

# The Algerian connection

A few hundred metres away from the set of *Panne de sens*, director Malik Chibane's film about second-generation Algerian youth in the suburbs of Paris, children are playing a game of terrorists and commandos. In this latest version of cops and robbers, it is unclear who are the 'good guys' and who are the 'bad'. The important thing seems to be who wins - and how 'cool' their uniforms are.

But in France, for young *beurs*, the group perhaps most acutely affected by the French/Algerian drama, the situation is increasingly a no-win one, no matter which side they choose.

Caught between the country of their birth and the land of their ancestors, *beurs* have seen their identity crisis further heightened by recent events. With French media jumping on the neo-colonial revenge bandwagon, TV newscasts praising the professionalism of the GIGN and right-wing tabloids full of photos of armed commandos storming the plane Rambo-style in Marseilles, *Panne de sens* offers the relief of a more human perspective. And by examining the dilemmas of second generation Algerians, Chibane, a *beur* himself, offers insight into the troubled relationship between France and her ex-colony.

At a time when France and Algeria are increasingly polarised, though still

intrinsically linked, the *banlieue parisien* has become a microcosm of current tension. And with Algiers now a cinematic no-mans-land, the *banlieue* has also become the focus for Franco-Algerian film-makers. Even Merzak Allouache, unable to work in Algeria since the production of *Bab El-Oued City*, is preparing the screenplay for a new film, a suburban love story about a young *beur* and a Senegalese immigrant.

*Panne de sens*, a play on words meaning both "out of petrol" and "it doesn't make sense", tells of two *beur* sisters living in Aubervilliers, a suburb of Paris. One rejects her Algerian heritage, embracing everything French. The other embraces the fundamentalist Islam which is rapidly gaining popularity in the *banlieue* (largely as an affirmation of Algerian identity and a defence against racism).

Mirroring the migratory trend which has brought many Algerian artists and intellectuals to Paris, actors from *Bab El-Oued City*, unable to work at home, have resurfaced in *Panne de sens*. But the journey from Bab El-Oued to Aubervilliers, it seems, is not that far.

Mohamed Ourdache, who played the young Islamist gang leader in Allouache's film, is transformed into a suburban Imam. Ourdache, who was raised in a suburb of Algiers, finds

many similarities in Aubervilliers. He sees the same situation unfolding in both milieus: unemployed young men caught between two cultural identities are seduced by an Islamist doctrine which often uses social issues as a starting point for religious rhetoric.

In *Panne de sens*, Nadia Kaci, who played the beautiful girl frustrated with her cloistered existence in *Bab El-Oued*

City, now plays the role of an Algerian girl who becomes disillusioned with life in a Paris suburb. Her character's *voyage du soi* serves as an interesting metaphor for the Algerian 'regard' towards France.

She comes to Paris believing that she is to be engaged to a young *beur*. Initially happy to be away from the crisis in Algeria, she soon discovers that the 'love letters' that she received from her 'fiancé' were in fact written by his mother, who hoped to marry him off to a 'traditional' Algerian girl. He is actually in love with someone else, and Kaci's character, thinking she has left Islamic extremism behind her, is alarmed at the rise in *banlieue* fundamentalism.

In the end, puzzled by a society that asserts its freedom and identity through the very religious fundamentalism that she is oppressed by in Algeria, she decides to return home. All is betrayal, confused identity, shattered illusions.

Meanwhile, the children playing terrorists and commandos ignore the *tourage* and continue their game. Nearby, their parents sit inside cramped apartments watching Algerian soap operas beamed in via satellite, while thousands of miles away, the roofs of Bab El-Oued receive the latest transmissions from Canal Plus.

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