

*La Petite Jérusalem*. Written and directed by Karin Albou. France: Gloria Films, 2005.

Reviewed by Nahrain Al-Mousawi, Los Angeles, CA, USA

*La Petite Jérusalem: The Subject of Universal Humanism “In Pieces, As It Is”*

A film *de banlieue*, a film inspired by the French suburban housing projects in which the poor, working class, and émigrés have lived together for a long time, Karin Albou's *La Petite Jérusalem* focuses on a young Orthodox Jewish woman living in the suburb of Sarcelles, a product of the low-income housing plans devised to absorb the influx of Jewish immigrants in the 1960s. Albou positions the protagonist, Laura, at the crossroads of a variety of conflicts and oppositions related to her duties toward her philosophical ethics and those toward her Jewish upbringing. The diverging routes that Laura confronts range from her loyalty to her Kantian universal humanism and the laws of Judaism imposed by her family, to her desire to strictly remain a thinking subject by quelling her sexual desires (in an attempt to emulate Kant's asceticism), to the “pre-modern” communal and domestic spaces where she functions as a “practicing,” religious subject and the “modern” spaces of the *banlieue*, Paris, and the university where she functions as a “thinking” subject. The term “pre-modern” applies to Albou's intensely focused, detailed portrayal of Jewish practice and ritual and the closed spaces in which they are filmed as nearly myopic in its elision of the contemporary world around them. The term “modern” captures the industrialized and mechanized spaces of the city as sites for the walking and thinking subject to which Laura's Kantian leanings compel her to aspire. Although Albou locates Laura at the threshold of oppositional routes and gestures toward the destructiveness of the “pull” of these oppositions, proleptically signaling her fractured subjectivity in the beginning of the film by shooting fragments of her body, Albou ultimately renders these oppositions untenable.

In a deconstructivist mode, she undermines these binaries by demonstrating how one route of “antithesis secretly inheres within the other” (Eagleton 1996, 115). The pull of these divergent duties is doubtlessly portrayed as destructive for Laura as she tries to accommodate submission to the laws of Judaism that her family establishes and battles with them in order to continue the interrogation of “truth” (as opposed to the unquestioning faith associated with religion) that her commitment to her philosophical studies requires. However, as much as Albou sets up these oppositions, she also ultimately insists not only that they do not hold, but that aspects of one opposition inhere in the other. For example, although Albou appears to privilege the Kantian universal humanism that Laura studies and seemingly attempts to practice outside of the university, she ends up undermining its precepts of equality and hospitality. In doing so, she renders the concept of the full, authentic, humanist subject and its discourse inoperable in Laura's contemporary France.

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Albou shows the modern sites of the city and its university as idealized “open,” discursive, and heterogeneous displays of universal humanism: an ideal universalist model of multicultural peaceful coexistence is displayed by those who share the trains and buses with Laura. Significantly, although Albou creates this scene of peaceful multiculturalism, it is more tolerant and passive than relational. “Open” and equal dialogue is encouraged by Laura’s professor in the classroom. Even Laura’s quelled desire is overcome by an inclusive temptation for the Muslim “other” when she pursues a relationship with Djamel, another inhabitant of the *banlieue*.

In opposition to the “open” systems of modernity where the universal humanistic impulse of multiculturalism, free academic exchange, and equal and inclusive desire are featured, Judaism represents the “closed” system of pre-modernity where discourse, interrogation, and intellectual pursuits are discouraged or disrupted. For example, Laura’s sister, Mathilde, explains that philosophers try to hit the target of “truth,” conveyed by “Hashem,” but always miss: while the “truth” of God is static, permanent, unchanging, eternal, philosophy for the more religious Mathilde represents the excess of futile activity to a point that falls short of sport and merely functions as leisure—it is too inept, too unpracticed, too unsteady in its wavering impermanence to “hit the mark.” Moreover, representation of Jewish practice and ritual and the closed spaces in which they are filmed lack a “coevalness” that closes off the modern world around them. The home that Laura shares with her mother, sister, brother-in-law, and four nieces and nephews is where Jewish practice, even when festive, is often filmed in claustrophobic, dark, cave-like frames. Not only is the Orthodox Jewish home portrayed as impermeable to light (except for scenes of Laura’s intellectual labor over Kantian texts of “Enlightenment,” which is always filmed with the curtains open to the natural light) but also to strangers, non-familial outsiders, with the exception of the young man sought after by the mother to marry Laura and to enter the family. The generic spaces of the city offer “open,” somewhat relational systems of discursiveness, multiculturalism, intellectual engagement that stand in direct opposition to the spaces marked by Judaism that set up a “closed” system of clannishness, exclusivity, and stasis.

Even though Albou appears intent on setting up an opposition between the universality of humanism and the particularity of Judaism, her shots of the spaces of the city are just as intent on deconstructing them as binaries. Albou’s frame crosses from overhead shots of a city, rendered nearly universal in its anonymity from an elevated position, to direct shots of the particular, multi-ethnic space of the *banlieue* (La Petite Jérusalem, the nickname of Sarcelles) and its streets embedded with the figures of Orthodox Jewish men, women in Muslim *hijab*, and Laura and her sister Mathilde in conservative Jewish dress. The frames of this urban space follow one another, and in their sequencing, suggest that the frame of the universal space is determined by, conditional upon, the particularity of the same space.

The cityscape, in its facelessness, assumes a universality that “elevates” it to the position of the urban center, the metropolis, and in the frame that follows on the ground is the peripheral territory of the *banlieue*. On one hand, in crossing from a frame of nearly a universal cityscape to a locally specific one, Albou reveals the pretenses of the vision of universalist space in its conditionality upon and constitution by the particularities of its

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European origin and history. On the other hand, the relation of these sequential frames, the elevated anonymous, universal cityscape and the local street-level shot of the periphery's émigré inhabitants, problematizes the notion of the elevated cosmopolitical ideal of universalism as rooted in European history. That is, in cutting from a panoramic shot of a universal, "faceless" urban landscape to one that focuses on the faces of France's émigrés, many of whom have arrived from its ex-colonies, Albou undercuts the relation of the space of universalism to European history by featuring France's faces of alterity. At this point, I would like to point to the identity of the "émigré" in France as one often marked by lineage rather than by an actual process of immigration, meaning that generations from immigrant backgrounds, who have been born and lived in France, are still identified as "émigrés." The faces of alterity include the protagonist Laura, her Jewish Orthodox sister, and the Muslim women in *hijab*. By this, I mean that the frames, in their relation to each other as the same space in the film, deconstruct the opposition between the universal cityscape and the *banlieue* below: the relation of universalism to European history been shaped and influenced by the colonial territories and the colonized. But, also, in the context of France, the contemporary dominant culture has absorbed the culture of the émigrés to the point that certain elements have become indistinguishable. This emphasizes the significance of the discourse of *cross-cultural exchange* as an implicit counterstance to the dominant discourse that highlights the asymmetry of assimilation of minority cultures by the hegemonic culture, recalling philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's reflection that American history would not exist without its African foundations. The top-to-bottom move, with no transitory shots in between, points to the discrepancy between the privileged, elevated "faceless" space of abstraction, of the idea of universalism, and the faces that are relegated far below to the corporeal and material reality "on the ground." In material terms, how would the city remain operating without the work, the services of those on the periphery? In this sense, the periphery has the capacity to materially deconstruct, undermine, and pull apart the city by leaving it inoperable without the labor of its inherent "other." The juxtaposition of these shots functions proleptically to address the formation of identity and the spaces to which it is relegated as a deconstruction of oppositions in *La Petite Jérusalem*.

Albou uses the same sites to create the binary of the openness and liberalism of the city and the closed enclosures and conservatism of Judaism as she does to collapse those binaries and to recast them as paradoxical but coexisting oppositions. Laura is captured as the only character in the film navigating the streets and modes of transit that characterize the spaces of her putatively divergent lives, her "practical" and "practicing" life in the *banlieue* and her "esoteric" life at the Parisian university. The "practical" and "practicing" converge in Laura's "Jewish" identity, which is portrayed as performative, rather than discursive or intellectual, as she is constantly absorbed in performing one religious ritual after another in the film. Albou's attempts to establish oppositions and then to unravel them, while suggesting they are actually inherent to each other, pertain to the portrayal of corporeality. Thinking is sensualized: Laura's professor comments on her paper that she writes as if she is trembling. The religious is rendered an object of sexual voyeurism: she prays in the nude. However, when it comes time to have sex with Djamel, the Muslim man, her body disappears into the presumable other. The self and the other

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are indistinguishable. Laura finds freedom in regimentation: she goes on a walk every evening at 7:00, as Kant did, yet she has a chance to escape the confines of her claustrophobic home and catch a glimpse of Djamel. She is bound to the schedules of the buses and trains she is shown to be constantly taking, but they allow her the agency of plodding determinedly from *banlieue* to the capital. Deconstruction of oppositions in the film leads to paradoxical coexistences in which regimentation is equated with freedom and agency, in which the self disappears into the other, and in which thinking is corporeal and sensual. Thus, the Kantian ascetic ramparts that Laura emulates in her daily walks in order to thwart a sense of her own sexuality are actually the open doors to lived desire.

Albou overdetermines the ritual aspects of Judaism to the point of relegating them strictly to the realm of the merely “practical,” that which is practiced, applied, rather than the realm of the intellectual, that with which Laura is allowed to engage discursively as she does with Kantian philosophy in the classroom. The constative dimension of Jewish laws precedes and forms its performative aspects, its rituals and practices, and so they are closed off to Laura’s intellectual curiosity because once formed, presumably, she can only submit to them. Mathilde further reinforces for Laura the impossibility of intellectual engagement with Jewish tradition by positing the target of “Hashem’s” truth as impenetrable to the critical weaponry (arrows) of philosophers. However, the film suggests that the “closed”-off target of an unchanging and impenetrable Judaism has already been opened up and ruptured by the processes of creolization. The Sephardic/Mizrahi Jewish identity has not only been open to transformation, as evident by the Maghrebian talismans that Laura’s mother uses, but also a form of creolization in which the fragments of languages that Laura’s family has adopted are woven together in a single conversation.

Obversely, Albou reveals that the city’s sites of idealized universal humanism reflect elements of the “closed” system of exclusivity and impenetrability with which she marks the spaces of Jewish identity. She does so in a manner evocative of the particularities inherent in Kant’s own work on the universal ideal of hospitality. In “Perpetual Peace” (1991 [1795]), one of the key records on the cosmopolitan ideal, Kant defines “universal hospitality” as a geopolitical system constituted by obligation and limits:

... hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory ... He may only claim a right of resort for all men are entitled to present themselves in the society of others by virtue of their right to communal possession of the earth’s surface ... The community of man is divided by uninhabitable parts of the earth’s surface such as oceans and deserts, but even then, the ship or the camel (the ship of the desert) make it possible for them to approach their fellows over these ownerless tracts, and to utilise as a means of social intercourse that right to the earth’s surface which the human race shares in common. The inhospitable behaviour of coastal dwellers ... is contrary to natural right. But this natural right of hospitality, i.e. the right of strangers, does not extend beyond those conditions which make it possible for them to attempt to enter into relations

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with the native inhabitants. (Kant 1991 [1795], 105-106)

In this discourse, the “communal” right to territory, the “earth’s surface” transforms into the “natural right of hospitality,” which works to naturalize hospitality, with its spatial and temporal obligations and limits intact. The particularity of this construction of “universal hospitality” resides in Kant’s consciousness toward its nationally specific lineage that is the concept’s indebtedness to agreements between particular nations.

Most importantly, the temporal limits and obligations inherent in Kant’s notion of universal hospitality are ironically realized in the film’s idealizing scenes of France’s tolerant and harmonious multiculturalism. For instance, the trains and buses, which Laura takes to school and back, are crowded with presumably immigrant workers (or those from an immigrant background) from the surrounding peripheries as they are projected to and from the center of Paris. But it is clear that they are mobilized according to the regulating, regimenting rhythms established by a spatial and temporal conditionality: the workers are absorbed into the center to work and fulfill the needs of the capital, *on the condition* that they return to the peripheries at the end of the workday. That is, the sites of “universal hospitality” are open until it is time to close.

James Clifford’s statement “We are all Caribbeans in our urban archipelagos” has been taken as testimony to the Caribbean’s exemplary privileging of the cross-cultural and the process of creolization. The statement resonates with Albou’s deconstruction of the oppositions that mark her film. The contradiction between the segregating spaces of the city, as conveyed by the fragments or clusters of “urban archipelagos,” as well as the identities they occupy, and the processes of creolization as a process of weaving those fragments is realized in Albou’s cross-signification of themes and imagery, allowing a set to inhere, to build in the other.

At the end of the film, through Albou’s deconstruction of the oppositional stances that she sets before Laura, Laura ends up both deconstructed and deconstructing. Her deconstruction is reinforced by her newfound rootlessness, once her family decides to set off to Israel. Laura’s profile is shot in motion being carried through a train station by a moving walkway. She turns her face away from us. Her face resists “full” exposure to the audience as though resisting the full or fully conveyed subjectivity of the universal humanist subject. She is being transported horizontally (rather than on an incline), suggesting two things: First, the horizontal movement is the antithesis of, a resistance to, the juxtapositions of the top-to-down movement of Albou’s shots of the city and then Laura below in the initial shots of the film. Albou reveals that Laura, she who is produced by humanist ideology, resists the lens that attempts to capture the ontology of her narrative (thus, she moves horizontally rather than on an incline) and also resists the portrayal of the full humanist subject (her image is left fragmented at the end). Albou recuperates Laura’s rootlessness and fractured subjectivity as the agency of resistance to the producer of her own imagery, her story, as though she is capable of deconstructing the rendering of her own image. Second, although it is clear that she has the choice to walk or be transported, she chooses to simply stand and be carried, rather than impose upon herself the regiment of walking as an activity to erect “ramparts” against desire, both abandoning the humanist lived maxims of Kant and rejecting his forced binaries of

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corporeal and desiring subjectivity versus a thinking subjectivity. Submitting to the architectonics of the city, she is silent, free from discourse, rather than plodding determinedly through the city's streets as she had throughout the film. Laura's free-floating profile emphasizes not only her rootlessness but her fragmented figure. Unfocused on anything, anyone, any object on the horizon, Laura emerges a fractured and fragmented subjectivity, "in pieces, as it is" (to use Edward Said's concept of telling one's story as fragmentary, open, dynamic). But in the recuperative framework of Albou's paradoxical coexistences, her fragmentation reveals her as a product of resistance and agency to the producer of her imagery, her narrative—Albou herself.

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