not renewed in the process; France will not be mightier for its mistreatment of the (immigrant) Other. And as for that Other, like the protagonists of these films, a Fanonian liberating violence is the only tool available for these internal outsiders to make their voices heard, their only means of expression in a country where they are forever seen as hosted, even though it is their home (Fanon 2004 [1961]).

In his book French Hospitality: Racism and North African Immigrants (1999), Tahar Ben Jalloun uses the concept of hospitality to draw out the issue of racial division in France. He proposes that hospitality is an integral element of human civilisation and can be found in every community, however impoverished. France, as a colonising nation, would impose itself on poorer countries, but the hospitality received was never fully reciprocated. Those who were once hosts were never allowed to be guests in return, only visitors who were often denied the right to stay. Ben Jalloun, who is himself an immigrant, having been born in Morocco and emigrated to France 1971, describes how at times he feels like a stranger in the country that is now his home. He explains that this happens ‘whenever racism
occurs, whether it is virulent or latent, and whenever someone lays down limits that mustn’t be transgressed’ (1999, 133). Such a transgression suggests the laws of a conditional hospitality that Derrida warns against. However, acts of social disorder or protest such as the 2005 riots and, on occasion, the content of horror films, can be forms of transgression: a push-back against the limits set by a society.10 Horror cinema is often seen as being reactionary, but it can also be progressive and speak to, and for, marginalised sectors of society. The majority of the French population supported Sarkozy’s actions during and after the 2005 riots, but the medium of film can provide the space for a counter-voice. From a director of immigrant descent (Chapiron) with his black, blanc, beur cast, to a Franco-French director horrified at the relative election success of a far-right party (Gens), the manner in which questions of French identity are explored across the country’s twenty-first-century horror cinema suggests that what these films represent is not as simple as just a white fear of the foreign Other. Instead they display an anxiety over the white French citizen who is increasingly turning towards more extreme ideological beliefs, and an awareness of the issues that challenge the young men and women who live in some of France’s most deprived areas. These films therefore offer, in part, an interrogation of what it means to be French in the twenty-first century and a challenging of the divide between the white Franco-French tradition and the country’s new generation of diverse French citizens.

Notes

1. ‘My name is Yasmine and I am three months pregnant. Someone once said that all men are born free and equal. The world in which I live is the opposite. Who wants to grow up in chaos and hatred?’

2. In his study of torture porn – of which he positions Frontière(s) as an example – Steve Jones (2013) argues that films of this subgenre are often stuck between being critiqued for lacking metaphor and dismissed when including it. However, whereas Jones succinctly draws out how a purely allegorical approach to the subgenre might be limiting, when looking at a collection of films within a national context – as opposed to a generic one – it remains a generative approach.

3. The term Festung Europa – Fortress Europe – has its origins in Nazi propaganda. However, in today’s usage it both signals the increasing levels of fortification and border controls at the boundaries of the EU and evokes a more general attitude towards immigration.

4. ‘Threshold of tolerance.’

5. ‘France cannot welcome all the world’s misery.’

6. ‘Love France or leave it.’

7. A few months before the unrest, after a child was fatally shot in Cité des 4000 in La Courneuve, Sarkozy stated that he would ‘cleanse the neighbourhood with a Kärcher’ (a high-pressure jet washer), and immediately prior to the riots when visiting Argenteuil he claimed that he would ‘rid them of the racaille’ (riff-raff) (Waddington, King, and Jobard 2009, 4).

8. For a discussion of hillbilly horror in American cinema see Bell (1997), who argues that throughout these narratives the rural is coded as ‘monstrous’ and the urban as ‘victim’.

9. In The Wretched of the Earth Frantz Fanon (2004[1961]) explores the twofold nature of the relationship between colonialism and violence. He argues that at first the colonised subject suffers at the violent hands of the coloniser, their sense of self detached from their community and culture, and therefore destroyed. Yet Fanon also contends that it is through violent acts of anti-colonial resistance, this time carried out by the colonised against their oppressor, that the colonised subject is able to restore their sense of self. The relationship between the legacy of French colonialism and the current demographic of the banlieues positions Fanon’s
work as a further lens through which to view these twenty-first-century horror films, this time from the perspective of the descendants of immigrants and this liberating and restorative violence, rather than the Franco-French self.

10. It is worth noting that a significant number of French horror directors – including Bustillo and Maury, Pascal Laugier and Coralie Fargeat – have commented on how difficult it is to organise financing for their films, as locally made horror films are not regarded as being profitable in France. Instead, these directors have to self-finance their productions, or work with a number of smaller, at times international, companies to get their films made. This can present the opportunity for more creative freedom as these directors are operating outside of the mainstream commercial system (see Brown 2011).

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