

THE COMEDY OF FRENCHNESS: EXPLORING SOCIAL ISSUES IN
MAINSTREAM FRENCH CINEMA

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INTRODUCTION:

As pioneer of the cinema industry, France has long been concerned and involved in the creation and distribution of film both domestically and internationally. The birth of the film industry in the late 1800's coincided with a growing interest in national identity, which was, and still is, incorporated into French cinema today (Hayward 5). Issues of national identity and public unity continue to preoccupy France as it faces an increasingly globalized world and society. French cinema and culture have generally been associated with high culture and considered a fine art rather than purely entertainment, unlike most Hollywood films (Hatchondo 52). However, the last decade has seen a collection of extremely popular French movies that do not necessarily reflect this trend, but still attempt to continue the historical trend of making a statement in film by confronting contemporary social issues that are prevalent in French society. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the various social issues identified and addressed in recent mainstream French films, and to determine how these issues (both in their depiction and the films' messages regarding these concerns) are presented with relevance to contemporary issues in France today.

I have chosen three recent, popular French films to analyze in their portrayal of relevant social issues in French society. These films include: *Intouchables* (2011), *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (2008), and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* (2014). Each film features characters that are confronted with problems that affect many French people throughout the country, yet these films are unique in the manner in which they resolve and/or dismiss certain issues that society has not been able to overcome. I chose these specific films because of the surprising success of each one despite some rather

controversial criticisms, primarily from abroad. These are films that millions of French people from all walks of life have seen and enjoyed. The issues presented in these films, paired with their overall popularity, motivated me to investigate how exactly each film addresses modern problems of French society. The criteria of my selection will be further explained in the course of this paper.

“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” by Fredric Jameson theorizes that film is a representation of society’s ultimate utopia and how overcoming the film's conflict is a symbol for dispelling threats to social harmony. Jameson’s theory can help explain the success of these films given that the issues addressed are much more relevant and identifiable in French society, so the triumph of unity over social injustice (as the “threat”) is a much more sought after utopia. However, Jameson ultimately warns against trusting films’ social utopias because it prohibits progress in reality as audiences become content to trust the imaginary solutions presented in these fictional representations (124-127). The success of these films then becomes worrisome in light of Jameson’s theories, especially given the low probability that any of the scenarios presented in these films would realistically resolve peacefully – or even come to pass in the first place.

Similarly, French film critic and theorist André Bazin discusses the ways in which film reflects reality, but is essentially only an illusion. Robert J. Cardullo discusses Bazin’s debatably controversial views in his article “Cinema as ‘social documentary’: the film theory of André Bazin, revisited.” Cardullo comments on Bazin’s essay, “*Tout film est un documentaire social*,” in its views on the effect of film on society and its individuals. Bazin asserts that cinema can “grasp social, cultural, political, and economic realities,” and therefore, create a believable dream or an inversion of said reality that

people latch onto as a realistic fantasy (Cardullo 35). The French films that I intend to discuss identify and, more importantly, overcome their respective social issues in a comedic and entertaining manner. This, of course, is not always the case in reality, yet Bazin's theories demonstrate how films have the power to reflect societal concerns in a manner that is believable yet ultimately unachievable. In reference to this concept, Cardullo states:

In a word, cinema functions in such a way that we can believe (to some extent) that what we see on-screen is true. But this does not mean that cinema can reproduce truth; on the contrary, its innate realism cannot be separated from its potential to create believable illusions. Hence, cinematic realism is not a naive acknowledgement of what reality actually is; rather, it is dialectically linked to illusion - i.e., to its own fundamental condition. (Cardullo 36)¹

It is important to understand that films, particularly ones that are both popular and controversial, can provide insight in their portrayals of a given society and the ways in which their characters interact with it.

In regards to the ideal representation of their society, France has long been concerned with how their culture is presented, regardless of accuracy. Preserving and promoting the French culture is extremely important to the French government, which feels obligated to ensure that its cultural products and lifestyles are properly represented in a manner that unifies national identity. "For the state, the products of its culture are both a sign of the health of the nation and an exportable commodity that serves the renown of the nation" (Hayward 16). In 1959, former French president Charles de Gaulle created the Ministry of Culture, first headed by André Malraux, in order for the French government to officially assume responsibility over the promotion and production of its

¹ In his critique of naturalism, Guy de Maupassant made a similar point in his essay "Le Roman" (preface to his book *Pierre et Jean* (1888)) that artists can only create illusions of reality instead of completely accurate portrayals.

culture. The French film industry falls under this governmental protection and regularly receives subsidies to ensure independent and/or low-budget French films have a chance to debut (Hayward 16-17).

As aforementioned, French cinema has regularly been regarded as more of a fine art form rather than as pop culture and entertainment. It has been attributed a dreamlike quality that is almost ambiguous in its representations and its overall themes, usually leaving the spectator to find meaning in the film based on his or her own personal interpretation (Hatchondo 51-52). In this respect, *Intouchables*, *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* follow a more direct, Hollywood-esque structure that makes its themes and social representations very apparent to audiences, instead of addressing them in merely ideological terms. This is in keeping with the current transition of the French film industry as it attempts to revolutionize its image and production to more adequately adapt to the advanced age of digital technology and increased globalization (Hatchondo 54). The French film industry “appears to be rich, but is also terribly fragile” (Hatchondo 50).²

As stated above, other nations must make their films and style of direction unique in order to compete with the global success of Hollywood movies. Usually, this strategy results in presenting and identifying with a country’s national identity and culture (Hayward 8). *Intouchables*, *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* each end in a manner that demonstrates an understanding among its characters in a way that suggests acceptance through cultural – and national – unity. These three films also each feature characters that find themselves out of their comfort zone, yet eventually manage to find happiness and peace through the acceptance of other characters. The

² The French film industry, “*apparaît comme riche mais aussi terriblement fragile*”

transformation of each movie's characters is portrayed in a comedic fashion, creating a lighthearted attitude towards serious societal problems. I mentioned before that this structure and the use of comedy as a cinematic tool is not as present in French films compared to those of Hollywood. Furthermore, the contemporary relevance of the films' issues resonate on a more direct level with the French public and the blatant manner in which they are addressed leaves no question to the desired message.

Henri Bergson discusses the importance and influence of comedy in society in his essay "*Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*," or simply "*Laughter*," originally published in 1900. Bergson asserts that laughter is an exclusively human characteristic and can only be created through strictly human personifications. The ability and pleasure of laughter only occurs through the stripping of emotion and prior personal attachment to a situation, allowing audiences to make a new connection to a comedy without bias so as to truly laugh and enjoy it. Laughing is a social commodity that allows individuals to join together in the presentation of the comedic representations of the world around them. Bergson states that humans put aside their own social prejudices and vices in order to laugh at, and therefore understand, the social issues presented.

Bergson's theories on laughter and its societal implications are applicable to *Intouchables*, *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* in that audiences recognize the social significance of the films' issues but disconnect themselves from their own prejudices in that moment in order to laugh and enjoy each film's comedic demonstration of serious social problems. The comedic element to these films is extremely important in understanding the large success of these debatably controversial films. The humorous demonstrations of contemporary social issues in French society can

potentially explain the reason these films resonated so well with French audiences.

According to Bergson, audiences must disconnect from their own emotions to laugh at something, but they must also, in some manner, make a connection to the demonstration itself in order to truly understand it enough to laugh.

I have used a qualitative methodology in analyzing these three films. After researching film theory and its teachings, I created a series of codes/categories to find within each film that reference examples to a specific social issue or theme. They are as follows: language (slang terms, racial slurs, dialectic differences), stereotyping (race, religion, social class, geographic origins, etc.), character depictions (negative vs. positive, cinematic techniques, exaggerated comparisons in terms of race, religion, social class, and geographic origins, etc.), and changing characters (reactions, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, etc.). Additionally, I have noted the important nuances of the *mise-en-scène* throughout each film that contribute to the demonstration of a certain social issue.³ The evolution of the main characters of each film is extremely important in recognizing the way each film addresses a social stigma; therefore I have chosen to incorporate my analysis in the context of a narrative summary of each film in order to show this progression. I use these summary analyses outlined the important plot points of each story for those who may not be familiar with these films while analyzing the depicted social issues in the course of the summary. In order to fully understand the significance and context of the discussed social issues, my first chapter is a general overview of French society and the societal dilemmas that France faces today.

³ The “*mise-en-scène*” of a film refers to the stylistic aspects of a given movie scene that contribute to the overall message and feeling of a specific situation. Elements such as lighting, stage design, wardrobe, etc. are used to set the visual theme of a film.

Each film that I have chosen is unique in the divided reception and reviews. I stated before that these are some of the highest grossing films in France to date, so it is apparent that the French public quite enjoyed these films. However, critics did not necessarily give positive reviews despite each film's surprising success; the United States was particularly critical and condemning of these films. Therefore, I briefly discuss the significance of these reviews and the public reception, in addition to official box office numbers. In doing so, I hope to explain why these movies resonated so well within French society despite some rather harsh reviews, primarily from abroad.

I originally intended to also investigate how these movies have noticeably influenced the French public. Unfortunately for the purposes of this paper, it is not possible to adequately measure any relevant influence these movies may have had. I can only make assumptions based on the data I have gathered and attempt to explain what aspects of these films contributed to their popularity among the French. Furthermore, according to Eunice Cooper and Helen Dinerman's article, "Analysis of the film *Don't Be A Sucker: a study in communication*," there is a possible "boomerang effect" that results in a counterproductive and sometimes opposite message being conveyed due to the predisposition and differing characteristics of each person. In this respect, those that have strong personal biases can misconstrue the intended message of a film, and a film's representation of a social problem as negative could potentially be reinforced as a positive social construct (10-12). The three films I discuss each strive to dismiss certain social problems, but could also inadvertently create this "boomerang effect" and strengthen predisposed perceptions. However, the social influence of these films is yet to be fully determined.

In the course of my research on and analysis of these films, I have come to realize that each of these films share the overarching theme of uniting under the commonalities of being, first and foremost, *French*. This message was not directly apparent to me in the beginning of my analysis, but has since become one of the most important findings of my research. Given the popularity of each film, it has been increasingly interesting to see the ways in which these films appeal to the greater French national identity, which is the product of French universalism ideals.

The article “Contesting the Exclusive Nation and the Republican Subject: A New Universalism and Cosmopolitanism,” by Domna C. Stanton, addresses the historical influences on France’s modified version of universalism and the ways in which it influences the current debate on French national identity. She essentially argues that detrimental remnants of the French monarchy, Revolution, and Enlightenment continue to permeate France’s definition of national unity, which they claim follows the ideals of universalism. However, Stanton asserts that defining universal equality by nationwide uniformity inherently excludes the “other,” despite efforts to conform. “Assimilationist universalism remains a seductive tool that says to others within: ‘if you become like us, exactly like us, you will be part of us,’ but in fact ‘they’ can never become ‘us,’ for what sustains ‘us’ is precisely the excluded inferiority of others” (129). In this context, Stanton discusses the realities of French universalism in that it ultimately suggests that in order to be equal, one must be French – in the most traditional terms.⁴

However, *Intouchables*, *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* and *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* are successful examples of the “other” becoming one of “us” by embracing

⁴ It is important to note that Stanton argues that a multicultural, specifically cosmopolitan, approach is more effective than assimilation. This text is a good example of the contrasting approaches to addressing diversity.

the ideals of universalism. Each film features characters that do not initially seem to qualify as traditionally French, but are eventually seen as no different than anyone else. Nonetheless, these films are fictional representations of Jameson's "social utopia" that are promoting the best possible outcome for exaggerated situations that are only imagined reflections of actuality. Each film attempts to demonstrate the benefits of embracing (French) universalism by highlighting the characters' shared humanity (in the context of national identity) and disregarding their individual differences, such as class, race, religion, and origins. It is in this context that I discuss the ways in which each film addresses and identifies the social problems arising from such differences that are prevalent in modern French society.

CHAPTER I: *Social and Historical Context of Contemporary Social Issues in France*

In this chapter, I intend to provide a general overview of the current social atmosphere in France by addressing the aforementioned problems of social class, religion, race/ethnicity, and stereotyping. This chapter will outline the social context of the relevant issues portrayed in *Intouchables*, *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*, and *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, which will then be referenced in the course of the film analysis. In order to adequately analyze the depiction of French societal problems in each of these films, one should understand the social and historical context in which they appear. Immigration and national identity problems in France are inherently connected to the more specific issues addressed in these films and to the contemporary conflicts in modern French society, not to mention the questions they raise in regards to French universalism. They act as overarching themes and are essential to understanding the context and contours of French society. Given the more recent release dates of these films, I will only provide directly relevant historical context in explaining the origins of these issues in order to focus more attention on the contemporary atmosphere of the last decade as a whole. In the course of this chapter, I will outline the ways in which these issues are present in French society and the interrelated aspects of their relevancy.

First, I will introduce the French definition and debate of nationality and national identity in order to improve understanding of the ways in which French society identifies itself, in addition to the connection they bear with the overall message of each film. While a definition of national identity is related to many of France's social problems, embracing the shared commonality of simply being French is the ultimate unifier for the characters in these films and an inherent part of each film's social statement. This

unification process consists of characters looking past their personal differences and instead focusing on the shared commonalities between them, which are ultimately those of the French identity.

France has historically been associated with assimilation techniques in defining national identity instead of using multicultural policies. The French coined their approach “*intégration*” to signify a more positive connotation than the term “assimilation.”

Intégration essentially states that those who conform to the mainstream cultural norm and identify with French values will be considered a part of the national body (Hargreaves and McKinney 21-22). This approach stems, primarily, from views on nationality that are reminiscent of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment where ideas of universalism permeated the growing intellectual movements. Following ideals promoted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, France asserts that it is the state’s role “to embody the ‘general will’ as the institutional expression of popular sovereignty and the common good” (Daly 586). The idea of French nationality was first incorporated in French law in the Napoleonic Civil code.

The French Republic universalism goes back to the ideal that, after the 1789 French Revolution from which emerged the Republic of France, all subjects would become French citizens under a single political system with equal rights. Invisibility of the differences was supposed to imply equality in status and rights. This constructed ideal is opposed to a pluralistic France with diverse identities which would divide the nation into separate communities (Leonard 79).

French Republicanism asserts that national identity is defined by inclusion into the state (civic nationalism), and not by the ethnic, racial, religious, or geographic characteristics of an individual. In this respect, these individual characteristics (primarily those of minorities) are downplayed in favor of promoting a universal national identity

that supersedes all other self-identifying factors specific to an individual or group. This ideology claims that French ideals and values cannot be supported if a person has stronger allegiances to other social groupings, such as to an ethnic heritage or a religion (Lamont and Duvoux 2-3).

The definition of French identity has been discussed more frequently in recent political and public discourse. Former President Nicholas Sarkozy focused the majority of his policy promotion and campaign on defining a French national identity. During his term as president, he created a Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Solidarity Development in 2007.⁵ This announcement sparked national controversy in its association with the terms “national identity” and “immigration,” both of which have become increasingly disputed topics in French society. Jean-Marie Le Pen, head of the extreme right Front National party at this time, was one of the few who did not criticize Sarkozy for the creation of this new position because it fell in line with his ideology (Leonard 81-82). Prior to Sarkozy’s 2007 campaign, public and political discourse on a French national identity was considered a political taboo that now has come to permeate political campaigns and discourse. The increased discussions of these topics have polarized national sentiments into an “Us” vs. “Them” mentality (Noiriel 7).

It is in this context that I introduce the immigration situation in France and its ramifications on ethno-racism, religion and the resulting stereotypes. France’s immigration problems are more visibly represented in *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* and are addressed and mocked in a surprisingly direct manner that does not shy away from the controversy surrounding this issue. However in the same way that the immigration debate is linked to many other societal problems in France, the definition of

⁵ *Ministère de l'Immigration, de l'Intégration, de l'Identité nationale et du Développement solidaire*

“foreign,” in all its contexts, is the initial source of conflict between each film’s two main characters. These three films share a common plot structure in that each first draws attention to the exaggerated differences between its characters. One character is presented as a product of the status quo, while another character demonstrates the ultimate personification of what the other considers “foreign.” In regards to the immigration situation in France today, the foreign characteristics of immigrants are increasingly seen as threats to the solidarity of the French identity in the same respect that the characters of each film initially feel challenged by the differing traits of one another.

France has historically had high levels of immigration, which has directly influenced France’s promotion of assimilation rather than multiculturalism. After World War II, there was a huge influx of immigrants as France began to rebuild and recuperate; the foreign population doubled in the following thirty years as France needed cheap labor to move past the overall destruction of the war. Immigrant numbers increased from 1.7 million in 1946 to 3.4 million in 1975. The French government originally assumed that these workers would return to their home countries after rebuilding, but this was obviously not the case. The continued presence of large numbers of immigrants sparked public concern in the after the 1960’s when immigration began to be seen as a “threat to public order” in the context of economic decline and social conflict. Restrictions on immigration ensued as public contempt grew towards immigrant populations (Hargreaves and McKinney 40-42).

It is important to note that the majority of immigrants entering France have been and continue to be of North African origins. Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria were each under French control for over a century; Tunisia and Morocco were French colonies,

while Algeria was considered an extension of France itself. Each country continues to have close ties with France today, despite formal independence. Tunisian and Moroccan independence in the mid-20th century were not nearly as complicated as the Algerian war for independence fought with France between 1954-1962. This war was brutal on both countries as France refused to give up one of its most valuable resources at the time, especially as Algeria was considered a part of France whereas Tunisia and Morocco were only territories. After Algerian independence, the majority of French citizens living in Algeria, whose families originated from the *métropole*, fled to France “carrying with them bitter feelings of exile and dispassion” (Hargreaves and McKinney 18). It is in this post-colonial context that the promotion of assimilation policies intensified as the French refused to let the cultures of their lost colonies threaten the traditional ideals of French society (Hargreaves and McKinney 21).

One way that the French downplay the importance of race and ethnicity among the general population, in addition to fighting discrimination, is the lack of ethnic statistics included in the national census. The National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) does not feature categories identifying race or ethnicity. In fact, it is illegal in France for any public or private institution to collect information that could potentially classify citizens based on race or ethnicity (Leonard 68). The French government passed a law in 1978 that “banned the collection of computerized storage of race-based data without the express consent of the interviewers or a waiver ...” (Bleich 2).⁶

Despite the lack of information of specifically racial and ethnic citizens in France, the French government, along with other institutions, has found other ways to assess, and

⁶ The lack of classification along ethnic or racial lines in national statistics is a result of the misuse of ethnic statistics by the Vichy Regime during World War II when this information was used to locate and deport Jews to extermination camps (Leonard 72-73).

in some cases discriminate against, the minority populations living in France. The INSEE census asks about the “national origin” of participants, which allows for assumed race or ethnicity depending on the country of origin outside of France. Moreover, there is discrimination in the job market and in housing in France based on assumptions from these individuals’ country of origin, in addition to other factors, such as: names, place of residence, and photos (Leonard 78). In this respect, employers, renters, and other public or private institutions have discriminated against minorities in France without directly acknowledging race or ethnicity as a contributing factor (Leonard 83).

In other countries, like the United States for example, a minority status can entail additional aid from the government in different forms, but France does not administer any forms of assistance based on racial or ethnic status. However, the French government does distribute aid based on geographical and economic statistics in that they focus monetary aid in geographically poor areas (Bleich 2). Such areas include the *banlieues* (which means “suburbs” in French, but is often used with a meaning similar to “ghettos,” they are also often referred to as “les quartiers”, short for “les quartiers difficiles” or “les cités” for “les cites HLM”⁷) surrounding many major French cities and are primarily inhabited by immigrants and their children and are characterized by crime, drugs, and alcohol (Lamont and Duvoux 16).

The presence of millions of immigrants in France of varying racial, ethnic, and religious status sparked an inherent fear in French society and politics as the state of the public sphere suffered high levels of unemployment and socio-economic uncertainties. “As residency became permanent, however, the religious affiliation, ethnic origin, and

⁷ HLM is the acronym for “Habitation à Loyé Modéré”, a form of social housing often concentrated in the outskirts of towns.

citizenship status of millions of immigrants and their children were presented by the far-right politicians and intellectuals as endangering the very survival of the French nation” (Hargreaves and McKinney 48). Motivated by the increasingly popular campaigns of the Front National, there is evidence of a rising xenophobia in France, directed primarily towards those of North African – Arab – descent given the large number of immigrants from North Africa (Lamont and Duvoux 16).

In recent years, blacks and North Africans have become increasingly viewed as more “undesirable” compared to twenty years ago. Black people in France generally come from either Africa or the Caribbean. Black people from the Caribbean have seen less discrimination than those from Africa because of the French territories in the Caribbean; therefore, they are seen as more of a French citizen than those from Africa. Black people from Africa living in France have encountered far more racism because the majority are undereducated, have less legal status, and are presumed Muslim – which is a key factor in race, ethnicity, and religious problems that I will discuss further later in this chapter. With that said, African black people are perceived as having too many children, taking advantage of the welfare system, and practicing polygamy and genital mutilation. (Lamont and Duvoux 14-15).

The North African population in France has historically been the most marginalized minority group due to colonialism and their close ties with Islam. They have been the largest group of immigrants to enter France since decolonization in the 1960’s, and they have since been characterized, like black people, as undereducated, as taking advantage of the welfare system, and as Muslim (Salem 82-84). Anyone who has dark skin is many times automatically assumed to be Arab – and therefore Muslim –

while many are, in fact, Berbers from the North African region (Hargreaves and McKinney 19).⁸ North Africans have historically made up the lower classes since the mid-1970's when the first generation of immigrants was permitted to bring their families to France while they worked.⁹ After a few years, the French government realized that many were not going to leave France after all, and therefore began offering money incentives for immigrants to return to North Africa in 1977. At the time, these immigrants were extremely poor, uneducated, and did not speak French, but the vast majority decided to remain because living in near poverty in France was still a better option than returning to their home country (Salem 82-83).

The problems of ethno-racism and racial stereotyping are addressed primarily in *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* and, to a lesser degree, *Intouchables*.¹⁰ Both films feature characters of diverse origins that are prematurely judged by their physical appearance, noticeably foreign names, and geographic origins. In order to identify the nuances of how minorities are perceived in French society, both films initially depict these characters in a way that almost confirms some of the discussed stereotypes. However, each character is later redeemed in the eyes of audiences as he later reveals himself to be more than what society expects of him, i.e. he demonstrates his "Frenchness." The stereotypes addressed in *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*, in particular, combine preconceived notions of both race and religion to stigmatize certain characters of racial and religious affiliations that differ from the traditional French norm – being white and Catholic.

⁸ Berbers are the indigenous populations of the North African region and are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally different than Arabs.

⁹ This was possible under the "loi de regroupement familial," passed in 1976 under the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, whose prime minister at the time was future president Jacques Chirac.

¹⁰ There is a noticeable lack of diversity in the main characters of *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*.

Even after many North Africans obtained citizenship, they were still not treated as equals in French society, primarily due to the assumed connection between the Arab and Muslim identities and to France's secular views on religion and national identity. France has been a predominately Catholic nation for centuries, but it has long been characterized by its "constitutional secularism," or *laïcité*. In following with the previous discussion on national identity, the 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State mandates that religion shall play no part in defining French social and state identity and shall not influence state or public institutions in any way. Moreover, it is a "dissociation of public authority from any religious basis or legitimation, or simply, state neutrality towards religion" (Daly 584-585). This secularism has increasingly implied the notion that a French citizen should be "discreet" with his/her religion, as in refraining from practicing or representing one's faith while in the public sphere (Daly 593).

The values of French secularism and their role in the French definition of national identity have resulted in growing societal concerns in regards to the large Muslim population in France. As stated above, there are inherent ties between the North African, Arab, and Muslim persons in France, especially given that many assume that if a person is North African or Arab then he/she is certainly a Muslim (Hargreaves and McKinney 18). Muslims are becoming more and more associated with everything the French consider foreign, particularly in the recent years of terrorist attacks throughout the world from radical Islamists. The National Front has specifically targeted North African immigrants as being unable to integrate fully into French culture due to their strong loyalties to race and religion rather than to the French identity. Originally, the National Front did not agree with *laïcité* because of the predominantly Catholic right-wing

politicians, but it has more recently been using secularism as a way to define French culture while excluding Muslim immigrants and their values from that definition. In this respect, Muslims have come to be seen as one of the primary menaces to society (Lamont and Duvoux 16-17).

The divide between faiths and race/ethnicity in France ties directly into class divide given that minorities of non-Christian faiths primarily fall into the lower class spectrum. Assumptions toward the lower classes follow the same line of thinking as complaints against minorities in that other social classes feel that the poor too heavily rely on the French welfare state and lack adequate work ethic to potentially change their status in society. There are social concerns in French society that perceive the lower classes as receiving too much aid from the state, which therefore enables them to survive with less effort than the rest of society (Lamont and Duvoux 10-11). Additionally, there is a stark divide between the working and middle classes in France given that the working class has been more directly affected by the economic decline of the last decade.

There is an even greater disconnect between the general French public and the social elites that are associated with French “*haute culture*.” French elites have historically been considered “self-serving” by the rest of society (Lamont and Duvoux 7-9). There has been a long history of “bourgeois dynasties” in France that consist of historically wealthy French families that have maintained their status for decades, if not centuries, and primarily interact only within the French high culture (Wright 452-453).

Intouchables, in particular, focuses on highlighting the nuances of class divide through the surprising friendship of a white, Parisian aristocrat and a poor, black immigrant. *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* feature

characters of the same socio-economic status, yet the stigmas associated with the working and lower classes are nonetheless used to stereotype certain characters whose personal backgrounds (such as race and geographic origin) suggest lower class affiliations in the eyes of French society. *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* addresses the fallacies of French regionalism and the resulting stereotypes that negatively reflect a given region – in this case, Northern France, which has historically been condemned for its uncivilized culture that is reminiscent of the working class of a hundred years ago.

France's regionalism stems from localized alliances towards one of France's twenty-seven regions, twenty-one of which are a part of mainland France. Francois Mitterrand originally created these regions in 1982, but was criticized for contradicting the "French tradition of government that had celebrated standardization, uniformity, hierarchy, a combination of centralization and de-concentration, and the idea of "*la Republique une et indivisible*." Critics feared the potential for regional identity to flourish, thereby threatening the strength of national unity (Schrijver 190-191). With the exception of Corsica, this was not the case in most of France as recent statistics show that more people identify with the French national identity than with their respective region (Schrijver 199).

However, regionalism still exists to some extent in each French region, particularly those in the periphery. Regional identity is prominent in regions with independently developed cultures, historical prominence, and a distinctive linguistic variation – such as Brittany, le Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and Alsace. Areas such as these are also stereotyped along these same lines, which has caused division between regions (Schrijver 200-207). Furthermore, there is a stigma associated with Paris and its culture

that isolates it from the majority of the country due to feelings of superiority (from the Parisians) and contempt (from the rest of France) (Coulangeon). With respect to national identity, it is not surprising that those outside of Paris regard it with disdain given the fact that its culture and lifestyle do not necessarily reflect the entirety of France, yet it inevitably represents the entire country as one of the most famous cities in the world.

French national identity is unique in the way in which it is regarded by the state as the ultimate public unifier. Issues relating to immigration and ethnicity are seen as threats to national wellbeing due to their influence on the (debatably) traditional values on which French identity is founded. National identity is expected to take priority above all other personal and/or cultural characteristics, such as race, religion, and geographic origins. In this respect, those that have noticeable ties to these attributes are stigmatized, thereby creating social problems that contribute to conflicts between races, religions, classes, and regions. In the context of these films, personal characteristics initially cause problems for the characters, but they eventually overcome their differences to unify under the shared commonalities of their universal identity – that of France.

CHAPTER II: *Intouchables*:

Summary Analysis:

The opening scenes of *Intouchables* immediately attempt to evoke sentiments that fulfill the film's unique goals, those of emotion and comedy; more importantly, these scenes make a point to show no cultural differences between the two main characters. The film begins with none other than a police car chase throughout the streets of Paris set to the reoccurring emotional piano piece composed by Ludovico Einaudi titled "Fly." The two main characters, Driss and Philippe, race on the *quais* of the Seine in in a sleek Maserati that almost succeeds in outrunning the police, but to no avail. However, they manage to avoid arrest as Driss makes a scene to the police, explaining that he must bring Philippe to the hospital because he is quadriplegic and having a stroke. Philippe plays along by pretending to convulse and foam at the mouth. The police believe them and insist on giving them an escort to the hospital, a fact that gives Driss and Philippe great joy as they sing along to Earth, Wind, and Fire's *September* in celebration. After arriving at the hospital, they simply drive away while sharing a cigarette.

These scenes introduce the epitome of the easy friendship and complete trust between a young African immigrant from the Ivory Coast and an older, white, and disabled aristocrat. Throughout the entire situation, both Driss and Philippe joke back and forth as they break the law for their own enjoyment, but audiences do not know anything yet of their lives outside the fact that Philippe seems to be paralyzed and that Driss is his friend. The lack of prior knowledge of these characters is intended to play on the ideals of French universalism in that audiences do not need any additional information to fully accept this friendship that is only later revealed to be unconventional.

Intouchables follows the lives of Driss and Philippe as they overcome physical, mental, and social handicaps in twenty-first century France. Jacques Mandelbaum of *Le Monde* remarked in a pre-release review that “The film offers a generous social metaphor that shows the benefits of contact between France’s ‘old’ generation, paralyzed by privilege, and the vital strength of the youth that comes from immigration” (2011).¹¹ This metaphor very clearly manifests itself as the film goes on to show the birth of this meaningful friendship first demonstrated to audiences in the opening scenes.

The following scenes of the film flash back in time to when Driss and Philippe first meet. It opens to a number of professionally dressed men waiting to be interviewed in an *hôtel particulier*. This is the house of Philippe in the affluent Parisian neighborhood of Saint Germain des Près, where he and his assistant, Magali, are interviewing men to be his 24/7 caretaker.¹² Driss is among these men, yet he is dressed in a hoodie and sneakers and appears extremely impatient. The *mise-en-scène* sets a contrast between high and low society that is continually displayed throughout the film. Driss is meant to seem out of place, but audiences soon see that Driss has little-to-no regard to the nuances of social graces as he bullies his way through this high society.

A montage of different applicant interviews follows as Philippe and his assistant Magali attempt to find a new caretaker.¹³ When asked about their motivations for the job, each recite extremely cliché and rehearsed responses they believe would appeal to a disabled man. Some of their answers include: “helping people,” and “for mankind.”

¹¹ Direct quote from the article in *Le Monde*: “*En deuxième rideau, le film file une métaphore sociale généreuse, qui montre tout l'intérêt de l'association entre la Vieille France paralysée sur ses privilèges et la force vitale de la jeunesse issue de l'immigration*” (Mandelbaum “Intouchables”).

¹² Saint Germain des Près, also called Faubourg Saint Germain, is historically known for the presence of French noble families that inhabited the area, and its aristocratic stigma remains today.

¹³ In the context of filmmaking, a “montage” is time-saving technique that cuts multiple short scenes together to show multiple situations or activities in a small amount of time.

These responses are examples of the lack of personal interest in the job or in Philippe, who for them is not an individual but a patient; moreover each of these candidates is essentially the same in their representation.

However, Driss does not by any means fit this mold. He barges into the interview room before his turn and promptly demands Philippe sign his welfare form stating he tried – and failed – to find a job. In this first encounter between the main protagonists of the film, audiences see two seemingly opposite characters that fit society's expected class stereotypes: Philippe, an intellectually and financially gifted aristocrat reminiscent of the once ruling noble families; and Driss, an abrasive, poor immigrant from a big family attempting to take advantage of the French government. This stereotypical depiction is shattered when Driss cleverly engages Philippe in a game of wit that plays on musical allusions. Philippe asks for his references to which Driss names popular funk bands in answer, playing on the double meanings of the word. In response, Philippe mentions Berlioz in order to offset Driss' confidence, assuming he will be stumped. In this instance, Philippe attempts to assert his cultural superiority through his expertise on classical music, an aging fine art stereotyped within high culture. Driss, however, has no intention of being dominated, yet he decides to play dumb and responds by referencing an apartment complex in his dilapidated *banlieue* that bears the same name. Philippe initially believes himself to be triumphant, but is shocked – and also intrigued – in realizing Driss' full awareness of the situation. This scene portrays an example of clashing cultures, where the lower class's knowledge of popular references trumps the isolated upper class through the shrewd understanding of all cultures and their stigmas.

More importantly, Driss proves himself equal, if not superior, to Philippe in both knowledge and ability, a feat instantly noted by Philippe.

Throughout this entire interview process, audiences see the flippant personality of Driss, who at this point in the film can only be judged by his appearance and attitude, in the overtly distinguished home of a pretentious aristocrat. However, film directors Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano specifically chose the comedy actor, Omar Sy, to play Driss; in an interview with The Weinstein Company (which distributed the film in the United States), they stated:

There's a way of speaking, walking, a sense of humor and vitality that belongs only to a certain social type. Many attempts to portray urban youth often result in caricature, but with Omar we were able to avoid this pitfall. Omar was our guarantee of authenticity from the clothing down to the most subtle local slang. (6)

In this respect, from the first stages of production Driss' character was vital in demonstrating a specific social persona that is understood by French audiences.

Throughout the film, Driss is key in representing an increasingly present part of French society: those of the immigrant, lower classes.

After this abnormal interview, Philippe instructs Driss to return the following day to pick up his paper. The film shifts as it follows Driss walking through Parisian projects to return to a small apartment filled with a crowd of screaming children and no visible parent. The next sequence, filmed with a grey lighting and tone, portrays a stereotypical lower class, presumably immigrant family. Later in the film, audiences learn that this is Driss' aunt's apartment and children; his aunt and uncle could not have kids initially, so they traveled to the Ivory Coast in Africa to adopt one of their nieces or nephews – Driss. Later, his aunt becomes pregnant multiple times with different men after his uncle dies.

The result is a large family living in a small apartment in the Parisian projects as a single mother works as a cleaning lady at night to support her numerous children.

After his aunt comes home from work, it is revealed that Driss has been gone for six months with no contact with his family, and later audiences learn he was in jail for robbery. Driss' return is no cause for celebration for his aunt, who proceeds to kick him out due to his criminal lifestyle. Driss proceeds to spend the night on the streets of the Paris *banlieues* with a gang of his friends, eating fast food and smoking joints. The next day, he returns to Philippe's townhouse to get his signed paper and then his welfare check, but to his surprise he is immediately shown a tour of the house and taught his responsibilities as Philippe's new caretaker. Apparently, he got the job.

Despite his initial confusion, Driss drools over Philippe's luxurious townhouse in the course of his tour. There are maids, gardeners, and cooks all going about their daily business whilst wearing headphones to cover the classical song, "Ave Maria," which is being blasted throughout the house. Driss is shown his new room, which leaves him in awe as he dives onto his four-poster bed and drools over his large bathtub. The lighting is brighter and more vibrant as the house is shown with its lavish art and architecture compared to the dim, grey lighting of Driss' apartment with its plastic tablecloths and dirty dishes. These scenes are purposely shown directly after audiences see Driss' house and family in order to draw an even greater contrast between the two characters and their respective lives, particularly with attention to the idea of an oversized bath given an earlier scene at his aunt's apartment showing Driss struggle to bathe in a tiny bathtub while children run in and out of the room.

At this point in the film, both Driss and Philippe have become *types*: their dress (Hermès necktie versus Adidas jacket), their *domicile* (the hôtel particulier versus the HLM) and their cultural preferences (Funk versus Berlioz) told the audience what they need in order to think they know the characters. Driss' life and family are used to identify the social stereotypes associated with the lower class: Driss is an immigrant and poor, which plays into the assumption that immigrants and the lower class are one in the same. Furthermore, Driss initially appears to embody many of the stigmas associated with these groups. For example, he is involved with drugs, crime, and alcohol, in addition to the fact that he relies on the French government to sustain him through welfare. His personality is loud, comedic, and almost offensive in his complete disregard for proper manners. He embodies the *incivilités* associated with the *banlieues*. Furthermore, Driss' aunt is the single mother of an above average number of children. This stereotypical depiction is immediately contrasted by the following scenes in Philippe's townhouse that identify the complete opposite side of the social divide.

Similarly, Philippe has presented himself as a stereotypical French aristocrat, despite his handicap. There seems to be no possible connection between the lower social classes and the French high society as the latter are seen as pretentious, selfish, and exclusive, with a particular interest in the fine arts. As discussed in Chapter I, the upper classes have been criticized in France for their isolation amidst the dated ideals and practices of high culture. Philippe's personality and lifestyle thus far in the film falls within these social stereotypes. His townhouse in Saint Germain des Près exudes luxury, both in its appearance and large household staff. Philippe's interest in the fine arts,

including classical music, art, and poetry, is a key tool used throughout the movie to portray Philippe as a product of high culture.

However, the accuracy in the presentation of these social stereotypes has the potential to reaffirm the truth of these fictional exaggerations in the eyes of the French public, thereby creating Cooper and Dinermin's "boomerang effect." The rest of the film attempts to demonstrate how these social distinctions are irrelevant in the face of true universalism, but the discussed characteristics of both Driss and Philippe are never disproved – they are merely ignored. Philippe continues to be a wealthy aristocrat with a taste for fine art and classical music, and Driss remains a product of the lower class. Yet, the clash of class cultures inevitably affects both Driss and Philippe in that they both eventually discover the codes of both worlds. This adaptation process is gradually apparent as Driss and Philippe learn to live and flourish in the company of one another.

So Driss takes the job and moves into his new, fancy room where he will be at the 24-hour caretaker for Philippe. "The Ghetto" by George Benson plays as Driss learns to assist Philippe in doing literally every activity in his daily life, including exercising, showering, dressing, eating, writing, sorting mail, and using the restroom.¹⁴ Driss is initially very careless in his responsibilities and sometimes even forgets that Philippe is handicapped, an aspect that is not lost on Philippe who finds it refreshing rather than insulting because Driss treats him like a normal person – not as fragile or helpless.

Later in the film, Philippe discusses his new caretaker with his brother, who warns him not to trust Driss due to his criminal background and lower class upbringing: "they are without pity," never clearly mentioning if the they refers to Blacks or to the

¹⁴ "The Ghetto" is used ironically to draw a contrast between Driss' old life in the *banlieues* and his new one in Philippe's *hôtel particulier*.

inhabitants of the *cités*. He insists that Philippe should know better than anyone to not let just anyone in “given his condition,” an euphemism to discretely push aside Philippe’s handicap, as mentioning it directly would be impolite in good society. However, Philippe argues that Driss is strong, smarter than he looks, and a welcome change to the monotony of his life – *especially* given his condition. Driss does not empathize with him based on his handicap and that makes all the difference to Philippe. Driss’ disregard for social graces does not only belittle the social divide, it also overcomes the fragility of social stigmas associated with the handicapped.

In respect to Jameson’s social utopia, Driss is initially perceived as the “threat” that could potentially dismantle the exclusive world surrounding Philippe. However, assuming that high society is the sought-after model for a perfect society does not quite comply with the theory. Nonetheless, Philippe’s life, even with his disability, is portrayed as a better alternative to Driss’ socially handicapped lifestyle. Driss does indeed take advantage of his new privileges, yet it is important to note that he never buys into the – in his opinion – ridiculous nuances of high society. Surprisingly, Philippe is merely intrigued by Driss’ lack of respect for the only culture he has ever known, thereby demonstrating that his perceived “utopia” is not so perfect after all.

For example, Driss insists one day on taking Philippe’s luxury sports car, the Maserati seen at the beginning of the film, instead of the handicap accessible van to the posh art gallery they intend to visit. Driss then proceeds to physically manhandle a driver in the street that parked directly in front of the house driveway blocking their path. Throughout both of Driss’ decisions to take the nice car and to bully the driver, Philippe simply laughs along, remarking: “I feel change is coming.” In discussing his character,

Francois Cluzet, who plays Philippe, states in an interview with The Weinstein Company: “And my character has a thirst for the ordinary, even though he finds himself in an extraordinary situation. Even Driss suggests experiences that push the limits, Philippe accepts them because he doesn’t know them and, like a child, he wants to try everything” (9). Audiences witness Philippe’s open acceptance to the carefree lifestyle Driss introduces, thereby demonstrating a break in the traditions of the upper classes.

The following gallery scene is an important example in identifying the differences between high and low culture. Philippe and Driss are shown in a private, modern art gallery with giant windows displaying views of the Eiffel Tower. Philippe considers buying an abstract art piece as he discusses the meaning and price of the piece with the curator. Throughout the entire exchange, Driss complains and jokes about the absurdity of spending so much money on mere paint splatter. Philippe questions Driss about why he thinks that art can be so interesting to people. Driss replies that it is simply business, and Philippe retorts: “No, it’s because that’s the only print of our time on earth.” To which Driss barks: “That’s bullshit, Philippe!” After hearing the expensive price of the piece, Driss is astounded that something so simple and seemingly meaningless could be worth so much, especially when he could, in his opinion, make it better himself. Philippe brushes off his comments and demands a piece of the chocolate Driss is eating. Driss says no and states the popular phrase: “*Pas de bras, pas de chocolat.*” In the English translation, it states “No feet, no sweets.” Philippe is confused and does not realize that Driss is joking given that he does not recognize the familiar joke. Driss finds this hilarious, especially, as he explicitly states, that Philippe is paralyzed.

This conversation, especially in the setting of a chic art gallery, is an important demonstration in the difference of cultures. Once again, Driss is completely unfazed by the high culture surrounding him and even mocks the decadence of the art. He does not see the value in the modern art, which is further demonstrated throughout the film. He maintains that this is not art because he could do it himself, which he later does to the surprise of the entire household.

However, Driss is not completely ignorant of fine art; he simply does not care for it himself. He recognizes famous pieces and even uses this to his advantage at the end of the film during an interview for another job. He draws attention to the melting clock in a Salvador Dali piece in the office of the interviewer as a reference to the company's logo: "*En temps et en heure.*" However when she mentions that she likes Goya, he replies that she has not sang as much since "Pandi-Panda" – a reference to a famous French children's television program in which the lead singer was named Chantal Goya. In this instance, Driss associates fine art with familiar French pop culture references, thereby demonstrating the way in which he can easily switch codes, navigating from high to popular culture – an ability he already possessed, but was fine tuned in Philippe's company to be asset rather than a talent. He relates aspects of high culture to more easily recognized aspects of his own life, which help to depict Driss as a more relatable character than those of high society.

Similarly, the chocolate joke Driss uses in the art gallery is a children's joke that is generally known throughout France, yet Philippe does not immediately catch on. His ignorance can be seen as a reflection of Driss' "misunderstanding" of high culture, however Philippe is called out on his ignorance whereas Driss simply does not care.

Philippe failed to recognize a well-known French joke, thereby demonstrating the stereotypical isolation of the upper classes. Driss, as a member of the lower class, consistently makes these kinds of references in the context of Philippe's high society, such as when he had equated the composer Berlioz to the name of a poor housing district in Paris. The difference between the two is that Driss, for the most part, actually recognizes these references of high culture, but associates them with more relatable things in his life, whereas Philippe either does not understand or, when he does, embraces the lower class stigmas wholeheartedly.

Since the creation of the Ministry of Culture by Charles de Gaulle in the 1960's, the French government felt responsible for the promotion and identification of national culture; however, it has, until recently, maintained that culture of elites and intellectuals is more representative of French identity. In defining French culture as that of the upper class, the French government has implied that anything that does not meet these qualifications – i.e. pop culture – is irrelevant and not worth supporting. It is for this reason that the majority of government subsidies go primarily towards the fine arts, including classical music and independent, *auteur* films (Dubois 397-398). In the context of *Intouchables*, Philippe is exposed to aspects of culture outside those that he has been immersed in as a member of the upper class and its high culture; his open-mindedness demonstrates a bridge between the classes in terms of cultural acceptance.

Driss continues to introduce Philippe to more newer and more exciting ways of life that he never experienced or even thought himself capable of doing. Periodically, Philippe gets phantom pains throughout his body in the middle of the night, so Driss decides one night to take him on a late night stroll through the city where they share

cigarettes and then marijuana, which Philippe continues to enjoy throughout the rest of the film. They venture to a late-night café where they have a heartfelt conversation, revealing the details of Philippe's life. Audiences see that Philippe once enjoyed the aspects in life outside of the stereotypical aspects of high society. Philippe found great joy in paragliding and had the financial capabilities of making it his hobby; he decided to go out one day despite dangerous weather and crashed, becoming paralyzed from the neck down. Philippe also had a wife who, after his accident, became sick and passed away. He emotionally asserts that living without her is the real handicap in his life. The mood then shifts as Philippe jokes that he may be quadriplegic, but he is rich and the doctors can keep him alive until he is seventy. Driss replies that he would shoot himself if he were paralyzed, to which Philippe jokes that he would not even be able to do that.

This scene is a great example of the thematic goal of the film in being both emotional and comedic. Audiences see yet another side to Philippe that generates a greater understanding of a man thought to be a product of the status quo. Audiences have seen that he is open to new things from an alternate way of life and is learning how to overcome the metaphorical handicap of the exclusive – and therefore culturally isolated in many ways – high class. In comparison, Driss has easily combined aspects of both his social class and the high culture in which he is now immersed, thereby overcoming his own socioeconomic handicap. However, he joked that he would chose death over paralysis. Being poor and socially marginalized, Driss' ability to move is one of the only ways in which he can get by and find joy in life. He does not have the situation in life to be able to mentally handle what Philippe endures everyday of his life. Seemingly unimportant activities like dancing, driving, or even just the freedom to leave whenever

he pleases are vital to those like Driss who are socially and economically constrained.

The film would convey an entirely different message should Driss be handicapped while Philippe is physically free. Philippe's status in life is an exceedingly important aspect to remember, thereby demonstrating another consequence of the social divide.

Later in the film, Philippe's friends and family throw him a birthday party that, much to the annoyance of Philippe who has grown tired of the overly pretentious atmosphere these people create. The first scene of the party opens to a room full of formally dressed aristocrats seated in front of a string ensemble playing a series of classical pieces in Philippe's ballroom. Driss comes in late, dressed in a tailored suit Philippe bought for him earlier in the film. Determined to sit next to Philippe's attractive assistant, Driss forces an entire row of annoyed guests to move down so he has a seat. Once again, Driss bullies his way through this rather uptight group of elites, who comply out of the fear of acting inappropriately, but also because they do not know how to deal with Driss' abrasive personality.

Flash-forward to the end of the party when the high society guests have departed and all that remains is Philippe and his household employees. Audiences see Driss lounging on a couch next to Philippe as they both casually smoke cigarettes. Philippe asks the band to play one more song, Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," in order to elicit a feeling from Driss while listening to his favorite music. Driss complains, of course, and insists that it is only music if he can dance to it. Philippe keeps trying by requesting different famous classical pieces. Driss comically mocks each one depending on what they remind him. For example, he recognizes one from a coffee commercial and another from a recording at the French welfare office; one makes him feel like a medieval knight

galloping towards the king's castle, and he asks if the last one is from *Tom and Jerry*. Philippe simply laughs throughout Driss' comments and finally remarks: "Rescue the masterpieces." Driss then plays "his" music, Earth, Wind, and Fire's "Boogie Wonderland," and proceeds to perform an upbeat dance number and invites his fellow employees to dance – for Philippe, who laughs along as his friends eventually let loose and dance with Driss.

In these scenes, audiences see a concrete demonstration of the differences between cultures, but in a lighthearted fashion that mocks the stereotypes of high society without aggression. Driss continually disrupts the unchanging norms of these people's society, yet they say nothing and, sometimes, even join him. Driss bullies his way through life, and the people around Philippe usually accommodate him without question because they have rarely been directly challenged in the fashion Driss utilizes. The row of guests moves as he commanded, albeit grudgingly, despite the fact they had no plausible reason to do so. Driss openly condemns Philippe's music; yet he succeeds in creating a dance party with his fellow employees that brings Philippe more happiness than the reserved party of his "equals." Driss' lively and upfront personality is foreign to this society, which allows him to get away with his behavior and even endears him to many of his new friends – especially Philippe, who finds joy in this change of scene.

Once again, music is utilized as a cinematic tool to exemplify the differences, and also the camaraderie, between Driss and Philippe.¹⁵ Philippe tries to make Driss see the beauty in classical music, a genre typically associated with high culture. However, Driss asserts that music is only enjoyable if one can dance to it, yet Philippe showcases

¹⁵ The use of American songs in the soundtrack reflects the Hollywood-style structure and feel of the film. More importantly, it incorporates a popular culture presence that contrasts the setting of high society.

numerous pieces that he feels prompt the same sentiments to no avail. Driss reacts similarly earlier in the film when he and Philippe attend a German opera; Driss bursts into laughter the second the performers begin singing. He laughs hysterically while mocking the performers attire and the fact that the opera is in German. Philippe attempts to quiet him at first as other guests look over in annoyance and astonishment, but Driss continues to laugh loudly until Philippe eventually joins him in laughter. Mocking the fine arts is one of the ways in which Driss belittles the, in his opinion, frivolity of high society and its nuances. Philippe never is truly offended, showing his self-awareness to the lifestyle he has lived in for his entire life, acknowledging that some of the criticism aimed toward high culture is somehow justified. In contrast, Driss feels that music and art are meant to be experienced physically, which should be a rebuttal to Philippe's way of life but is instead a welcome alternative.

Unfortunately, Driss' time spent with Philippe eventually comes to an end after one of his cousins seeks refuge from a gang and uses Philippe's house as a hideout. It is in this light that Driss confesses to Philippe the details of his background and upbringing. Philippe is understanding and interested, but ultimately tells Driss that their time together has come to an end. He appreciates his hard work and states that he has earned the privileges of unemployment once more. Driss is greeted with heartfelt goodbyes from each of the staff he has worked alongside, thereby showing acceptance from those he once offended. As he and his cousin are leaving the house, Driss spots another car blocking the driveway. However, this time Driss politely asks the driver to move without the violence he used earlier in the film, demonstrating a personal change. When his

cousin asks him why he did that when they are not even driving, Driss replies that it is a “matter of principle.”

Philippe’s progressive transition to embracing new lifestyles is easily recognized, however Driss’ experiences with Philippe have also sparked a change in him. Choosing not to react violently towards the driver contrasts to his earlier actions; furthermore, he is able to connect with the interviewer of his new job with references to fine art. Driss’ time with Philippe taught him how to live a respectable lifestyle as a productive member of society while continuing to maintain a connection to his passions. He can now more easily maneuver between the social classes that were once out of reach.

In this context, the appeal of a unified French identity becomes apparent. Initially, both Driss and Philippe are depicted as embodiments of two extreme opposite sides of the class spectrum. However, their time spent together allowed them to meet in the middle – exactly where the French national identity falls. As previously discussed, Driss and Philippe each retain their individual characteristics, but they suppress their more radical attributes in favor of a *juste milieu*. However while Driss begins to straighten his life out after leaving, Philippe starts deteriorating without Driss there to keep him balanced.

Driss is inevitably called back to help a struggling Philippe, as his new caretaker fails to soothe him during one of his fits of phantom pains. Driss comes straight over and immediately begins teasing Philippe about his new beard while reprimanding him for not taking better care of himself. Philippe simply smiles and the film cuts to the police chase scene shown at the beginning of the film. After they leave the hospital, they drive to a luxurious beach house where Philippe can relax in the company of his best friend.

Conclusion:

Throughout the ending scenes, the film's theme song "Fly" plays and continues on into the credits as images are shown of the real life Philippe and Driss – Philippe Pozzo Di Borgo and Abdel Sellou. Philippe and Abdel were the men who inspired *Intouchables*. Driss' character was based on Abdel, who was of Algerian descent, while Philippe represented the French elite bearing the same name. Filmmakers Nakache and Toledano were inspired by the TV documentary chronicling Philippe and Abdel's story titled "A la vie, a la mort (1995)" (The Weinstein Company 4). The fact that *Intouchables* is based on a true story only increases its importance in showcasing the inherent social issues prevalent throughout both the film and the actual story.

At first glance, the "based on a true story" aspect of this film should discount certain theories that warn against trusting a film's story as truthful representations of reality. However, Bazin's believable illusion and Jameson's social utopia still apply to *Intouchables* due to the simple fact that it is an exaggerated version of an already improbable situation. Jameson warns against passively accepting that these kinds of social problems will resolve themselves because they happen to work out in a film. In the case of *Intouchables*, this willful denial only strengthens because there happens to be one similar (and incredibly unlikely) instance in reality where social divides were transcended. Nonetheless, the fact that Philippe and Driss have real-life personifications has been one of the contributing factors of this film's success, both domestically and internationally.

Intouchables has become one of the most successful French films of all time. UniFrance reports that it is the highest-grossing non-English speaking film in the world,

amassing \$310 million worldwide, and it is currently the second most viewed French film in the history of France (behind *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*).¹⁶ It may be number two domestically, but, according to *Le Figaro* and UniFrance, *Intouchables* has surpassed the international French sensation, *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), to become the most widely viewed French film in the world with 23.1 million entries in over fifty countries (Cesbron). Furthermore, *Intouchables* won nine César Awards (the French equivalent to the Oscars) in 2012, including Best Actor for Omar Sy – who has since become one of the most successful black actors in French cinema and started a promising Hollywood career.

Given France's past inclination toward intellectual and elite culture as a representation of national culture, *Intouchables* is surprising in its success due to its Hollywood-esque structure and a social awareness that essentially mocks the frivolities of high culture. Reviews of the film from French critics were initially positive, however it was only after the condescending and accusatory reviews from American critics that France truly celebrated the progressive aspects of *Intouchables* (Michael 131). For example, *The New York Times* claimed that, "its genial parade of stereotypes may be more regressive than liberating," and that it was an overall "embarrassment" (Scott). *Variety* magazine went so far as to call it "Uncle Tom racism" and states that Driss is nothing more than a "performing monkey" (Weissburg).

Each American review accused *Intouchables* of representing France's failure to properly address its growing diversity, but these critics are writing in an specifically American multiculturalist mindset that zeros in on the film's representation of race. The

¹⁶ UniFrance, founded in 1949, is a French organization tasked with promoting and reporting on French films abroad. Information on nearly every French film released outside of France can be found on their website, UniFrance.org.

stereotypes identified and addressed throughout the film derive primarily from class distinctions like the fact that Driss is a lower class immigrant – not necessarily the color of his skin. The nuances of disputed public reception are interesting to consider given that the contrast stems from the ideological differences between American multiculturalism and French *intégration*.

Intouchables seems to have resonated with the French public because it highlights the traditionally *French* method of embracing universalism to overcome social problems. The idea that two seemingly opposite characters from completely different backgrounds could form a meaningful friendship is exceedingly important in understanding the popularity of the film in France. In the context of nationwide immigration issues and increasing social marginalization, *Intouchables* demonstrates a happy ending to a scenario that could have been disastrous given the societal implications of the current social atmosphere in France. Audiences view the process in which a lower class, black immigrant with a criminal background becomes the best friend of a white, quadriplegic aristocrat. The relationship that develops goes both ways: they learn through a common and abrasive sense of humor from one another and discover that the world of the “other” offers clues as to how to escape their respective handicaps. This is only possible by disregarding the implications of social distinctions and bonding over the similarities between them that exist outside the influence of society. Humanity prevails over society. In this context, Driss and Philippe embrace the ideals of French universalism that highlight the commonalities of mankind and ultimately define French national identity.

CHAPTER III: *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*

Summary Analysis:

Imagine walking along the quaint streets of an idyllic seaside town on a sunny day in the French Riviera. A lighthearted, pleasant tune accompanies you as you walk alongside your spouse with your child's hand held loosely in your own. You are completely at ease and exude happiness. This fantasy orchestrates the opening scenes of *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* as audiences are first introduced to the main character, Philippe Abrams, and his family who are experiencing a taste of what their lives could potentially become: the perceived fantasy of life along the French Riviera. However, the goal of this film is to discount these types of stereotypes associated with regions and their assumed lifestyle. Philippe will soon find that happiness can be found even within the most (assumedly) backwards conditions if he simply embraces the inherent connection that naturally exists between all of humanity which is to say, and this is no surprise, between all Frenchmen

Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis tells the story of an average Frenchman attempting to cope with a, in his opinion a professional, social and physical death sentence as the French administration moves him the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of Northern France, but as expected, he eventually discovers that the stereotypes associated with this area fall short of reality. Philippe and his family live in Salon-de-Provence, a town in the Bouches-du-Rhône department of Southern France. He applies for a work transfer to a coastal town on the Mediterranean, but is denied in favor of a disabled applicant. The despair of his wife prompts Philippe to apply for second transfer, but this time he claims

he is handicapped. This ploy actually works, and he is granted a work transfer to a seaside town of his dreams. However, Philippe's fantasy life along the French Riviera comes crashing down around him when an inspector visits during his going away party in order to affirm that Philippe is, in fact, disabled. Philippe immediately darts into his office where a brand new wheelchair is hidden and proceeds to pretend to be handicapped. The inspector seems to believe him, and they bond over the horror of the people that pretend to be disabled in order to get priority in life over others. Philippe explains that he refused to say he was handicapped on the first request because he wanted to be treated like a normal person without being given precedence over others due to his disability. Everything goes perfectly until the inspector rises to leave and Philippe stands to shake his hand, thereby dismantling the entire charade. The irony of the entire situation is expressly stated.

After the disastrous encounter with the inspector, Philippe meets with his coworker, Jean, to hear his punishment. Jean begins by saying that he has good news and bad news. Philippe tries to guess the nightmares of his fate and begins by asking if he got suspended. The conversation is as follows:

Jean (J): Worse.

Philippe (P): Fired?!

J: Worse.

P: Worse than fired?

J: Transfer to the north.

P: Lyon?

J: No, further north.

P: Paris? Don't tell me it's Paris.

J: No, further.

P: Belgium?

J: No, (he says reluctantly) near Lille.

Philippe is increasingly confused as Jean explains that his transfer goes into effect the following Monday to the northern French city of Bergues in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. This is the good news. After protesting profusely, Philippe is told that this is an irrefutable disciplinary measure caused by the falsification of information on his transfer request to the French Riviera. The bad news: he must stay there for two years or lose his job.

These stereotypes are further presented when Philippe visits his wife's uncle, who is familiar with the region, to better understand exactly what is in store for him. The *mise-en-scène* is comically depicted as an exceedingly grim conversation. The uncle is shown half in shadow, sitting in an old armchair while Philippe nervously perches on a chair and wrings his hands as the conversation progresses. The uncle's voice is gravelly and deep as he begins to tell Philippe how his father was a "Sheutemi," a term that greatly confuses Philippe. The uncle explains that this is how the people of this region are referred to – even the animals. He proceeds to outline the horrors of the desolate Nord-Pas-de-Calais and its inhabitants, detailing their strange accent, their backward lifestyle, and their arctic living conditions. Philippe is in disbelief, to which the uncle simply repeats: "It's the North!"

This scene lays out the general attitudes towards northern France that permeates French society. The exaggerated seriousness of the conversation demonstrates the expected tragedy of Philippe's new situation in life. The images described of the Northern people and environment are intentionally depicted as that of a horror story in order to create an expectation for what is to come. Philippe is already passing judgment on this region, which will only increase his dread and misery. He will specifically look for these elements when he arrives at Bergues without giving the benefit of the doubt that

these could only be stereotypes. Philippe forms an opinion that is based on hearsay stereotypes instead of on personal experience, which is a reoccurring social issue within French society (not to mention the rest of the world) in that people choose to behave according to their assumptions of a given culture before taking the time to learn for themselves.

These conversations, both with Jean and the uncle, are the first of the many stereotypical perceptions of northern France intentionally depicted throughout the film. The very notion of regional stereotyping is a common social problem found in nearly every country throughout the world. *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* attempts to discount these stereotypes by directly addressing them in a comical fashion. The conversations mentioned above only hint at the stigmas associated with the Pas-de-Calais region of France, and the rest of the film purposely elaborates on these stereotypes, both condemning them as falsehoods and reaffirming them in some respects.

The rest of France has long maintained a negative view of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais and aspects such as economic disparities and high unemployment have contributed to its perceived uncivilized lifestyle. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the northwestern region of France was the forerunner in industrialization, particularly in the mining industry. This development attracted vast numbers of workers from all over France, North Africa, and Europe, specifically from Belgium. There is a large population of Belgian migrants and second-generation families continuing to work and live in the region, thereby garnering an even worse reputation for the region given the French's

dislike of Belgians¹⁷. In this context, the working class became the prominent social group within the area (Baycroft 66-67).

However, the economic crises of the 1970's resulted in mass deindustrialization that has since hindered progress in the region and left it in economic despair. Unemployment rose on a massive scale, and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais remains one of the poorer regions in France today (Raphael 106-107). Furthermore, the once prominent working class was no longer vital to cultural and urban modernization since the collapse of industrialization.

The working class, particularly its 'traditional' categories – manual workers in the heavy industries such as steel production, mining and shipbuilding, were seen as most peasants were seen a generation earlier: an ageing social group with no future and no longer with a prominent place in the nation. (Raphael 107)

These circumstances form the context of the negative perceptions France holds of the region today given the North's continued economic disparity and associations with working class lifestyles. In the context of *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, Philippe, his family, and his friends continue to assume, like the majority of France, that the cultural consequences of the North's past disparities have resulted in a backward, alcoholic, and ultimately barbaric culture living out an endless scene of Emile Zola's *Germinal*.¹⁸

Unfortunately, Philippe could find no way around moving to this alleged wasteland, so he must say goodbye to his life in the South, including his wife and son who decided to stay. As his family sees him off, each of them, including Philippe, look

¹⁷ It is important note that there is very little reference to the Belgian influence in northern France throughout *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, despite its large presence in the region.

¹⁸ *Germinal* (1885) by Emile Zola is a famous French novel that describes the North of France and the harsh lifestyle of the working class due to its exploitation by the upper classes. While *Germinal* depicts the social struggle of workers, it also depicts their horrid working conditions and social misery. This last aspect is especially resonant for the majority of the rest of France, who imagines the North as still being stuck in this archaic past.

and act as though he is driving to his death. It is an intentionally dramatic goodbye to demonstrate the harsh expectations of the North, especially given the sunny and pleasant day from which he must depart. Philippe maneuvers himself into the car whilst wearing an extremely large parka and says mournfully that he will call when he arrives at – dramatic pause – “le Nord-Pas-de-Calais,” and he sadly drops his head to his chest. Philippe then makes the drive north to the tune “Avec la mer du Nord” by Jacques Brel, a famous, somber song singing about miseries of life along the North Sea.¹⁹ He even gets pulled over for going too slow, to his surprise, and is not given a ticket by the police officer when he sadly explains where exactly he is going. The police officer pats Philippe sympathetically on the arm and lets him be on his way. Up until this point in the film, every person has reacted in horror and sympathy to the news that Philippe must now live in the North of France, thereby demonstrating how widespread these regional stereotypes truly are.

The instant Philippe sees the sign welcoming him to Bergues, a sheet of torrential rain immediately pours down around his car. He then proceeds to accidentally hit his new coworker, Antoine, who attempted to flag him down. Philippe jumps out into the rain to check on Antoine, who repeatedly assures Philippe that he is unharmed. Philippe suspects that Antoine injured his jaw because the southerner is unable to understand a word Antoine is saying to him. Philippe then realizes that this must be the local accent – which he soon learns is called “Ch’tis” or “Ch’timi” by the local inhabitants and can also be used interchangeably as a reference to the people themselves.

¹⁹ Jacques Brel is a famous Belgian singer that performed, within a quite large and revered *repertoire*, despondent pieces about the north of France and Belgium. His works are well known throughout the francophone world and contribute to the negative stereotype of the Northern region.

Antoine then begins to jabber away to Philippe, rather obnoxiously, and introduces himself as the local postman. Antoine's first impression on Philippe and the audience initially depicts him as falling into the stereotype previously discussed. This is further demonstrated when Antoine repeatedly returns to the post office drunk after delivering the daily mail later in the film. He appears obnoxious, lacking manners, and sometimes offensive when drunk: an embodiment of working class stigmas. However, Antoine's persona gradually evolves to be seen as endearing and genuine, rather than uncivilized and abrasive. Antoine and his story represent the epitome of the Northern stereotype, yet his redemptive qualities at the same time discount these negative stigmas by revealing his true nature as a human that is equal, if not better, than those labeling a common Ch'ti *prolo*.²⁰

However, Antoine and Philippe do not initially get along, despite Antoine's initial attempts at kindness. After the car accident, Antoine shows Philippe the apartment provided to him as the director the post office in Bergues, but finds that the former manager had taken all of the furniture. An interesting and humorous conversation ensues where Philippe completely misunderstands Antoine as he explains that the former director took the furniture pieces because "*c'est les siens*" (they are his). However, due to the Antoine's Ch'ti accent Philippe understands it to mean the furniture is "*chez les chiens*" (with the dogs). After much confusion and arguing, an exasperated Philippe eventually comes to understand and asks Antoine if everyone here speaks in such a

²⁰ "Prolo" is the abbreviated form of *Prolétaire*, a common and often demeaning term for a member of the working class – or, the proletariat.

manner. Antoine replies, “All the Sh’tis speak Sh’tis,” to which Philippe remarks that the dialect barely resembles a language at all.²¹

This scene is the first time that the Ch’ti dialect is spoken in the film and it is immediately depicted as unintelligible for Philippe. In this instance, there is almost an animosity emanating from Philippe, whereas Antoine is simply confused. The Ch’ti accent is used throughout the film first as an alienating factor for Philippe and later as source of unity when Philippe learns and adopts the accent himself. However, the Ch’ti spoken in *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* does not accurately reflect what is found in the real town of Bergues, which has a larger Flemish influence; the dialect used in the film takes elements from different accents throughout the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, specifically outdated and rural lingo, in order to present an exaggerated accent that meets the expectations of a French audience. Despite this cinematic tool for audience appeal, the attentive detail used in presenting the Ch’ti accent in the course of this film has been an a large contributing factor in the film’s success due to its representation of the region’s national identity – especially given the lack of regional identification or dialectic differences within French cinema (Harrod 77-78).

The fact that the Ch’ti dialect appealed to French audiences is surprising given the fact that it is one of the more extreme and less recognizable variations of standard French – aspects that have historically been viewed as markers for the uncivilized and socially inferior populations in France. In her analysis of French universalism, Stanton argues that the birth of French nationalism in the nineteenth century, in addition to the influences of

²¹ Within the English subtitles, the word “Ch’tis” is replaced by “Sh’tis” for pronunciation purposes. From this point on, all of the S sounds in the subtitles are replaced by SH when a Ch’tis is speaking. Director Dany Boon paid close attention to the way the film was subtitled for international audiences to ensure the authenticity of the Ch’tis dialect was intact and understandable in foreign languages (Harrod 77).

the Enlightenment, resulted in a desire for a universal sameness in all aspects of the French identity and culture, specifically language. This aristocratic idea resulted in the condemnation of those who failed to speak the standard (elite) dialect of the time. Therefore, the lower classes were once again considered inferior due to their continued use of dialectic French. In this context, lower class stereotypes became automatically associated with those who spoke the more extreme variations of French dialects – like the Ch'ti. This inaccurate assumption continues to permeate modern French society, hence Philippe's initial disdain for the Ch'ti dialect (Stanton 126).

However, it is the dramatic effect of an almost foreign yet essentially understandable variation of the French language that resonated with the French public, who came to view Ch'tis as endearing rather than uncivilized (Planchenault 257-263). According to Stanton, the linguistic differences between Philippe and Antoine – not to mention the rest of Bergues – should hinder the progression of an equal and meaningful friendship. This is, in fact, initially the case; however, both the Ch'ti language and culture eventually becomes one of the unifying factors that help Philippe overcome his prejudice of the region. This is only possible because Ch'ti is still, first and foremost, *French* – despite its variations. With that said, linguistic differences become one of the many social distinctions that become irrelevant in terms of defining French national identity. *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* succeeds in showing the cultural value of both the Ch'tis dialect and region, but it ultimately advertises the recognition of how the shared Frenchness of its characters allows them to overcome social divides.

Unfortunately, Philippe cannot initially perceive the commonalities between himself and the Ch'tis, despite the kind efforts of his new coworkers at the post office –

where he is now the director. Upon arriving, Philippe refuses to even attempt to understand or appreciate the nuances of this new culture due to his preconceived notions; these negative expectations initially blind him from seeing the positive, even admirable, aspects of the Ch'ti culture.

However, his attitude changes when his coworkers (including Antoine, who bore the brunt of Philippe's discrimination) pool their money to completely furnish his new apartment. This display of undeserved kindness is the spark that allows Philippe to finally set aside his judgments and actually experience first-hand the value of the people and culture around him. They celebrate by going to dinner in a neighboring town, Vieux-Lille, where Philippe insists on ordering all the local delicacies for everyone as his treat. Everyone begins teaching Philippe about the Ch'ti culture and lingo – and Philippe surprisingly listens. They teach him the curse words, and how one simply says “Hein?” very loudly instead of saying “Pardon?” He practices and even orders for everyone in the Ch'ti dialect to the amusement of everyone at the table. His attempt was successful when the waiter, at the end of his order, explains that he did not understand because he is not Ch'ti, but Parisian.²²

This part of the film demonstrates a change in Philippe as he finally begins to see the lack of any meaningful differences between the people and culture that he is accustomed to and the Ch'tis. Philippe is outwardly enjoying himself for the first time since arriving in Bergues and continues to embrace the Ch'ti culture as a later montage shows him spending time outside of work with his coworkers – now his friends – and regularly speaking Ch'timi. The Ch'ti dialect is no longer seen as a farce of a language,

²² The waiter's Parisian identity is used both to demonstrate a more mixed society, but also to draw attention to the cultural isolation of Paris from the rest of France as discussed in Chapter I.

but as a unique characteristic of a pleasant and inviting part of the North of France that is home to an amiable and genuine group of people.

However, Philippe allows his wife to continue thinking that his life in Bergues is miserable. Philippe tries to explain to Julie that things are not nearly as bad as they anticipated, but she believes he is lying in order to save her some pain. He shamefully chooses to encourage the stereotypes of the Pas-de-Calais instead of telling his wife the truth. Julie expresses that she is proud of him for making this “sacrifice” for their family.²³ When he visits them in Salon-de-Provence, he dramatically explains how everyone in Bergues drinks to keep warm in the arctic temperatures, the sun rises at 11:30 A.M., everyone is pale, and there was even a cholera outbreak because of the locals’ bad hygiene. He claims that it is “worse than hell.”

No one seems to believe Philippe when he claims that the North is actually not as terrible as everyone seems to think. This demonstrates the deep-rooted problem of regional stereotyping that is ingrained within French culture – which Philippe is only perpetuating. Stanton discusses the ways in which the French society stereotypes groups or individuals based on how they fit into the state governed mold of a conforming national identity. She remarks:

The exclusion of such disorderly others, who are defined by oppositional stereotypical traits, ... creates an outside and thus an inside, binding together those who are or become part of the imagined nation. Inevitably, however, these others do not constitutively remain without, and prove to have been always already somewhere within, albeit at the abjected margins (125-126).

²³ Philippe claims that he continues to lie to his wife because they are finally getting along better apart than they ever had before he moved. His perceived misery in Bergues allows them to disregard the smaller problems on which they had formerly focused.

In the context of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the people and culture have been stigmatized to the point of seeming foreign and are therefore considered a part of the “outside” – hence the continued belief of Philippe’s friends and family in the stereotypes of region so different from their own. However, Philippe realizes that the Ch’ti culture has been a part of the larger French identity all along, but it has been marginalized to the point of disdain rather than appreciation.

Philippe comes to this realization through his friendship with Antoine, who is the film’s embodiment of the Ch’ti culture. For example, Philippe and Antoine take a visit to the seaside, where Philippe asks more about the Ch’ti dialect and culture. Antoine explains that instead of using the standard French verb for *to cry* (“pleurer”), the Ch’tis use “braire.” Philippe then asks what they use for the verb *to laugh*, and Antoine says that it is the same and that they have to use French every once in a while. He then explains that there is a Ch’ti proverb stating that a stranger will cry twice while in the Pas-de-Calais, once when he arrives and once when he leaves. Philippe admits that he was indeed sad when he first arrived, and Antoine warns him that it will be worse when he leaves. Philippe replies that this would not be the case because the South is his home. Antoine laughs and says: “We will see.”

This scene is extremely important in its portrayal of the camaraderie between two characters that were essentially at odds with one another at the beginning of the film. Their conversation about the linguistic differences between Ch’ti and standard French only proved to highlight the similarities between them. The use of the French language in this film is first a source of animosity, but is then used as a unifier. Philippe and Antoine are first and foremost French, despite the nuances of the Ch’ti culture. In this respect,

audiences once again see the theme of national unity that has played a large part in the film's success.

Philippe may have embraced their shared humanity, but his wife, Julie, continues to believe the North to be an apocalyptic nightmare. Julie decides to join Philippe in the North after he and Antoine are arrested one day for public drunkenness.²⁴ This incident leads Julie to believe that Philippe has taken to drinking due to his misery in the North, and she insists on visiting him. It is in this context that Philippe admits to his coworkers that he has been lying about them by encouraging the stereotypes of the region. These people have become his close friends, and they do not take the news lightly as he explains that he let his wife believe that they were “basic, simple, vulgar, dense, and backward.”

However, just as Philippe is about to tell Julie the truth as she arrives at the Bergues train station, Antoine and the other post office workers pull up in a battered delivery van, screaming obnoxiously to welcome Julie to Bergues. They chant her name as they pick her up and throw her in the air in celebration. Philippe is in awe of his friends' decision to help him in fooling his wife by behaving in the stereotypical Ch'ti manner. They sloppily open beer after beer on the car ride to an old, retired mining town nearby that used to be the original Bergues. They have arranged an entire charade of shenanigans to perpetuate the stereotypes Julie believes are true. There are people screaming and fighting in the streets, a man stands silently holding a gun in his yard, and a collection of miners casually stroll by them, despite the fact that the mines have been

²⁴ Philippe had joined Antoine on his mail delivery route in order to prevent him from accepting the many drink offers he receives everyday from Bergues' residents as he delivers their mail. Philippe gave in to the charm of the polite townspeople who insisted they stay for a drink. They both become intoxicated whilst riding through the streets of Bergues and are eventually arrested.

closed for decades. They bring Julie to a shabby apartment that she assumes is Philippe's residence. As she settles in, Julie remarks that it is truly worse than she had believed and looks stricken by, what she believes are, the conditions in which her husband has been living, and Philippe simply plays along with the charade.

This sequence of events is an extremely interesting cinematic tool given that it is essentially a play portraying the exaggerated stereotypes that this fictional film attempts to discount. It is a farce within a parody and exemplifies the use of comedy in addressing, demonstrating, and ultimately mocking the regional stereotypes of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. In this context, André Bazin's theories on film as a representation of a fantasy reality are interesting to apply. Bazin asserts that films have the ability to portray a believable illusion of reality because of the social context they depict and to whom they appeal. In this instance, Julie represents an audience in her belief that this charade could be an accurate example of a given reality; however, Julie is ignorant of the fact that this entire scenario has been expertly constructed to appeal to her predisposed perceptions – i.e. she, unlike the audience, cannot see the humor in this ironic situation.

In this respect, Henri Bergson's theory on laughter does not seem to apply because Julie is unable to disconnect herself from her own emotions and bias to see the comedy in this false reality (within the fictional reality of the film). However, audiences see the irony in the situation because they realize the personalities of Philippe's friends are fabricated. Therefore, Bergson's theory becomes exceedingly relevant given the audiences already present disconnect from the film in the realization that it is a false reality – thereby allowing them to embrace the humor – but the fact that they are privy to the given charade allows them to actually make a connection without the consequence of

changed perceptions.²⁵ The exaggerated stereotypes demonstrated in this film sequence are therefore presented to the audience without intending to influence them in any way because they are aware of the context in which they are showcased.

Philippe's lies are eventually revealed to Julie – who forgives him – and the two, along with their son, spend the next three years living happily in Bergues in the company of their Ch'ti friends. The final scenes of the film show Antoine giving Philippe a transfer notice to the sought-after French Riviera. All of Philippe's friends see he and his family off as they prepare to drive south. Antoine and Philippe share a heartfelt goodbye as Philippe tries – and fails – not to cry, thereby confirming the Ch'ti proverb. As the credits begin to roll, the final scene of the film shows aerial shots of Bergues in the sunshine as a pleasant tune plays.

Conclusion:

Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis is the number one most watched French-produced film in the history of France, with over twenty million views domestically – equaling roughly one third of a population around sixty-four million. Furthermore, the struggling economy of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais actually benefitted from the film's success through increased tourism and the creation of a souvenir market, as the negative stereotypes of the North of France as a backward wasteland were discounted in the eyes of France (Planchenault 267). The French public was and continues to be charmed by a film they feel represents the fundamental values of French culture in a way that reflects Jameson's social utopia where the problems of social distinctions are easily overcome.

²⁵ André Bazin and Henry Bergson's theories are outlined more fully in the Introduction chapter of this paper.

In explaining the film's success, some critics speculate that the French public was frustrated with President Sarkozy's failure to improve social conditions or influence the economic problems of the time. *The New York Times* reported, "Many pundits have interpreted the praise of small-town living in an unglamorous, untrendy region as rebuke to Mr. Sarkozy's pro-capitalist politics and his flashy lifestyle" (Vincentelli). Furthermore, *The Guardian* claimed audiences "surged to their comfort zones" and that Sarkozy's popularity declined as *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*'s skyrocketed (Rose). It is ironic to think that the French public used a film promoting national identity as a defense against a president whose campaign addressed the same issue, albeit in a very different manner.²⁶ In this context, the film offers audiences a sense of nostalgia for simpler times when the possession of capital was seen as less important than quality of life.

More specifically, the apparent lack of diversity in this film is important to note in explaining the idea of the film as an escape from reality given the increased immigration issues of the last few decades. Furthermore, the well-known economic disparity and immigrant populations of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais are not shown in the course of the film, which is questionable due to the film's aim at demonstrating a more realistic version of the region. Similarly, each of the characters, including Philippe, is essentially part of the working class, whose historical presence in the region has negatively influenced its public appeal. In this context, Philippe's initial sense of superiority over the Ch'tis stems from his personal perception of what culture should be and not from economic or racial factors. He believes that the culture of the south (and the rest of France, for that matter) is somehow better than the Ch'ti culture, of which he has only heard rumors, simply

²⁶ Sarkozy's national identity campaign is discussed more in depth in Chapter I.

because it is the societal norm. However while the protagonists in the film were not characterized as diverse, the actors playing them are of mixed origins.

The French stand-up comedian and actor, Dany Boon wrote, directed, and starred as Antoine in *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*. Boon's mother was from this region (while his father was Algerian), and he grew up within the community he aimed to portray. His ultimate goal in creating this film was to depict his homeland in a more positive light than the regional stereotypes held throughout France dictate. Boon aimed to appeal to French audiences by demonstrating that the nuances of social distinctions, like language or lifestyle, should not hinder unification; "...the film implies that all our backgrounds are subordinate to our material reality as human beings who must find ways to relate to one another" (Harrod 84). The way the North is initially described reaffirms audiences' stereotypes of the region, while Philippe's journey in seeing past these stigmas encourages audiences to reevaluate their own preconceptions.

Kad Merad plays Philippe and, like Boon, is a second generation French Algerian. However, it is interesting to note that race, in addition to class and religion, do not play any significant roles in *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*. Granted, neither Merad nor Boon necessarily appears distinctively Arab in his appearance. Unfortunately, this did not stop Jean-Marie Le Pen, the head of the National Front party at the time, from condemning the positive reviews of the film (that praised its regional and national representations) by insisting that Boon and Merad could not possibly be realistic in their portrayals because they are not French – they are Arab (Royer 147). Le Pen's comment is understandable given the National Front's radical views on the detrimental effects of immigration, in addition to their increasingly racist political agenda, not to mention its then leader's

propensity for controversial comments, which he continuously used to propel his political career.

However, drawing attention to the mixed origins of the film's main characters does raise the question as to why these characteristics are not addressed in the context of the film. In short, they are irrelevant. *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*'s ultimate message is to highlight the importance of disregarding the social implications of these characteristics in order to identify with the inherent similarities between people simply because they are human. The specifically French aspects of this kind of universalism manifest themselves in the realization that the Ch'tis are not all that different from the rest of France – which means that they can adequately live up to a uniform French national identity.

CHAPTER IV: *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*

Summary Analysis:

Marie and Claude Verneuil raised four beautiful daughters in a comfortable and loving home in Chinon, France.²⁷ Their daughters were their pride and joy, but Claude and Marie were utterly heartbroken when three of them decided to marry immigrants instead of the expected white, Catholic Frenchmen. How could they do this to Marie and Claude when they raised them to be “good little French girls”? *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* tells the story of how Marie and Claude come to terms with their new diverse, albeit dysfunctional, family despite their longstanding prejudices. In the context of modern France, this film is extremely direct, and debatably offensive, in naming and mocking the stereotypes associated with a variety of groups. However, this film, like those discussed before it, addresses a serious social issue in France in that it tells the story of a traditionally French couple who struggle with and eventually overcome their prejudice towards those of a different race, religion, and culture.

The opening scenes of *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* show a series of three weddings taking place at the city hall of Chinon, France – a location that deeply dissatisfies Marie and Claude simply because there is no traditional church ceremony following it. The first wedding shows their daughter, Isabelle, getting married to Rachid, an Arabic lawyer from Algiers. He has a number of family members cheering for him, even yelling the stereotypical Arab ululation, while only Isabelle’s three sisters and parents are present from her family. Her three sisters beam at her happiness, but Marie and Claude maintain haughty looks of disapproval that reappear at each of the following

²⁷ Located in the Indre-et-Loire department of France, Chinon is the quintessential traditional French town in the Loire Valley known for its wines and historic chateau.

weddings. One year later at the same city hall, another of the Verneuil daughters, Odile, marries David, a Sephardic Jewish businessman from Tel-Aviv.²⁸ Once again his family cheers, while Marie and Claude purse their lips. One more year passes and one more daughter, Segolene, gets married to Chao, a Chinese banker from Beijing. Marie and Claude are eventually called out on their discontent when the wedding photographer asks why they are the only two people not smiling for the group photo amidst a sea of grinning Chinese relatives.

Within the first five minutes of the film, audiences are already presented with certain stereotypical images of specific immigrant groups and can immediately see the disapproval exuding from Marie and Claude as their precious daughters marry foreigners, in both race and religion, instead of proper Catholic Frenchmen. Of course, they refuse to admit they are prejudiced initially, but their actions throughout the film range from strained tolerance to outright racism. It is common in France for older generations to struggle with accepting the effects, such as diversity, resulting from increased globalization and modernization. Conservatives and traditionalists in France cling to the notion of a homogenous community that shares the collective identity crafted by the French government decades before. In this context, immigrants are seen as tainting French society and threatening long held traditions with their own foreign cultures (Lamont and Douvoux 17-18).

Furthermore, this mindset is steadily increasing as a result of the economic crises, social stratification, and questions of national identity within the last few decades in France. This has given rise to the growing support of the extreme-right, the National

²⁸ The name “Verneuil” is telling in its aristocratic sound, yet it is important to note that this family is not aristocratic. They are provincial bourgeois that attempt to reflect the lifestyle of the historic French nobility.

Front in particular. Former head of the party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, did not have nearly as much public support as his successor, his daughter Marine Le Pen, who has revamped the party's image to appear more in tune with traditional French ideals, such as "democracy," "liberty," "justice," and "secularism." However, the party's agenda essentially argues that the effects of globalization, particularly increased immigration, threaten these core French values. The fragile social situation in France has elevated the National Front's popularity as the public's frustration intensifies (Alduy 19-21). The director of *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*, Philippe de Chauveron, attempted to discount the National Front's ideology by highlighting the similarities and discounting the differences between its diverse characters. The film's depiction of how one can overcome social differences aligns with the ideals of French universalism – a philosophy not supported by the National Front.

In fact, Marie and Claude are initially used as examples to identify the stereotypical norm of those who struggle to accept the nuances of diversity in France. Throughout the film, Marie and Claude are consistently challenged in their difficulty to accept their new son-in-laws and each of their respective characteristics that could, in their opinion, threaten the traditional French lifestyle they envision for their progeny. For example, Marie and Claude reluctantly attend the Jewish circumcision ceremony of David and Odile's newborn son where they hardly hide their disdain towards the "barbaric" practice. Marie even attempts to persuade Odile to baptize her son in case he decides to be Catholic later in life; this request also stems from the fear that their grandson will be raised Jewish. In the course of this film, Marie and Claude stubbornly try to coerce their daughters into resembling, as they see it, the traditional French norm.

Claude and Marie are not the only characters in the film that stereotype; the son-in-laws constantly their own prejudices against one another. This animosity is first seen at a family luncheon at Chao's house in Paris the day following the Jewish ceremony. Everyone is getting along rather well at first, despite the tangible tension felt throughout the room as everyone tries to behave properly. The conversation takes a turn for the worst when the idea of circumcision is brought up, and Claude once again expresses his concern that the practice is barbaric. This provokes David to defend his cultural tradition, and he inevitably offends Rachid by affirming that it is more humane than the Muslims, who circumcise boys at the age of six. Rachid takes this to mean that David is claiming Muslims are barbarians. This topic sparks a heightened argument, first between David and Rachid and then amongst everyone as Chao's attempt at mediation only instigates further conflict. They use a plethora of racial and religious stereotypes to attack one another, all the while looking for approval from Marie and Claude who have watched the argument ensue in alarm.

Everyone eventually calms down, but Claude disrupts this relative peace in discussing an evening walk through Paris the night before. Claude unknowingly causes offense when he complains about the lack of "Frenchmen" on the street on his walk through *Barbès*, an area of Paris, the previous night.²⁹ He explains how he and Marie felt unsafe and almost as if they were in *Bab El Oued*.³⁰ Claude refuses to acknowledge the racist implications of his complaints, even when one of his daughters scolds him for being inappropriate. When they say he is being racist, Claude exclaims: "But I am

²⁹ *Barbès* is well known to be a predominantly Arab area in Paris, France.

³⁰ *Bab El Oued* is a quarter of Algiers, Algeria. Claude equates the two areas to show demonstrate the foreign, and therefore dangerous, environment he found him self in.

Republican and Gaullist like my father! Of my four daughters I offered three to sons of immigrants. And you, what did you do for France?”

In the course of this luncheon, audiences are presented with the dysfunctions of a diverse family attempting (and failing) to handle the cultural differences between them. The ultimate comparisons are not between the different backgrounds of the son-in-laws, but instead how their respective cultures compare to French culture and the characteristics of a traditional French identity. David attempts to lessen the foreignness of his religion by drawing attention to the even greater differences of Islam. One of the criticisms against Chinese people involves the passiveness of their countenance in the context of French society. Chao defends himself by highlighting the increased spread of Chinese influence in former Jewish and Arabic quarters of Paris, thereby insinuating an agency within the Chinese population. Furthermore, Claude’s reaction to their claims of racism is to draw attention to his own “contribution” towards a multicultural France, but he ultimately accuses them of failing to measure up to the French expectations of *intégration*.

Marie and Claude do not seem to realize that neither David, Rachid, nor Chao completely exemplify the social stereotypes of their respective cultures. On their way back to Chinon, Claude and Marie vent their dislike of each of their son-in-laws, claiming that Chao is a “suck-up,” David is a failure, and Rachid is simply “the worst.” Each of the son-in-laws uniquely portrays their respective ethnicity, but they do not, by any means, fall into the extreme categories of cultural diversity that would upset French society. Chao is mocked by Rachid and David for overly appealing to Claude and Marie and for trying to mediate situations, which goes against the others’ claims of passiveness.

His success as a banker is compared to the failures of David's business enterprises. David does not necessarily represent the shrewd "Jewish businessman" as audiences witness his failed attempts to start an organic kosher business. He is portrayed as rather silly, in comparison to the serious Rachid. Rachid discounts the lower-class, criminal stereotypes associated with Arabs in France given his success as a lawyer. David and Rachid band together against Chao at many times throughout the film, but are at odds with each other more often than not. The son-in-laws are tools to demonstrate, and also discount, the racial and religious stereotypes of French society.

Furthermore, the immigrant depictions in this film are initially presented as Jameson's "threats" to a social utopia only perceived by those such as Marie and Claude. The film can be seen as a symbolic representation of a society attempting to confront the effects of both globalization and modernization. French society is in a fragile state of transition as the public looks for scapegoats to explain social and economic disparities that show no immediate sign of resolving, therefore the influx of immigrants and their cultures are viewed as threats to achieving this imagined utopia. However, the point of this film is to demonstrate a realistic representation of modern social issues that are ultimately overcome, albeit with some problems along the way.

Marie is the first to realize that she and Claude may be wrong in their judgements. In an effort to reconnect with her daughters, she arranges for each of her daughters and their families to come to Chinon for Christmas. She convinces Claude, and admits that the animosity was partially their own fault given their negative stereotypes. She says: "Before making them understand us, we should make steps towards them." And that is exactly what she attempts to do and the rest of the family, for the most part,

follows suit. However, it is important to note that Marie only comes to this realization due to the rejection of her daughters and it is her love of them that prompts her to reconsider her preconceptions.

Christmas at the Verneuil house goes surprisingly well. The dinner begins with a toast from Claude apologizing for his misconstrued actions and expressing his sadness that he was perceived as racist. Everyone accepts his apology as Rachid reassures him that, “Everyone has a hidden racist side.” Marie chimes in her apologies and desire to get along because, “You’re French like us.” In this instance, the family bonds over their shared embarrassment. However, even though Marie’s comment was well-received it implies that being French is the key to acceptance – instead of actually accepting other cultures regardless of their “foreign” characteristics. This line of thinking is in keeping with French assimilationist ideology that essentially states that one’s allegiance to French ideals and national identity should be stronger than any other personal ties.

However, Marie actually uses a multicultural approach for dinner that night when she prepares three separate turkeys for each of her son-in-laws, one kosher, one halal, and one using a Chinese recipe. She attempts to appeal to each of their respective cultures, but inevitably highlights their differences in doing so. Furthermore, neither David, Rachid, nor Chao strictly follow any dietary traditions of their religions and cultures – a fact that rather irritates Marie and belittles the work she put forth, especially when they begin sharing their individual turkeys with one another. In this context, it is implied that multiculturalism is not necessary in a society where the shared identity of a group (i.e.

national identity) supercedes individual characteristics because people are going to first identify with the shared commonalities between them.³¹

After dinner, the men retire to Claude's study as the women clean up – a very cliché ending to a family meal. As the men are chatting, David, Rachid, and Chao describe the overwhelming feeling they get when they hear the French national anthem played at a French football game.³² Claude is confused and begins to ask if they even know the lyrics given their origins, but he is interrupted by Rachid as he jumps to attention and begins singing the Marseillais. Chao and David then join Rachid in singing, all standing with their hands over their hearts. Claude stands at attention, regarding them with pride as they finish the anthem as he says: "I had goosebumps."

Once again, audiences see the use of France, as an entity, in creating unity between the family, despite the fact that Claude and Marie's traditionally French mindset was the initial source of the disconnect. The idea that they are "all French together" helps Marie and Claude overcome their prejudices against the individual backgrounds of Rachid, David, and Chao. With that said, those who choose to identify with these alternative characteristics are seen as outcasts within French society, thereby demonstrating the reluctance of Marie and Claude in fully accepting their son-in-laws. In fact, Philippe de Chauveron stated in an interview with production company *Union Générale Cinématographique* (UGC) that the Marseillaise scene was intended to demonstrate how immigrants and their children feel that French society does not truly

³¹ Throughout the film, sharing meals together is an important way in first identifying the differences between the characters and then highlighting their similarities. Breaking bread together signifies a union that takes time to achieve.

³² It is interesting that the *La Marseillaise* is only played when the French national team competes due to its diverse players, whose collective representation of France in soccer insight heightened nationalism from the French public. France won the 1998 World Cup with a team whose slogan, "*Black, Blanc, Beur*" (Black, White, Arab), was used to advertise the successes of *intégration*. In this context, Rachid, David, and Chao's enthusiasm is understandable.

accept them. This is depicted in Claude's confusion and disbelief that they could even know the lyrics, but the son-in-laws' gallant display of French patriotism is key in changing his perception of them because they are finally starting to resemble, in his opinion, true Frenchmen.

In contrast, Marie originally turns to Catholicism to overcome her prejudice. However, Catholicism may help Marie to some extent, but it does not have a completely positive influence over her. For example, the fact that her daughters did not have a religious wedding ceremony in a church caused her great pain; additionally, part of her prejudice towards her son-in-laws stems from her discomfort with and ignorance of their religious affiliations. In the context of modern France, Marie is not unique. Catholicism was one of the original influences on the formation of French Republicanism in its promotion of the "commonalities" of all. This influence is ironic given the fact that ties to Christianity have been one of the sources of discrimination to those of other faiths in France; specifically the older, more conservative generations cling to Catholicism in the face of the increasing Muslim immigrant population. (Lamont and Douvoux 2).

Religion is an important distinguishing factor throughout the course of this film, however Rachid and David (in contrast to Marie) are not particularly traditional or strict in their practices. They share their respective turkeys with one another during Christmas dinner. Rachid drinks wine, which is traditionally forbidden in Islam. David participated in the circumcision ceremony for his son, but admits that he does not follow a strict kosher diet. Chao's religion is not even mentioned within the course of the film outside the fact that he is definitely not Catholic. Religion only seems to matter to them when it is threatened or insulted; yet they are stigmatized throughout the film according to their

assumed religions. In contrast, Catholicism heavily influences Marie, and also Claude – but only in its societal importance. Their dream of having a white, French, Catholic son-in-law is left to their daughter, Laure, who is the only Verneuil daughter left unmarried. They even try to set her up with a prospective husband who meets these qualifications, much to the dismay of Laure – who is, in fact, not single.

Earlier in the movie, Laure is seen at her apartment receiving the news that everyone will gather together in Chinon for Christmas. As she ends the call, she begins speaking to a man lying in bed with a book blocking his face. She tells him the news, to which he replies, “Am I invited?” and drops the book to reveal a handsome, black man. The fact that his reveal is so dramatic is significant in showcasing the fact that he is not white or possibly even French. Laure’s secret boyfriend is named Charles, and he is an immigrant actor from the Ivory Coast in Africa. This plot development shapes the course of the remainder of the film in that he inadvertently disrupts the tentative peace that has finally been achieved within the family. However, Charles is different from the other son-in-laws in that he is completely aware of and fully accepts the atypical nature of his relationship and those of Laure’s sisters; he does not get as easily offended as Chao, David, and Rachid, but is very direct in addressing and discounting racial stereotypes. When Laure tells him that maybe he can join them next Christmas, he jokingly replies, “So a Chinese, a Jew, and an Arab are okay, but not a black?”

Charles and Laure get engaged at the airport just before each returns home for Christmas. Before they leave each other, Charles calls back to Laure saying that she must now tell her family about him. However, Charles fails to tell her that he is in a similar position to her in that his family, his father in particular, is not racially tolerant either.

Charles' father, André, functions as a parallel to Claude in that he is equally prejudiced against the immigrants in his own country, but his hatred of the white Frenchman forms the foundation of the coming problems. Claude and André both assert that they are not racist, but they simply want a specific partner for their children that matches the traditional expectations of their respective societies. However, religion does not cause the same problems with Charles as it did with the others because he and his family are Catholic. In this instance, Marie and Claude can no longer use Catholicism as a front for their racism. Furthermore, both families are of the upper class. Claude and André have certain images of one other that have been shaped by their respective societies and experiences. André warns Charles not to trust the "white man," particularly the French. He consistently condemns the French for their racism and presumed superiority, which stems the post-colonial mindset of former colonies that resent their colonizers. In comparison, Claude is convinced that André and his family are trying to take advantage of him and his wealth, despite André and his family being relatively wealthy themselves. Both are suspicious of the other, but their similarities are paralleled for the remainder of the film and are only revealed to one another towards the end.

Laure is all too aware of her parents' social prejudices and therefore fails to mention Charles' race or origins when informing them of her engagement. They are absolutely elated, especially when they learn he is Catholic, because they automatically assume he is their ideal, *white* Frenchman. However, Marie and Claude's glee is short-lived when they join Laure and Charles for dinner one night in Paris. As the new couple walks in, Claude says, "Who's this, the valet?" and their smiles become increasingly

strained. Charles attempts to break the tension as they walk up to the table and says to Laure, “You could have told me your parents were white.”³³

After a tension filled dinner, Marie and Claude try and fail to be open-minded to the new addition to their already diverse family. They privately begin discussing it by highlighting the fact that he has a good sense of humor, is handsome, and they will have beautiful mixed grandchildren. The matching looks of complete misery on their faces reveal the fallacy of their praise. The charade is dropped when Marie breaks down into tears and exclaims, “*Qu’est qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?*” In saying this, they are asking what they could have possibly done to deserve this situation in life. In their eyes, they have been good, Catholic Frenchmen who have upheld the traditions of their culture and are cursed with, in their opinion, a family that does not in any way represent the societal norm they strive to uphold.

Marie and Claude’s reaction to their daughters’ mixed marriages is actually quite common in France. Studies show that the friends and family of mixed couples are often discriminatory out of fear that the incorporation of someone from another culture will threaten the family’s established values and culture. However, France has exceedingly high levels of mixed marriages compared to the rest of Europe, and one in five French people have a foreign grandparent. Unfortunately, the longstanding assimilationist ideology has resulted in an inherent fear of those who do not represent the norm, despite the large and historical presence of mixed marriages (Collet 63-66). Philippe de Chauveron purposely characterized Marie and Claude to represent these kinds of reactions, which he personally witnessed while growing up in a Catholic, bourgeois

³³ This statement is an example of Charles’ lack of fear in addressing social stigmas, in addition to comedic relief.

society (UGC). The context of *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* aims to reflect a growing social anxiety that the French identity and culture is under threat from foreign cultures.

With that said, Charles and Laure's engagement completely dismantles the fragile happiness achieved within the family after Christmas. Marie sank into depression, Claude began manically cutting trees down in the garden, and the other daughters hypocritically condemned Laure for dissolving their parents' last hope for the ideal son-in-law. David, Rachid, and Chao even try to remove this new "threat" to family peace, which only results in their own embarrassment.

Each of the family members' reaction to Charles demonstrates the stigmas and characteristics attached to the idea of being "foreign." Chao, David, and Rachid may fall outside of the traditional idea of Frenchmen, especially given their religions and origins, but they do not necessarily conform to their own stereotypes (and they are relatively whitewashed, which appears to actually matter given the disdain with which they treat Charles). However, Chao, David, and Rachid do identify with their respective cultural identities to some extent, whereas Charles, despite his appearance and origins, does not demonstrate any traditional or stereotypical African attributes. Furthermore, he is Catholic. The only recognizable difference is his skin color.

In this respect, Charles can be seen as an exaggerated metaphor for the idea of the foreigner, which is discussed in Chapter I as the being the ultimate enemy in modern France within the "Us" vs. "Them" mentality. It is interesting that the African, rather than the Arab, is used as the ultimate foreigner due to the growing xenophobia towards Maghreb immigrants in France. The film is already dangerously close to crossing the line

from social comedy to controversial offense, therefore perhaps using an Arab character as the deal-breaker would be hitting a little too close to home for French society at this given time.

The two sets of parents eventually face off when it is finally time for the wedding. Laure and Charles greet his family at the airport, only André to immediately begin condemning France without even a hello. Furthermore, he insisted on wearing a traditional African robe, referred to as a “*boubou*.” He only wears this to be “provocative,” as Charles claims that he normally wears a Western suit. Upon arriving to Chinon, André insists that he will strike anyone who makes a racist comment, but he is the only one who demonstrates his prejudice towards both Frenchmen and immigrants. Charles’ mother, Madeleine, and Marie, however, immediately bond over the mutual happiness of their children – which is the ultimate factor for Marie in overcoming her prejudice. Claude, however, has refused to let go of his traditional mindset and struggles to endure the company of his diverse guests.

Claude attempts to escape the “tainted” environment by taking a fishing trip to a nearby lake, but André insists on accompanying him in order to speak more frankly. By the lake, Claude and André realize that neither actually approves of the wedding. Each introduces their complaints with the phrase, “I’m not racist, but...” André claims he wants his son to marry a black woman, “An African. An Ivorian.” Claude agrees and states he wants his daughter to marry a white man, “A European. A Frenchman.” They laugh together and bond over their mutual disapproval, in addition the fact that both Gaullists. It is ironic that Claude and André can finally connect with one another only after essentially admitting to their respective racism (regardless of their disclaimers) and

over their mutual respect for Charles De Gaulle – one of the most famous *Frenchmen* of the last century.³⁴

The fact that neither will directly admit to being racist signifies that they truly believe the social stigmas attributed to minorities, but only as a result of their respective backgrounds and lifestyles. Claude has never been confronted with diversity on this level because he has maintained a conservative lifestyle that never strayed from outdated French social norms. In comparison, André is a product of the post-colonial mindset that resents imperial powers. Their shared desires of having homogenous families are understandable given the context in which they have lived their lives.

The realization of their mutual contempt with the current circumstances prompts Claude and André to further their discussion over drinks at a local café, where they become increasingly intoxicated as they plan ways in which to prevent the wedding – one of which includes kidnapping the priest.³⁵ They continue to bond over the potential destruction of their children's wedding, and they actually compliment one another's exceedingly absurd plans of sabotage. When they finally stumble out of the restaurant, Claude has donned André's traditional African *boubou* while André wears Claude's fishing gear – a key comedy tool to accentuate superficiality of their differences while demonstrating their growing disregard towards these distinctions. They drunkenly walk through town and eventually get arrested, similar to Antoine and Philippe in *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*. As they are forced into the police car, Claude scolds the officer for nearly shutting his *boubou* into the car door.

³⁴ Gaullism has been increasingly difficult to define, but essentially refers to a feeling of national grandeur, dedication to national unity, and an appreciation for the policies of Charles De Gaulle himself.

³⁵ It is interesting to note that Catholicism may be one of the only concrete similarities between Claude and André, but it has no effective influence over their views or actions towards one another. They identify with Catholicism only as a means to fit the status quo.

Despite the fact that they are in a jail cell, Claude and André continue to bond over their shared, albeit twisted, views on racism and immigration. They both jokingly agree that the immigrants in their respective countries are tainting society. They have come to a point where they can easily mock one another without offense; this is the turning point in the film that signifies acceptance. In treating their respective prejudices with humor instead of offense, both Claude and André are finally able to see their judgments as misguided and can fully understand one another's contempt. This is demonstrated when a fellow prisoner laughs at one of Claude's racist comments towards black immigrants. André initially chuckles at his comment, but both he and Claude immediately react in anger towards this stranger's offensive laughter. Similarly to when he spoke with his son-in-laws Claude did not intend to insult to André. However, this is the first time that no offense was taken because André recognizes that Claude is merely repeating the social stereotypes of his culture and is ready to defend his new friend. Furthermore, this is also the first time that Claude was fully aware of the prejudice reflected in his words, but he understood that André would not be insulted because of their newfound understanding of one another. Once again, the cultural differences between them cease to matter in light of their inherent similarities as humans.

It is in this context that Claude and André save the wedding. After their night in jail, Claude and André immediately rush to the train station to prevent Laure from leaving. Fortunately, they are able to prove to her that they have overcome their differences and have actually become friends. Laure makes it to the church just in time for the wedding, and Claude and André both happily walk her down the aisle. Later that day at the reception, André takes the stage to give a heartwarming speech about how

proud he is of his new “French” family. Claude makes his own speech and explains that he is jealous of the upcoming honeymoon. Therefore, he invites Marie to embark on another honeymoon where they travel the world to visit each of the families of their four son-in-laws in Beijing, Algiers, Tel-Aviv, and finally Abidjan.

Conclusion:

According to *Le Monde*, *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* has become one of the top ten most watched French films in history. In the course of twelve weeks in 2014, it received over ten million admissions, which has since increased to over twelve million (Braquet).³⁶ In accordance with *Intouchables* and *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*, this extremely popular film uses comedy as a way to portray increasingly relevant social problems in France today. However, the issues presented in this specific film are more directly addressed, contested, and controversial than the others. Debates on race, religion, and culture are growing in relevance due to these issues’ association with immigration problems – which has become one of the leading causes of French xenophobia.

The fluctuating relationship between Claude, played by famous French actor Christian Clavier, and André, played by prominent Congolese actor Pascal N’Zonzi, is a tool used in the film to address this growing xenophobia. They act as parallels to one another and are able to realize their similarities only after disregarding the context of their backgrounds – which is a general theme throughout the film. The eventual friendship between a conservative white Frenchman and an equally conservative black African showcases the fallacies of French xenophobia. However, it is essential to note that the

³⁶ It is important to note that this film was released in April of 2014, and therefore new information and statistics on the film are still being released. I have included the most recent information from reliable French news sources.

majority of immigrant (in addition to racial and religious) stereotypes associate them with the lower class, yet none of the characters in this film are economically impoverished.

Class status is not a directly addressed issue in *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* Nonetheless, the fact that none of the ethnically stereotyped characters is poor is significant in the eventual acceptance between them. The Verneuil family is obviously wealthy, but they are not aristocrats – despite their attempts to appear that way.

Furthermore, Charles family is also depicted as part of the upper class. This is evident in the recognizably Western lifestyle they maintain. For example, Charles was initially very confused when his father arrived to France wearing a traditional African robe because André normally wears a Western suit.³⁷ The lack of class distinction between the characters more easily allows them to overcome the more ideological issues of race, religion, and culture.

Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu? presents characters who struggle to overcome their prejudices. However, the prime examples of this struggle, Marie and Claude, are not completely responsible for their inappropriate behavior because this is their first time having been confronted with diversity in the intimate setting of their family. With that said, they do not actually know what the appropriate behavior is for this context, and they are therefore surprised to find that their actions are potentially offensive or unnecessary. Claude unknowingly insults Rachid when he discusses his fear of walking through an Arabic quarter of Paris, and Marie makes a grand effort to prepare three separate turkeys for her son-in-laws, who do not actually follow the traditional diet of their culture. However, both Marie and Claude are able to overcome their ignorance by

³⁷ Furthermore, Charles, André, and Madeleine all have Western, specifically French names that do not reflect their African roots – in comparison to Rachid, David, and Chao whose names are stereotypical for their respective cultures.

realizing that cultural differences should not hinder acceptance, so long as their similarities outweigh the differences. This film ultimately attempts to sate the part of French society who shares Marie and Claude's anxiety for the (perceived) unknown.

Both *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* claimed that *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* ultimately conveys the message that everyone can be a little racist, but that common sense will eventually prevail. However, *Le Figaro* stated that the contemporary relevance of the film, treated in a brazen and comedic manner, resonated within a society struggling with the question of national identity (Buisson). In contrast, *Le Monde* criticized the film for "twisting the neck of reality" to create a happy ending for a specific situation that did not accurately reflect the social disparities of the contemporary era (Mandlebaum 2014).³⁸ Both articles agree that the mockery of modern social problems contributed to its success, despite the, at times, offensiveness of the content. Unfortunately, *The Telegraph* reported that American and British producers found the film too offensive for their audiences who "would never allow themselves to laugh at blacks, Jews, or Asians," which means that there is currently no English subtitled release of the film (Mulholland). The disputed reviews have obviously not affected the film's success in France as it has been equated to both *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* and *Intouchables* in terms of popularity and social relevance (Mandlebaum 2014).

Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu? may be offensive to some, but the directness with which it addresses certain social issues makes its resolution that much more important. Nearly all the characters were at odds with one another at some point in the film, yet they were able to see past the social distinctions separating them in order to embrace the inherent similarities between them. They eventually all begin to see the

³⁸ "tordant le cou à la réalité"

Frenchness in one another as their cultural differences failed to matter in light of a shared humanity. In doing so, the film becomes a symbol for French society in that it identifies and resolves some serious social anxieties permeating France today through the uniting theme of national identity.

CONCLUSION:

In recent years, France's film industry has been in the midst of a new transition to better reflect the nuances of modernization and globalization. *Intouchables*, *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* demonstrate a drive towards this heightened awareness in that they address social issues that are not only relevant to France, but also resonate on an international level. Yet closer analysis reveals that these films inherently follow the longstanding ideals of French universalism, which has since evolved into promoting the values of French identity.

However, each of these films is, for lack of a better word, a "buddy movie," where two seemingly opposing characters manage to overcome their differences in order to create a lasting friendship despite socially improbable odds. However, these films may promote social equality, but they are overwhelmingly male dominated. The "buddies" of each film – Driss and Philippe (*Intouchables*), Philippe and Antoine (*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*), and Claude and André (*Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*) – are two men of seemingly stereotypical backgrounds that relay the ultimate message of each film. There is a disconcerting lack of female characters central to each film's take on the fallacies of social injustice. *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* is the debatable exception given that Marie Verneuil demonstrates signs of tolerance before Claude, but her effort initially stems from her desire to reconnect with her daughters instead of social enlightenment. In choosing male characters to exemplify the thematic values of national unity, the films potentially undermine the importance of female agency in representing and encouraging the ideals of French identity.

Nevertheless, the actress who plays Marie, Chantal Lauby, is a well-known French actress, director, writer, and comedian whose popularity is influential in explaining the films success.³⁹ In fact, each film features actors with successful film careers and are recognizable to the French public. *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* also features famous French actor Christian Clavier.⁴⁰ *Intouchables* stars acclaimed French actor, François Cluzet,⁴¹ in addition to Omar Sy, whose popularity skyrocketed after the film's release. Dany Boon from *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* was already known for his Ch'tis persona from his successful stand-up comedy shows. The presence of distinguished and recognizable French personalities as main characters in these films is a contributing factor to the success of each film because a notable French name creates an initial interest in viewers to see the film, regardless of the content.

In discussing the record-breaking success of these films, it is especially important to note the comedic aspect of each film. Henry Bergson's theories on laughter affirm that comedy functions as a social unifier as audiences join together in laughter at fictional representations of their society. In doing so, they must disregard their own differences in order to laugh at and connect to a film. The comedic aspect of *Intouchables*, *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* is especially significant because audiences are only able to enjoy the film if they set aside their predisposed assumptions towards the relevant social issues, which essentially allows them to connect to the overall message of each film – social and cultural differences are meaningless in light of the realized commonalities inherent within humanity (or in this case, French identity).

³⁹ Lauby was a member of the hugely popular TV comedy group, *Les nuls*, in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

⁴⁰ Clavier is known for his role as Asterix in the popular *Asterix et Obelix* films and in French box office hits such as *Les visiteurs* (1993), *Les visiteurs en Amérique* (2001).

⁴¹ Cluzet won a César award in 2007 for his role in the successful film *Ne le dis à personne*.

For example, *Intouchables* portrays Driss comically bullying his way through Parisian high society with no regard to the exaggerated nuances of French high culture; yet he ultimately creates a monumental bond with Philippe, who refuses to let Driss' lower class background – or even his own aristocratic status – influence this enlightening friendship. The comedy aspect throughout this story allows audiences to first laugh at Driss' indifferent behavior amidst the stigmatized *haute culture* and then eventually to connect to the revolutionary relationship formed between two seemingly opposite members of French society. In this light, comedy acts as Bergson's social unifier.⁴²

The protagonists also display a relative lack of morals in each film. Each features characters that initially are, in a sense, scoundrels who exemplify Robert Darnton's idea of "Frenchness," explained in "Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose." In explaining the nuances of European folk tales, Darnton describes the consistent portrayal of French folk heroes as rather selfish in their endeavors, specifically in the ways they resolve the stories' central conflict. He explains that French folk tales exemplify the more common peasant mind-set in that the heroes manipulate the situation to their own advantage through shrewd cunning. He states that,

... it conveys a particular view of the world – a sense that life is hard, that you had better not have any illusions about selflessness in your fellow men, that clear-headedness and quick wit are necessary to protect what little you can extract from your surroundings, and moral nicety will get you nowhere. Frenchness makes for ironic detachment. (60-61)

While Darnton's analysis mostly concerns the eighteenth century, which was influential in the constitution of modern French identity, his conclusions still resonate to

⁴² However, there is also the possibility of Cooper and Dinerman's "boomerang effect" that could potentially reinforce the social stereotypes represented in these films due to the subjective disposition of audiences at a given time, as discussed in the Introduction.

this day. In the context of the given films, Darnton's "Frenchness" is directly applicable to the first impression audiences receive of each of the main characters, who display little to no regard to the influence of their actions towards others. In *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* for instance, Philippe falsely claims that he is disabled on his transfer application in order to gain priority in placement along the French Riviera; he even elaborates to the inspector on the shame of those who fake handicaps in order to further their own agenda. Despite his failure, Philippe's actions exemplify the clever manipulation utilized in French folk tales to gain precedence. Nonetheless, the ideals of French universalism ultimately have far more influence over the characters in these films as they grow to care about the results of their actions and, more importantly, to realize the faults in their socially constructed perceptions.

The increasing debate on national identity today in France is a result of the frustration many French feel with the current status of their society as issues arise from increased immigration, financial instability, and social marginalization. Judith Butler states in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* that, "moments of outrage and incomprehension, when we think that others have taken themselves out of the human community as we know it, is a test of our very concept of a universal human subject" (89-90). In this context, France grasps at finding a clearly defined national identity to use as justification for rejecting "foreign" influences that fail to meet its definition of the universal. However, each of these films attempts to remind audiences of the inherent universalism that exists within all of humanity, despite cultural distinctions like class, race, religion, and cultural background.

In their promotion of universalism, the films demonstrate the specifically *French* aspects of this ideology and its relation to national identity. For example, *Intouchables* rejects the modern remnants of pre-Revolution classism that divides and stereotypes social classes into isolated entities; both Driss and Philippe learn to navigate between the social extremes as they attain the desired *juste milieu* of an ideal French identity. *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* condemns the stretched definition of the feared “foreign” to include perceived extremisms within the French culture itself; Philippe’s realization that the Ch’tis are first and foremost French allows *fraternité* to overcome regional and cultural stereotypes. Finally, *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* presents a modern example of a diverse French family that successfully overcomes France’s rising xenophobia; each of the characters ultimately disproves the social stereotypes surrounding them, thereby revealing their greater identification with France than with their own cultural background. Ultimately, each of the films’ main characters overcomes social divides by recognizing the innate Frenchness of one another.

With that said, *Intouchables*, *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, and *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* become comedies of Frenchness that attempt to soothe social anxieties through humorous depictions of and solutions to the question of national identity. Furthermore, the questionably offensive comedic illustrations of social injustices in each of the films are one medium through which French audiences are both entertained and humbled by the unfortunate truth in these representations of their society. It is for these reasons that each film has been one of the top ten most successful French-produced films in history. In their presentation of the ultimate social utopia, these films address the ongoing campaign to define what exactly it means to be “French,” thus becoming

comedies of Frenchness in their redefinition of national identity in a diverse society – which resonates with their audiences in ways of which politicians could only dream.

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