The urban renovation of Marseilles in Luc Besson’s *Taxi* series

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**Abstract:** Similar to the urban changes that occur in other post-industrial European cities, Marseilles has been going through an intense renovation process over the last twenty years. The symptoms of these changes were indicated in the action film series *Taxi* as early as the 1990s, when the renovation was beginning to take shape. Four films shot between the years of 1998 and 2007, written and produced by Luc Besson, reflect the urgency felt by the government and Marseillaise commerce to promote the city as the Mediterranean capital of global finance and tourism. This article first examines the process of urban renovation in Marseilles. After a brief discussion on the city’s representation in cinema, the article inquires into the film industry’s interest in post-industrial urban spaces. Finally, it explores how the *Taxi* series prefigures the city that the urban renovation drives for: a Marseilles rendered more attractive for investments and tourists thanks to increased security measures and distilled ethnic diversity.

**Keywords:** Marseilles; city in cinema; urban renovation; Luc Besson; the *Taxi* series

**Word Count:** 7,518 words

Marseilles has been one of the European capitals of culture throughout 2013, a year abundant with Mediterranean-themed cultural events—ranging from museum openings and exhibitions to concerts, theatrical and dance performances, and street parties—that were the fruits of many years of planning, financing and construction work. The capital of culture year marks the zenith of the urban transformation plan
initiated in the mid-1990s by the French government, along with Marseilles’s city council and business interests. Since then, billions of Euros have been invested to renovate the appearance of the city and push forth an intense gentrification of the city center through the establishment of numerous museums, cultural institutions, high-end residences and hotels that have reclaimed Marseilles’s post-industrial port area.

As early as the 1990s, the *Taxi* series portrayed Marseilles as on its way to becoming a global investment and tourist attraction. Its sanitized streets and clean roads enable the main character’s car to move smoothly and—as repeated numerous times in the series—faster even than the high-speed train that connects Marseilles to Paris. Luc Besson’s production foreshadows the reformulation of the city as a flexible neoliberal urban space and the refashioning of an always already cosmopolitan migration city into the site of a safer form of diversity ideal for attracting tourists. Furthermore, the series reflects the move in Luc Besson’s career from director to producer of big budget films, and reveals how his relationship with post-industrial spaces changes as his film locations turn into film-related investments.

**The city and its image under construction**

In the early 1990s, as opposed to many large European cities, there were no signs of urban renovation, investments, property speculation or gentrification in Marseilles’s inner city (Megerle, 2008). In response to the competition from the other Mediterranean ports such as Genoa and Barcelona, the French government introduced Euroméditerranée, a top-down urban renovation project, to alter the city’s economic stagnancy and to initiate a transformation. From 1995 through 2012, the project allocated over 500,000,000 Euros of investment to Marseilles (L’Euroméditerranée, 2014a). Following other post-industrial port cities such as London, Belfast, Liverpool
and Bordeaux, Marseilles was opened to reconstruction with initiatives such as turning disaffected waterfront area into art galleries and museums and renovating the housing in the city center. As the city transformed itself from post-industrial to cultural economy, its rehabilitated image, improved connectivity, and augmentation of high quality hotels aimed to draw tourism (L’Euroméditerranée, 2014b).

In his discussion on the politics of urban development David Harvey points out that cultural and creative industries play a significant role in raising the value of land and property in today’s post-industrial cities. These novel industries make a city space distinct and unique among other global cities competing to attract tourists and investments. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is Bilbao becoming a global attraction after the construction of the Guggenheim museum with its signature Gehry architecture. Harvey explains, “the knowledge and heritage industries, the vitality and ferment of cultural production, signature architecture and the cultivation of distinctive aesthetic judgments have become powerful constitutive elements in the politics of urban entrepreneurialism in many places (particularly Europe)” (2012: 106). Indeed in Marseilles, museums with unprecedented themes such as the first museum dedicated to Mediterranean history and culture (Musée des civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranées, MUCEM) with its distinct architecture and waterfront location, other architecturally inventive buildings such as CMA CGM Tower designed by Zaha Hadid, and space-specific cultural activities (capital of culture year) have been crucial in the effort to brand the city as an attractive Mediterranean capital. Additionally, cultivation of “distinctive aesthetic judgments” in the city was facilitated by the arrival of a certain group of Parisians—those whom economist Richard Florida names “the creative class” and considers as the driving force for economic rejuvenation of post-industrial cities—who moved to Marseilles
now tightly connected to Paris through the TGV. Between 2001 and 2006 alone, five years into the TGV, 100,000 people (middle class, cultured, and urban journalists, writers, actors, and artists) moved into Marseilles (Gasquet-Cyrus, 2013).

This movement was welcomed by one of the mayor’s deputies in a controversial speech in November 2003 during which he announced: “We need people who create wealth. We need to get rid of half of the city’s inhabitants” (in Dell’Umbria, 2012: 69). An overwhelming number of the inhabitants of Marseilles (75 %) believe that the recently built and renovated housing in the inner city serves these new inhabitants of higher income rather than themselves, the local population (Megerle, 2008). The impact of inner-city renovation processes has been greatest on the most vulnerable populations (the poorest, the elderly, the unemployed and minority populations) who lived in the areas destined for Euroméditerranée renovation projects. Most of these low-income residents were forced to move out through various means, including having their water and electricity cut (Richard, 2008).

While unemployment in Marseilles decreased dramatically thanks to the economic stimulation, it continues to be highly concentrated in certain neighborhoods. The poorest parts in the north do not seem to sufficiently receive the benefits of the Euroméditerranée investments (Langevin, 2007; Andres, 2011). A few months before 2013, when the European Capital of Culture in Marseilles took off, The Independent reporter announced, “Away from its glamorous tourist center, 15 men have died this year as the city’s drug war spirals out of control,” emphasizing the grave split between the northern and southern parts of the city. The leader of a resident association in Bougainville, one of the poorest northern suburbs, underlined, “We have been abandoned. Forgotten”; a lawyer who represents the families of the victims of gang violence in the city described Marseilles as the permanent location to
a crime movie: “This is the city of *The French Connection*. All the organized crime of the Mediterranean basin passes through here—Corsicans, Sicilians” (Lichfield, 2012).

**Filmic representations of Marseilles**

The lawyer’s allegory of *The French Connection*, on the one hand, associates the city with international crime; on the other hand, however, it gives the city transnational legibility as a familiar genre film location. The film industry has been an increasingly important part of the urban renovation efforts and the post-industrial city’s economic revival through the promotion of culture tourism and branding. As Paul Swann observes, films and film industry have been crucial to establish “a postmodern inexorability in valuing cities as images rather than as sites of production” (Swann, 2001: 96). Focusing on Liverpool, Les Roberts explains that cinematographic tourism works in two ways: it attempts to draw film-induced tourism through various means such as movie-mapping, and it promotes the city itself as a film location. Efforts to draw both film-induced tourism and filmmakers to Marseilles may be seen on the municipality’s official website that declares in English,

> Marseille loves the movies and cinema, something that becomes it well. It is the most filmed city in France after Paris. Its warm light, blue sea, its rich and varied heritage, and the simplicity of its inhabitants have long attracted filmmakers and inspired scenarists (La ville de Marseille, 2014a).

The website also showcases the recently built Belle de Mai multimedia center (a former tobacco factory) as a facility for filmmakers, mentions the construction of La Maison des Cinématographies de la Méditerranée at Marcel Pagnol’s family house, and praises the visual attraction of the city as revealed in the popular French TV series *Plus belle la vie* shot in the city. The exchange between the city’s visual
representation and branding may be best observed through *Plus belle la vie*, which takes place in a fictional neighborhood of Marseilles, Le Mistral, modeled on the Le Panier neighborhood:

The show has encouraged tourists to flock to Le Panier, where a shop dedicated to merchandise relating to the series recently opened. The quartier’s old bars have been turned into ice-cream parlors, its facades repainted in bright colors. The cardboard neighborhood of the soap has begun to obscure the real neighborhood it was supposed to portray (Dell’Umbria, 2012: 85).

*Plus belle la vie* proposes a certain image of the city, as one offering the attractions of Mediterranean France akin to Marcel Pagnol’s famous trilogy—*Marius* (Alexandre Korda, 1931), *Fanny* (Marc Allégret, 1932) and *César* (Marcel Pagnol, 1936)—which showcases the singing Southern accent, seafaring, charms of the Old Port and its community spirit colored with traditional games such as *belote* and *pétanque*. Recently, there has been an interest in reviving the Marseilles imagined in this trilogy. Channel France 2’s remakes of the trilogy in 2000, Daniel Auteuil’s remakes of *Marius* (2013) and *Fanny* (2013) that came out simultaneously on the capital of culture year, and finally, the restoration of the original trilogy by La Cinémathèque Française for screening at Cannes 2015 reveals the resurgent nostalgia for Pagnol’s image of Marseilles. Robert Guédiguian’s film *Marius et Jeanette* (a clear reference to Pagnol in the film’s title) also promotes Marseilles as city with a colorful community spirit, though with a more class conscious approach. Shot in 1997, in *Marius et Jeanette* we see a crumbling industrial space as one of the main filming locations. Through the central role that a closed down cement factory in shambles takes in the film (as it brings the two protagonists together being the setting
where Marius works as the night watchman and where Jeanette’s father died at work) we see the nostalgia for the loss of “real labor” and the dominance of service economy jobs. In the film, Marsaillaise diversity is represented through the screening of its most precarious groups in strong solidarity under the duress of de-industrialization, urban change and impoverishment.

While the films of Pagnol and Guédiguian focus on the local colors of Mediterranean Marseilles another cinematic style has claimed a more global status for the city. In action and noir films shot in Marseilles cosmopolitan connections are established though crime where the harbor and later the old and derelict factories and docks become the hotbed of criminal activity. Along the same years when Pagnol’s trilogy came out, Justin de Marseille (Maurice Tournier, 1935) was produced which opened up a different trajectory for the city’s and the harbor’s representation, that of international drug trade, gangsters and crime related noir films most famously followed by The French Connection (William Friedkin, 1971) and French Connection II (John Frankenheimer, 1975). The representation of Marseilles in these films has parallels with that of Chicago as “crime, endemic to filmic representations of these two cities, stamps them as the loci of violence” (Block 2013, 5) with more recent crime thrillers such as The Transporter (Louis Leterrier and Corey Yuen, 2002), The Transporter 3 (Olivier Megaton, 2008) and MR 73 (The Last Deadly Mission, Olivier Marchal, 2008), the former two produced by Luc Besson’s production company EuropaCorp.

**Besson and counterculture city**

Such dual representation of the city, Marseilles with a strong sense of community and a Marseilles of action and crime—do not always stand apart from
each other as they are merged in the *Taxi* series. This duality shows that promotion of the city is not only accomplished by picture perfect, warm and accommodating images. As Maria Stehle (2012) highlights in her article on films that represent Berlin and Hamburg in the late 1990s, counterculture images of seedy parts of the city and marginal characters that some films show are equally attractive for a different group of tourists and spectators as they perpetuate the image of the edgy, cool and alternative city. Derelict, disused factories, former industrial spaces and harbors in shambles are especially recycled as film locations in marketing the counterculture image of the city.

Throughout his career, Luc Besson has had an intimate connection with such counterculture images of cities. According to Susan Hayward, the usage of decaying locations along with the abundance of recyclable materials and waste in Besson’s early films—such as *Le Dernier Combat* (1983) and *La femme Nikita* (1990)—can be explained as a reference to the economic failures of the Mitterrand era in 1980s France, when high unemployment led to a pessimistic cultural environment and “emotional deprivation suffered by the youth” (1998: 26). *Le Dernier Combat* (1983) was shot mainly in the “underbelly of Paris. The half-gutted buildings, the abandoned multi-storey parking lots—the parts of Paris that France film industry hardly ever shows” (Hayward, 1998: 29). For *La femme Nikita’s* interior scenes, Besson built sets in a derelict tobacco factory in another Parisian suburb, Pantin (Hayward, 1998: 56).

One of the filming locations for *Le Dernier Combat* was the former EDF (Electricité de France) factory situated in the underprivileged Parisian suburb of Seine Saint Denis. Currently, this factory is renovated to house the famous Cité du Cinéma film studio complex created by Besson and inaugurated in 2012. Following a similar investment pattern in Marseilles, Besson owns a multiplex cinema in the derelict port
area within a futuristic cultural event complex that will include a Marriott hotel and
convention center. The co-founder of EuropaCorp explains that the creation of the
multiplex was a result of the good relations established with the municipality of
Marseilles during the shooting of the Taxi series (Le Pogam, 2007). Hence, following
Luc Besson’s career trajectory from director to producer, we may conclude that
derelict post-industrial locations have been central for him, first as film locations and
then as locations of film-related investments. Often, Besson’s film locations
eventually turn into film industry investments.

Besson’s investments in the marginalized French suburbs and Europacorp’s
productions [such as Yamakasi (Ariel Zeitoun and Julien Sèri, 2001), Banlieue 13
(Pierre Morel, 2004), and Banlieue 13: Ultimatum (Patrick Alessandrin, 2009)] that
foreground the banlieue architecture through the practice of parkour (free running that
took its roots in French banlieues) “harness the countercultural charge of the
banlieue” (Pettersen, 2014: 27), and, as the director claims, they may “bring the area
jobs, tourism, urban development, transportation connections to the rest of France,
and perhaps even racial and economic integration” (in Pettersen, 2014: 29). It is true
that major investments such as the Cité du Cinéma in Paris and the multiplex movie
theater in Marseilles, and his productions that present countercultures of these cities
create brands that benefit and promote these spaces. Besson’s emphasis on the
positive consequences of urban development, and the political and economic
integration of post-industrialized, marginal areas to the center need to be taken,
however, with a grain of salt. Incidentally, both Marseilles’ port area where Besson’s
multiplex will be situated and the Seine Saint Denis area where the Cité du Cinéma is
built are going through the process of gentrification, which causes the evictions of
poorer residents and changes in the demography of these neighborhoods thanks to
increasing housing prices and new building complexes (Richard, 2008; Collet, 2013). These spaces are indeed being further connected to the center, but not necessarily along with their underclass residents. Hence, rather than the margins being attached to the center, they seem to be pushed further out and away from the center. Additionally, it must not be neglected that situating the studios in the margins of the city facilitates the accession to affordable labor. Even though the film school (Ecole de la Cité) in the Cité du Cinéma provides an opportunity for marginalized youth who do not have the means to receive film training, it also is a good resource for free labor through apprenticeships for Europacorp (de Boutiny, 2014), a company already notorious in the entertainment industry for “mak[ing] most use of casual work contracts, to avoid to pay social benefits to its employees” (Maule, 2006: 41).

The Taxi series

Besson’s changing relationship with derelict industrial spaces (from film locations to film-related investments) is a result of his changing career trajectory. Starting from the 2000s, Besson has been working mainly as a producer and much less as a director of his own films. In that sense, the Taxi series marks the take off of this shift in his career, as Besson decided to produce the first film of the series after Gaumont refused to fund the project (Pettersen, 2014: 44). Besson’s productions, however, do “not only retain elements of Besson’s directorial style, but also share a set of coherent stylistic traits”; hence the producer shows, even in a more limited manner, auteurial traits, especially since Besson seems to be involved in very different phases of production, having both “creative control and industrial leverage” (Gleich, 2012: 249). The elusive borders between director and producer Besson can be observed in the parallels between The Fifth Element (1997) and Taxi (Gérard Pirès,
Besson directed *The Fifth Element* immediately before the production of *Taxi*. In both films action through car chases and automobiles are a crucial part of the narrative, and there are similarities between the main characters of Korben Dallas (Bruce Willis) and Daniel Morales (Samy Naceri), both street-smart cab drivers.

The *Taxi* franchise has been rather successful in terms of ticket sales especially in France. While for the first film of the series *Taxi* the estimated number of admissions was 6,295,213 in France—which made the film one of the top 4 films of the year—*Taxi 2* (Gérard Krawczyk, 2000) had even better sales and reached over 10,000,000 tickets in the year of its premiere in France. Although there was a decrease in size, *Taxi 3* (Gérard Krawczyk, 2003) still reached a little over 6,000,000 spectators in France, while 4,500,000 tickets were sold for the fourth and last film of the series (*Taxi 4*, Gérard Krawczyk, 2007). In order to facilitate its distribution, *Taxi* was dubbed in English and promoted in England as, “Hollywood doesn’t make them like this anymore” (Mazdon 2001, 5). The US remake of *Taxi* featuring Queen Latifah as a speed-loving cab driver in New York (2004), also produced by Luc Besson, saw almost 6 million tickets sold, opening in around 3000 movie theaters in the US. As film scholar Joseph McGonagle notes, even though the third and fourth film of the series could not live up to the success of the second, the longevity of the series, along with the soundtrack and the computer game that came out of the franchise reveals its “sustained profitability” (forthcoming).

The series revolves around the odd friendship and adventures of the street-smart cab driver Daniel and the clumsy, naïve and relatable police detective Émilien (Frédéric Diefenthal). In each film of the series the Marseilles police department goes after an organized crime gang or an infamous criminal, often to be caught by plans devised by Daniel following several failures by the city police. The success of the
*Taxi* series can be explained by the mixing of transnational genres, including Hollywood buddy movie, French comedy, and action and crime genres. As an example of the blending of global and local, the second film has elements of both martial arts and *parkour*. At the center of the action is always Daniel’s car chases around Marseilles, in and out of traditional neighborhoods with narrow streets to highways surrounding the city. The centrality of the car stunts can be observed in the choice of Gerard Pirès as the director of the first film, since he had been working mainly as a director of advertisements, most notably of car ads, before he shot *Taxi* (Witt, 1999).

Automobile and car chase scenes have the potential to present the city as a non-distinct, unidentifiable space in passing. According to Baudrillard, “the automobile itself — this magnetized sphere which ends up creating an entire universe of tunnels, expressways, overpasses, on and off ramps by treating its mobile cockpit as a universal prototype — is only an immense metaphor of the same” (Baudrillard, 1991: 315). Along these lines, Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascarioli suggest that in films shot in Marseilles in the late 1980s and 1990s, the city becomes “a sort of ‘urban non-place,’ where the shapes are so fragmented and framed so indirectly that the story could be set anywhere”; this feeling is even further conveyed in *Taxi* “which is set in an even more unrecognizable, postmodern Marseilles” (Mazierska and Rascarioli, 2003: 76). In his review of the film, Witt also suggests that in *Taxi*, “Marseilles is shot to look like San Francisco circa *Bullitt* (1968), local colour reduced to the glimpses caught beyond the rapidly disappearing asphalt” (Witt, 1999).

I suggest however, that these “glimpses” of the city’s iconic landmarks and mobility along the “disappearing asphalt” do not just present an “unrecognizable” city, they rather show the desire to portray the transformation of Marseilles into the
“universal prototype.” The car chases show Marseilles as on its way to becoming the clean, mobile, global, post-industrial city now open to the world’s gaze and as a location for transnational genre film with snapshots of iconic sites reminiscent of touristic sightseeing photos. In the end, an important goal of the Euroméditerrannée renovation project in Marseilles has been to provide proper national and global connectivity to the city by altering its visibility through the re-routing of highway exits away from the underprivileged neighborhoods through the construction of tunnels. Hence, the official goal has been, à la Baudrillard: “creating an entire universe of tunnels, expressways, overpasses, on and off ramps” within Marseilles.

Insert Figure 1. Taxi 1, Daniel driving his motorcycle past the city’s iconic sites along the Euroméditerranée renovation zone (Courtesy of TF1 Production and ARP)

The first film of the series opens with upbeat music followed by the main character Daniel driving his pizza delivery motorcycle in haste. As he speeds through the city streets, Daniel passes the city’s iconic landmarks such as Fort Saint Jean and the Cathédrale de la Major in the harbor area (Figure 1). His motorcycle moves towards the Euroméditerranée area destined for renovation, representing the neighborhood’s up-and-coming economic dynamism and change. Daniel ends his ride with yet another record timing and he himself is moving upscale, going from two wheels to four wheels on his white Peugeot 406 specially altered for more speed and flexibility. Daniel’s upscale move from one service industry to another (a better one as he is self-employed) is celebrated with motorcycle stunts.

In all four films, Marseilles is portrayed as on its way up with sanitized streets and docks and clean roads that enable Daniel’s car to move smoothly and faster than
even the high-speed train. The analogy between Daniel’s taxi and the high-speed train, which is often voiced in the film, is telling considering that at the time the TGV was being built to connect Marseilles to Paris. It is no surprise that in the first film of the series, the German gang that rob several Marseillaise banks (depicting the desire of the city to become a global financial attraction) is trapped by Daniel on top of an unfinished highway bridge, a construction site that will give a new mobility and accessibility to Marseilles (Figure 2). The national connectivity of Marseilles is already established in the second and third film of the series, as the characters find themselves parachuted to Paris and they drive all the way to the Alps in record timing.

Insert Figure 2. Taxi 1, The German gang trapped in a road construction by Daniel’s cunning plan (Courtesy of TF1 Production and ARP)

Ackbar Abbas (2003), in his article titled “Cinema, The City and The Cinematic” discusses Ang Lee’s Wo hu cang long (Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, 2000) and suggests that the film, with all its technical sophistication and computer enhancements that are used to render the characters’ bodies gracefully weightless, creates a world of light and malleable cyberspace. Hence, Abbas claims that there is a certain parallel between Ang Lee’s film and the government’s efforts to make Hong Kong “a global city through projects like the new cyberport and the development of information technology (IT): Hong Kong, too wants to be a crouching tiger” (2003: 153). Similarly, the Taxi series represents Marseilles as a global, malleable and flexible city that can transform its look in a couple of seconds—just as Daniel’s car does—and accelerate to catch up with other European cities in a rush towards being the investment and tourist attraction. Daniel’s car often travels around the Old Port
and scenic Le Panier district towards the highway and the airport—going from local to national and transnational. In the credits of the series, Marseilles’s Board of Commerce and Industry is the first organization that the producers thank, which shows how the film series’ depiction of Marseilles aligns with that of the official desire to present it as an upcoming global capital of finance and tourism. Moreover, in order to promote the idea of a cool, alternative, and counter-culture city, these films turn decrepit spaces, old harbors and factories into places of organized crime yet full of action and visual attraction.

In the second film of the series, the chief of police tests his officers by asking them if they know why the Japanese defense minister would visit Marseilles. They come up with answers that define Marseilles as a “glocal” tourist attraction: the climate, the food, touristic sites such as Château d’If, pastis, and the football team Olympique de Marseille. In fact the Japanese minister of defense comes to the city to visit an anti-gang training base—with the promise of a global collaborative against crime—only to be kidnapped by the anti-globalist conservative Japanese mafia. As the film series feeds into the conception of crime-ridden yet alternative Marseilles, it simultaneously suggests that Marseilles is on its way to becoming a safer town thanks to the collaboration of the police (represented by Émilien) and the public (portrayed by Daniel). In any case, the origin of crime is always elsewhere. In the first, third and fourth film, the Marseillaise police chase German, Chinese and Belgian gangs who are organizing heists in the banks of Marseilles, suggesting that the city is an attractive financial center of Europe. While the city is at the center of transnational action and corruption, the source of crime is always imported to Marseilles and the city takes the role of providing order, clumsily but surely.
Witt explains that the general “police ineptitude” in the series is a “youth-friendly cliché.” In the Taxi series, it is almost always thanks to Daniel’s schemes that the problems are resolved and the criminals are caught. As Daniel moves from the inner city towards the freeway, the police radars find it difficult to catch him. Meanwhile, the film’s other main character, the clumsy police officer Émilien, tries hard and barely succeeds in getting his driver’s license after taking the test more than a dozen times. The police represent immobility and stagnancy, often displayed through police cars colliding and blocking each other during the car chase scenes. Throughout the series the police are given a non-threatening portrayal, although they are omnipresent.

Research conducted in cities in Europe (Bernd and Helms study on Glasgow and Essen, 2003) and in the US (Sharp’s work that covers 180 cities in the US, 2013) shows that in entrepreneurial post-industrial cities, the rise of a creative tourist economy comes with the heightening of the maintenance of order and the introduction of zero-tolerance policing. Since the beginning of 2013, the year of the European City of Culture, policing and tracking technologies in Marseilles have been improved by a mushrooming of surveillance cameras and the use of personal digital assistants to track minor offenses and infringements electronically. The Deputy Major responsible for public security and prevention of delinquency introduced the new era of heightened surveillance as follows: “the time for prevention has past. We follow a proactive policy of zero tolerance” (La ville de Marseille, 2014b). In the Taxi series, despite comical failures, the police take center stage in crime prevention, at times in collaboration with the army, the police in other parts of France, the local population (Daniel and in Taxi 1 for instance, his friends who deliver pizzas) and international intelligence (Japanese secret police in Taxi 2). Even though the films treat their
leading role in the lightest possible manner, the overwhelming presence of security forces in the series aligns with the post-industrial neo-liberal cityscape of Marseilles.

In order to lighten the omnipresence of police in the Taxi series, the protagonist Émilien is depicted not only as clumsy and clueless, but also as seeming to have chosen to become a police officer unwillingly due to his father’s early death and economic need. In the first film Daniel and Émilien pull an all-nighter, talking about their past, obligatory career choices and how they were forced into jobs they did not want mainly due to their working class backgrounds. Their bond strengthens as they discover that they attended the same high school before life parted them onto different paths: Émilien to law enforcement, and Daniel to pizza delivery, cab driving and traffic offenses due to his passion for speed.

What brings the two protagonists together against international criminals is proposed to be a common class background, as the ethnicity of Daniel played by the famous French actor of Algerian origin is effaced. For Witt (1999) the film’s “principal significance lies less in any intrinsic artistic quality than in the French public’s acceptance of a young non-white French actor, Samy Naceri, in the lead role of a major box-office hit.” It is true that the Taxi series represents the beginning of an era in which ethnicity and the multicultural texture of French society is much more present in popular French films, therefore showing that minorities are no longer marginalized in French cinema. However, as Alec Hargreaves notes in the Taxi series and many other popular movies of the late 1990s and early 2000s—such as La vérité si je mens! (Thomas Gilou, 1997) and its sequel, La vérité si je mens 2 (Thomas Gilou, 2001), Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) and Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre (Alain Chabat, 2002)—although ethnicity is not marginalized, it is integrated and normalized in such a way that “the ethnicity of
minority ethnic actors is blurred over or elided altogether” (Hargreaves, 2005: 213). The scholar points out that Samy Naceri’s ethnicity is well-known to the audience and is raised in the series through his costumes, such as the famous Marseillaise football player Zinedine Zidane’s number ten soccer shirt, “which could be interpreted as a nod towards the shared Algerian ancestry” (Hargreaves, 2003: 152). The series, however, “hint[s] at the ethnic diversity present in France while at the same time de-problematizing that diversity, suggesting that it can be simply if not indeed magically transformed into an inclusive Frenchness” (2003: 152). Even Daniel Morales’s name suggests an Italian or Spanish origin, ethnic origins that are often celebrated in their contribution to Marseillaise culture and that do not pose the same post-colonial and historically tense connotations as an Algerian origin. McGonagle similarly argues that “the casting of Naceri seemingly symbolizes France’s, and here especially Marseilles’s ethnic diversity but…the character he plays appears to be a rare exception to a vision of Marseilles where whiteness is the unspoken ethnic and cultural norm” (forthcoming). As McGonagle observes, the ethnicity in the film is either completely effaced and whitewashed (in scenes such as the Sunday lunch when Daniel listens to his army commander future father in-law’s past exploits as an officer in Algeria with much respect and interest in Taxi 2), or highly visible in the form of clichés (such as the black police officer Alain’s pot smoking and listening to reggae); hence, it “remains unrepresentative of Marseillaise society” (forthcoming). Adding to these clichés, the third film of the series presents a highly eroticized Chinese-Swiss femme fatale, while the fourth film represents ethnicity in one of its rarely acceptable forms in France: by featuring the famous Ivoirian-French football player Djibril Cissé.
Not all genre films representing Marseilles evade or whitewash its local multiculturalism. Other action/crime/thrillers set in the city such as *Total Khéops* (2002, Alain Bévérini, based on Jean-Claude Izzo’s novel) shows the brotherhood of three minorities and how one of them has to struggle with organized crime in Marseille to avenge the other two. Also, in *L’Immortel* (22 Bullets, Richard Berry, 2010), another EuropaCorp production, a retired mafia (Charly Mattei, played by Jean Reno) who survives 22 bullets after an assassination attempt is drawn into a fight with a mafia boss even though all he wants is a peaceful life with his family. The film opens and ends with family scenes in with sun-filled Marseillaise houses or beaches and brings together the sense of community along with action-filled crime thriller.

The multicultural community spirit is revered with stereotypical symbols throughout the film such as the star of David representing a Jewish police officer, Italian opera that tranquilizes the repenting Mattei, North African family meals and lavish marriage ceremonies. The film shows Marseilles as cosmopolitan, and increasingly hospitable and secure as the elements of violence are being eliminated and Italian (white) heritage dominates with its protective guardianship. Hence, when Marseillaise diversity is represented in action/crime/thriller genres, it either works through stereotypes, is associated with conflict and violence, or diversity is represented in a way in which white-ness dominates in a paternalistic manner.

An antidote to such representation of diversity in Marseilles is Karim Dridi’s *Bye-Bye* (1995) shot a couple of years before the first film of the *Taxi* series. Dridi draws a more multicultural picture of community, and Marseilles is defined as a zone of transition between Africa and Europe. The film begins with the arrival of two brothers, Ismael and Mouloud, from Paris to Marseilles and ends with their departure toward an unknown distant horizon in the south, possibly to Spain. Similar to *Marius*
et Jeannette Dridi’s characters are the underclass of Marseilles and the city is represented as an industrial and working class city with a great ethnic multiplicity—portrayed through the friendship between the main character Ismael and Jacky who both work in the docks and with scenes such as an interracial wedding party. Dridi is far from idealizing interethnic relations though, since both the blanc-beur friendship and the wedding party is spoiled partly by the intervention of a racist group of dockworkers. The city is portrayed as a diverse place of passage, with a rich local underclass diversity that is at times conflictual other times harmonious, cosmopolitan with advantages and drawbacks.

In comparison with Bye-Bye race dynamics in the Taxi series promote an asepticized version of a multicultural city. Marseilles has often been considered as a foreign city due to its high number of residents of migrant backgrounds: “The city was cited as being ‘first Arabic city on the Paris-Dakar road race’, the largest Comorian city in the world, the largest Armenian city” (Bullen, 2010: 76) and “for most of the 20th century, Marseilles was ill-thought of in France because of its ‘mêlissage’, its ethno-cultural mixing” (Dell’Umbria: 9). Recently, however, its blending of Mediterranean identities has been celebrated and its multicultural texture has been advocated as a pitching point in the bidding process for the City of Culture application. Once the project had been set in motion after the bid, however, the imagined ethnic mixing distilled the city’s foreignness into a rather sterile kind of multiculturalism that can be easily marketed. The idea of a city’s foreignness is appropriated and domesticated into a Euro-Mediterranean identity in the cultural productions and the architecture of the capital of culture. The local cosmopolitan texture of the city as well as lower class identities and demands were put aside, by emphasizing “professionalism” and “high quality” artistic productions over
supporting and showcasing the multicultural diversity of the local cultural producers, works and identities (Bullen 2010: 136). Such effacing of the city’s local ethnic diversity is once again foreboded in the representation, or rather the absence of representation, of ethnicity in Marseilles in the *Taxi* series.

**Conclusion**

In Marseilles the urban renovation process happens against a backdrop of economic precarity, securitization, and gentrification that especially impacts its underclass and ethnically diverse populations. Behind the ideal of colorful Mediterranean Marseilles as a global capital there is a crisis in the promotion of its ethnic diversity. The *Taxi* series foreshadowed this representation of limited Marseillaise diversity in its depiction of a transnational capital of crime—an attraction for crime tourism with heists organized by German or Belgian gangs and operations of the Japanese and Chinese mafia. These urgencies and crisis situations (always imported from abroad) bring together police officer Émilien and taxi driver Daniel Morales, a French-Algerian actor whose ethnicity remains a “taboo” in the film. This is not to say that Naceri needs to play his minority ethnicity; yet opting for clichés (such as reggae music booming from black police officer Alain’s car, erotic plays by a Chinese-Swiss femme fatale, or the transferring of Djibril Cissé to Olympique de Marseille) in films shot in Marseilles reveals how the diverse make-up of the city is effaced for a distilled form of ethnic diversity. Marseilles is portrayed as on its way to being the global post-industrial tourist attraction with sanitized streets that enable national and global connectivity. It is portrayed as a secure space thanks to the collaboration between the local population and the police in the spirit of community,
with its “cool”, shady, and thrilling docks and derelict ports as film locations that prefigure their transformation into cultural events spaces.

The Taxi series has put Marseilles on the international map of genre film locations and has opened it up for the spectators as a world city by blending easy mobility with a whitewashed sense of community while the urban renovation efforts were only beginning to take shape. These action films insightfully reflect the urgency felt by the French government and Marseillaise commerce to formulate the city as part of a flexible neoliberal urban space and to refashion an already always diverse city into a site of safe and “white” Euro-Mediterranean town. Focusing on such sensibilities of these films allows one to get a richer sense of the privileged forms of mobility and the fractures in the French imagination of diversity in the urban space. Besson productions capture the path of transformation which the groups that shape the image of post-industrial Marseilles aspire for: a city that moves from film to film-related investment location, from visual to financial attraction; a secure global center of finance and tourism with a domesticated form of ethnic diversity.

1 The French figures are taken from the Lumière database (http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/search/) and Meunier and Gordon 2001, 28.

2 The US figure is taken from Boxoffice Mojo (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/).

3 I am grateful to Joseph McGonagle for sharing with me a chapter of his manuscript before it is published.

4 With the creation of Centre de Supervision Urbain the municipal website proudly announces the installment of 1000 CCTV cameras around the city for 24/7 surveillance which required a 12 million euro investment (La ville de Marseille, 2014c).
Hargreaves gives examples.

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