

**“Une histoire de décollage.” The Art of Intercultural Identity and Sensitivity  
in *L’Auberge espagnole*.**

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*...la mondialisation n’a pas que du mauvais. On voyage, on prend l’avion, la culture africaine ou américaine est présente en France, la culture française ou africaine est présente aux Etats-Unis. Tout circule. Quand on parle de mondialisation, on ne parle que du capitalisme, qui fait que les marchandises circulent plus que les cultures et les hommes. C’est cette tendance qu’il faut inverser.*

Cédric Klapisch, *Cinéma*

In *L’Auberge espagnole* (2002), award winning director Cédric Klapisch continues his innovative cinematographic examination of identity, exploring the tensions between old and new, self and other, and the challenges and delights of change and transition –this time in an international and Franco-Iberian context. Nominated for the César award for best film and best director, *L’Auberge Espagnole* has enjoyed both national and international success. Narrated as a first person flashback, the film recounts the Spanish study abroad experience of its French protagonist, Xavier, convincingly portrayed by Romain Duris, as he explores and experiences culture, language, sexual identity, and self-exploration. While Klapisch presents Xavier’s yearlong stay in contemporary Barcelona as a lighthearted Bildungsroman, the city, and its culture and art, combine with Xavier’s experience to construct a metaphor that explores the divided and diverse identities of Europe, a Europe in the process of transforming itself into a more complicated entity that presupposes an examination of cultural and self-identity. Much as Klapisch’s 1996 film, *Chacun cherche son chat*, explores the themes of “transition,” “connections with others,” and “tension between old and new,” in a Parisian context, *L’Auberge espagnole*, presents a protagonist who must journey, both literally and figuratively, outside of home, country, and self to ultimately achieve self-love, understanding, and acceptance (Lucia 10-

11). In *L'Auberge espagnole*, however, intercultural/international encounters, art, and the individual experience of globalization are portrayed as a central part of this journey.

The international/intercultural context is established from the opening moments of the film. The French credits appear over a background of fragmented, cubist like images flashing rapidly across the screen. The different sized squares, each containing scenes from the film, are interspersed with momentary images of various European national flags, which flash to the rhythm of a contemporary Spanish pop song. These opening credits serve as an example of how the film's postmodern montage effectively portrays the changing pace of life in the new Europe. Throughout the film, the fast forward sequences, ellipses, and use of media suggest not only the splintering of contemporary life, but also reflect the fragmentation of self within this society. The present study examines the film's construction of identities in this intercultural European context, exploring how Klapisch unites form with content to present intercultural relations, and personal reflections about them, as a significant component in the journey to self-love and acceptance.

Klapisch has noted that the film's intercultural/international setting and theme, as well as its title, were inspired by several personal experiences: his own as a French film student in New York and that of his sister and a friend, both of whom studied in Barcelona through the ERASMUS program (Interview, *Synopsis*). In an interview with *Ecran Noir* for example, Klapisch explains how he was inspired by visiting his sister in Barcelona during her participation in the program: "Je suis allé lui rendre visite durant une semaine et ce que j'ai vu m'a non seulement séduit mais fait rigoler. Elle vivait au milieu de six personnes de sa génération, de nationalité différente. Devant la multiplicité des langues, des nationalités, j'avais surnommé cet endroit charmant *L'Auberge espagnole*" (*Ecran Noir*). While Klapisch's cinematic rendering of cultural and linguistic multiplicity is indeed both charming and seductive, it also reflects contemporary theories of personal development and intercultural sensitivity. *L'Auberge espagnole* goes beyond a simplistic, humorous presentation of cultural mélanges to offer thoughtful reflection about the relationship between intercultural interaction and self-acceptance. At the same time, Klapisch's *auberge* suggests a metonymic representation of national and intercultural identities of the "new" Europe. The ERASMUS program—The European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students—thus serves as the perfect

plot device for Klapisch to explore the challenges and rewards of intercultural connections and interactions.

Named after the great XVI century philosopher and humanist, the ERASMUS program reflects the scholar's commitment to tolerance, the unity of European culture, and his passion for travel. It has been growing in popularity since its creation in 1987. In 2002, the year of the movie's release, nearly 115,500 European students studied abroad through Erasmus, as a matter of fact, approximately 19,000 of these students chose to study in Spain. When Europe embarked on the adventure of uniting its disparate economies, political systems and social constructs, the inherent challenges of bringing together different cultures might not initially have been the essential preoccupation of the early builders of the European community.

However, the creation of a study abroad program such as ERASMUS clearly indicates that by the mid 80s, the European Commission had faced one of the difficulties of unifying Europe and was searching for ways to bridge the many intercultural gaps that existed among the member nations. Providing an opportunity for young people and intellectuals to experience each other's culture seemed like the panacea. Interestingly, around the same time period, Milton Bennett, an expert in intercultural communication stated, "Intercultural sensitivity is not natural" (21). In other words, just bringing people from different cultures in contact with each other does not guarantee cultural sensitivity or understanding. Milton Bennett goes on to argue that in addition to exposure to different cultures, people need to be trained in intercultural sensitivity (21). Bennett proposes a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity describing people's reaction to cultural difference at various levels of development. His model, cited below, suggests six stages divided into three ethnocentric and three ethnorelative levels.

#### A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The Ethnocentric Stages	The Ethnorelative Stages
<b>I. Denial</b> A. Isolation B. Separation	<b>IV. Acceptance</b> A. Respect for Behavioral Difference B. Respect for Value Difference
<b>II. Defense</b> A. Denigration B. Superiority C. Reversal	<b>V. Adaptation</b> A. Empathy B. Pluralism
<b>III. Minimization</b> A. Physical Universalism B. Transcendent Universalism	<b>VI. Integration</b> A. Contextual Evaluation B. Constructive Marginality (29)

In *L'Auberge espagnole*, then, Klapisch sets up a laboratory experiment by dropping his protagonist Xavier in the test tube of Barcelona and, more specifically, in an apartment where he is in close contact with a number of differences, not only cultural but sexual. Interestingly, the characters that inhabit Klapisch's *auberge* illustrate different stages of ethnocentricity or ethnorelativity according to Bennett's scale. William (Kevin Bishop) for example, the young British boy, who visits his sister Wendy (Kelly Reilly) in the apartment, embodies, in a rather clichéd manner, the Denigration stage within the Defense level. This is the stage at which, when confronted with difference, the individual adopts negative stereotypes of the other as a defense mechanism. S/he is no longer able to deny the existence of difference and has to resort to denigration of what s/he considers threatening to her/his identity. This is clear in several scenes where William uses the most simplistic stereotypes to mock the cultural identities of the other residents of the *auberge*. In one such comic, yet poignant scene, William comments that the state of Tobias (Barnaby Metschurat) and Alessandro's (Federico D'Anna) room is not unlike their respective countries/cultures –the "Italian" side of the room is messy and cluttered, while the "German" side is neat and tidy. He goes on to suggest that order is inherently German, seriously offending Tobias by making a reference to Hitler, as exemplary of German orderliness.

In contrast, Tobias remains a self-confident yet silent witness of the many interculturally insensitive remarks and jokes that are bandied around in the apartment. He is less concerned about nationality than are his companions, as evidenced by his questions during Xavier's interview –Xavier has a sort of panel interview with his potential new roommates to see if he will be a fit for the "cool" living experience. In the interview scene, unlike Alessandro, who seems to object to adding yet one more national or cultural ingredient to the international casserole of the apartment, Tobias indicates through his choice of questions that he seeks to understand Xavier as a person, rather than a citizen of a particular country: "What are you studying?" "What do you expect your life to be in about five years?" Similarly, Tobias's reaction to William's highly offensive sense of humor demonstrates a higher degree of maturity or sensitivity. Rather than confront William's insulting behavior, he offers Wendy the opportunity to chastise William in her role as big sister. The cast of inhabitants and their various levels of sensitivity serve to foreground Xavier's evolution as a character and an interculturally sensitive narrator.

Xavier, as the most developed character in the story and the protagonist of the Bildungsroman, seems to progress through several of these levels at various points in the film. For instance, when he first sets off on this adventure, he is largely unaware that he will be encountering a different culture. He is pushed to study in Spain by others—his father and his father's friend, Jean Charles Perrin—for the very pragmatic reason that it will improve his opportunities, not to mention guarantee his getting a good job with the Ministère de l'Economie, des Finances et de l'Industrie. In fact during the meeting with Perrin, Xavier is portrayed as an immature, uncomfortable child trying to have an adult conversation. He stutters, loses his balance, and seems generally very uncomfortable. His inexperience is quite visible when, in response to Perrin's asking him whether he knows Spain, he mentions, rather shyly, that he has been to Ibiza—the Balearic Island that could be considered the Fort Lauderdale or Daytona Beach of Spain. At this moment, Xavier begins to develop what will be his main motivation for his departure: to escape his life, his mother, and his own unease in his chosen field of study: "Je n'étais pas sûr de moi-même mais en réfléchissant je me suis dit qu'il fallait vraiment que je parte." Indeed, Xavier seems lacking in any particular individual will or desire and simply lets himself be led into the experience, without reflection or awareness of what cross-cultural challenges he might encounter in a different country. In pure ethnocentric form, he simply does not consider the existence of cultural difference. Thus Bennett would classify him as being in the Denial stage—not necessarily at a negative level—but a rather naïve one where one's worldview does not even include the existence of cultural difference. Upon his arrival in Barcelona, Xavier is faced with "the other" when he meets his mother's friend, with whom he has been scheduled to stay until he finds permanent lodging. Faced with a difference that he cannot handle, he seeks familiarity and reaches out to the only French people he knows in the city—a young neurologist, Jean-Michel (Xavier de Guillebon) and his new wife Anne-Sophie (Judith Godrèche)—in spite of the fact that he had initially classified them, when he met them at the airport, as "exactly the kind of people he usually avoided." His continued naiveté is graphically illustrated in his early morning interactions with Jean-Michel where he stutters, hesitates, and seems generally uncomfortable. For example, the first morning of his stay at Jean-Michel and Anne-Sophie's apartment he is awakened by the noise of their having breakfast at the dining room table. In response to Jean-Michel's apologies he stutters: "Ah, ouais, ouais, ouais, non, non, mais y a aucun problème, hein."

Xavier responds in a similar manner when Jean-Michel asks him to escort his new wife around the city. His willingness to accommodate Jean-Michel's odd request further foregrounds this naiveté and echoes his earlier response: "JEAN-MICHEL. Je peux te demander de sortir Anne-So?" XAVIER. "Ah, ouais, oui, oui, non, non, y a aucun problème." In contrast to this initial self-portrayal as a socially, sexually, and interculturally inexperienced young man, by the end of the movie, Xavier is transformed into what Bennett would classify as an ethnorelative individual in the integration stage. The hallmark of this stage is the ability to pick and chose one's cultural identity from an array of choices according to the needs of each situation. One must have internalized the other set of values so completely that one can, in fact, decide to tackle a problem as a Spaniard as opposed to a French person for example. In the last frames of the movie, we hear Xavier's narrative voiceover describe himself, in a kind of mantra, by identifying with all the various people he encountered during his stay. As reel-like images of each character appear on the screen, Xavier remarks:

Je ne suis pas ça. Ni ça. Je ne suis plus ça. Ni ça. Ni ça. Ni ça. Et je suis tout ça. Et je suis lui, et lui, et lui, et lui, et lui aussi. . . Je suis elle, elle, elle, et elle aussi. Je suis français, espagnol, anglais, danois. . . Je suis comme l'Europe. Je suis tout ça. Je suis un vrai bordel.

In the process of telling the story, Xavier has adopted all the various characters and integrated them into his own identity.

Several encounters along the way help develop Xavier's sensitivity and tolerance of ambiguity. In fact, as he experiences this diversity, he recognizes a familiar messiness to the intercultural world that echoes this "messiness" within himself, when he reflects, during the interview: "Le bordel qui habitait là ressemblait totalement à celui qui m'habitait depuis toujours." This perceived chaos is very different from the chaos of bureaucracy and the web of busy highways that frustrated him before his departure from Paris. By the end of the film, it seems Xavier has become comfortable with, and accepted, the plurality and ambiguity not only of interculturalism but of self as well.

Instrumental in pushing Xavier to greater awareness is the city of Barcelona, specifically its harmony of multiple identities and its art. From his initial steps into the streets of the city, Xavier feels and predicts the transformation that he will live through in the coming year. Getting to know the city, becoming familiar with its street names, its buildings, and its art, will be a way for our protagonist to enter into this new culture, and to find and accept himself.

As the city opens up for him and loses its otherness, the culture reveals its regional complexity. An incident at the university with a professor, who would only lecture in Catalan, triggers a discussion regarding cultural identity and its layered intricacies. As a new Barcelonian friend of Xavier notes:

estamos hablando de identidades y no hay una única identidad válida. O sea, hay muchas identidades que son perfectamente compatibles. Se trata de respeto. Por ejemplo, yo tengo por lo menos dos identidades: la identidad gambiana que traigo conmigo mismo y la identidad catalana. Yo no creo que sea contradictorio combinar las dos identidades.

Through the Gambian's description of his multiple cultural identity, Xavier begins to understand not only the diversity within Spain but also the multiplicity of one's own cultural identity. According to all intercultural training experts, self-awareness is absolutely essential for successful intercultural encounters. Cataluña, with its weaving of regional, national, linguistic identities presents a model of a possible multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural Europe.

Later, Isabelle (Cécile de France), a Belgian economics student whom Xavier sponsors for *auberge* membership, pushes him further along the path of openness and sensitivity by revealing to him her lesbian sexual identity. In point of fact, Isabelle serves as a catalyst for several of the other characters to achieve greater awareness and acceptance—from Wendy's close-minded discomfort at Isabelle's physical proximity when the power goes out, to Alessandro's sophomoric surprise at seeing Isabelle kiss another woman during the farewell party.

The other members of the apartment, much like Wendy and Alessandro, are also on their way to the more ethnorelative side of the scale to a greater or lesser degree. Wendy herself,

animated by a daring desire to open up to new experiences, pursues a purely sexual interlude with a nameless American. However when her “true” identity, represented by her relationship with her British boyfriend, is threatened she is quick to reject the new in favor of the old. Wendy, not unlike most of her housemates, is able to acknowledge and accept cultural differences but not to the point of adopting any of these different worldviews. Xavier remains the hero of his own narrative as he is the furthest along the path of ethnorelativism and integration.

Indeed Xavier’s development as an intercultural/global citizen is not only a result of living in the intercultural microcosm of the *auberge*, but it is also shaped by, and evidenced in, his narrative reflections of that experience. Xavier’s trip to Spain and his metaphorical journey along the path of intercultural understanding, lead him not only to greater intercultural sensitivity but consequently, as one would expect, to a greater awareness and acceptance of self. Intercultural sensitivity is certainly not a natural behavior, as Bennett asserts, but learned, in some senses, “an art” which must be aspired to and cultivated. It requires reflection, self-assessment and critique, as well as knowledge and acceptance of self within an intercultural context. This is visible not only in the content of the film but also in its narrative form.

Klapisch’s cinematic composition expertly reinforces the notions of reflection and the learned “art” and informed perspective of intercultural sensitivity, thus uniting form with content to foreground, both literally and figuratively, the central themes of the film. The film is told in the form of a flashback –in fact the barrage of cubist-like images that opens the film is actually a visual summary of the novel Xavier is writing about his time in Barcelona. This is significant in so much as the positioning of Xavier as both author and protagonist reflects contemporary theories of identity development. Consequently, through his experience and his recounting of that experience (which is the film) he “perceives [his]self as an active agent, in charge of his prospective life narrative and ongoing development” (Hoare 26). Psycho-social identity development theorists have suggested that there is a “direct relationship between ‘cognitive prejudice’ and lower levels of identity development” (Hoare 27). Thus the more mature and self-assured Xavier becomes, the higher his level of intercultural sensitivity. He not only achieves integration, according to Bennett’s scale, but, in finding and accepting his identity as an intercultural being and a writer, he also achieves a greater level of autonomy and identity development according to the theories of E. H. Erikson. He is no longer being led by others’ direction –his father, his mother, Jean-Charles Perrin– rather he is “original in [his] plans of



action ... [he is] active and, in fact, activating (as well as being activated by) others instead of being made passive or being inactivated by exigencies. All this together makes the difference between [Xavier's] feeling (and acting) whole –or fragmented” (Erikson 92). This is exemplified in the aforementioned scene, in which he reflects –“je suis lui, je suis elle”– and also by his many references to the fact that as a child he had wanted to be a writer.

The art of Xavier's intercultural development is thus informed by and connected to a variety of other artistic concepts and impressions. Interestingly, critic Roberta Johnson's description of Carmen Laforet's *Nada* (the 1944 Spanish novel often categorized as a postwar feminine Bildungsroman, also set in Barcelona) provides a useful tool for describing and analyzing the multiple functions of art in *L'Auberge espagnole* and in describing their relationship to Xavier's development of personal, intercultural, and artistic sensibility. First, art “is an important part of the education and developing sensitivity of the protagonist, second it helps the protagonist recreate his experience and third, it is the final product of all these processes” (55). Xavier recounts and explores his growing awareness of the world and of self through his narrated memories, which are linked to a variety of different art forms including humor, language, writing, architecture and music. Thus, in Xavier's narrative and in the film “art and memory establish a symbiotic relationship. Art is memory and memory art” (Johnson 63). Xavier's art, i.e. the story, replete with astute interventions by Xavier the narrator, becomes a way of processing the remembered experience and is integral to Xavier's developing intercultural sensitivity.

An important component of Xavier's artistic product is the ability to see the humor in the cultural misunderstandings that occur in day-to-day life in the *auberge*. On one occasion, for example, Wendy answers the phone when Xavier's mother calls. As she does not speak French, Wendy must refer to the ingenious wall chart near the phone, find the French flag and the appropriate French phrase, in order to communicate –with dismal, yet comic French pronunciation– that Xavier is not at home. Xavier's mother asks if Xavier has gone to the “la fac,” which Wendy hears as “le fuck”. The comical representation of linguistic misunderstanding shown here can be contrasted with a later scene where the humor is based in a linguistic *mélange* instead of misunderstanding. An owner of a local bar, Juan, promises Xavier that if he studied less and spent more time with Spaniards in the bar, his Spanish would improve; and, as Xavier reflects, indeed it does: “Au bout de quelques mois, grâce à Juan, j'ai commencé à parler un

español de puta madre.” This narrative reflection demonstrates how Xavier-the-author is capable of laughing at Xavier-the-character while reflecting upon his experiences. Additionally it also points to Xavier’s development as a person and an artist.

Unlike the series of events that lead him to Barcelona, he has a stronger sense of self as he recounts his experience and is therefore able to comment on his changed perception and how he will translate (and even change) the most challenging intercultural experiences into art:

Voilà. Plus tard on aura habité cette ville. On aura marché dans ses rues. On aura été au bout des perspectives. On aura connu ses bâtiments. On aura vécu des histoires avec des gens. Quand on aura vécu dans cette ville, cette rue, on l’aura prise dix, vingt, mille fois. Au bout d’un moment tout ça vous appartient parce qu’on y a vécu. C’est ce qui allait m’arriver et je le savais pas encore. (...) Après, bien après, quand on est revenu à Paris toute galère est devenue une aventure extraordinaire. Il y a toujours ce truc idiot où les jours les pires d’un voyage, les expériences les plus ratées sont celles qu’on raconte le plus après aux autres.

These voiceovers are representative of the use of this cinematic recourse throughout the film and points to the authorial control of Xavier the narrator, thus contrasting his pre-Barcelona self with his post-Barcelona self. Xavier the narrator controls both the content and the pace of the narration and in recounting his experiences he critiques his own earlier failings and cultural misconceptions. His statements are often ironic and suggest a more mature cultural perspective. In describing the process of registering for ERASMUS, for example, we see several techniques that are frequent in Xavier’s story: fast forward narration and montage. We see Xavier in fast forward motion going from office to office in search of the appropriate documents.

When he finally reaches the right office, the woman behind the desk rattles off a list of the documents Xavier needs:

l’accord de votre directeur de recherche ici, l’accord et la signature de votre directeur de recherche là-bas. Il vous faut l’accord de l’université d’accueil, l’accord de cette

université. Votre carte de mutuelle d'étudiant, il faut que vous me la donniez. (...) le formulaire E111... un CV, une letter de motivation, l'intitulé de votre DEA.

With the mention of each document, it appears accompanied by a clicking sound until the screen is almost full. While extremely funny, this scene is significant on several formal and thematic levels, first the "clicking-computer sound" contrasted with what seems like interminable bureaucracy, marks a stark contrast between advancement and tradition (much like the same two paradoxical components of the New Europe) in addition, however it is also a means by which Xavier forms a visual scrapbook of his experience. Similarly, Xavier mentions that he is still uncertain about "that guy" Erasmus, when, ironically, in living the experience and writing the novel Xavier himself has become a writer and intercultural philosopher of sorts. Thus both Erasmus the writer and ERASMUS the program have become facets of Xavier's identity and have played no small role in his development of both intercultural and artistic sensibility. He too has become an author who must decide where the story begins and ends, and how to best reach his audience. His narrative authority is manifest in the voiceovers where he interrupts or changes the story. An important example of which occurs in the opening moments of the film when he states: "Tout a commencé là quand mon avion a décollé. Non! oh la la! C'est pas une histoire d'avion qui décolle. C'est pas une histoire de décollage. En fait, le début c'est plutôt comme ça."

Xavier's chronicle of his intellectual, artistic, intercultural, and sexual coming of age is replete with literary and artistic points of references that aide him in sorting out his identity and experience. These references demonstrate a successful mixture of traditional, modern, contemporary, and intercultural influences. For example the film's soundtrack includes both classical and contemporary music in a variety of styles and languages (often juxtaposed as in the opening scene), metaphorically reflecting the intercultural nature of the auberge.

Additionally the setting in Barcelona is not only important from the perspective of cultural identities but also of the role of art in these identities and in Xavier's narrative. Klapisch's cinematography captures some of the most striking monuments of Barcelona, which serve as a backdrop for the protagonist's exploration. It seems no coincidence that Xavier's adopted ERASMUS home was also home to three of Spain's most important modern artists: architect Antonio Gaudí, and painters Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí. The work and styles of

these three artists in particular are intimately related to the theme and style of Xavier's experience and artistic product. Much as Picasso and Dalí having lived in Gaudi's Barcelona must have experienced the effects of his work, so is Xavier's artistic product influenced by and reflects the rich artistic history of the city.

The great monuments of Antonio Gaudi, the Parque Güell, and the Sagrada Familia Temple serve as the setting for Xavier's sexual coming of age. Characterized by fluidity, lack of boundaries, experimentation and references to nature, Gaudi's work seems the perfect setting for Xavier's learning and practicing the art of lovemaking. Much like the auberge serves as a laboratory for Klapisch's examination of intercultural realities in Europe, Anne-Sophie serves in the practical application of Xavier's newly acquired erotic art learned under the tutelage of Isabelle. These sexual explorations are presented as impressionistic (artistic reference intended) moments out of time. It seems only fitting that these encounters be set against Gaudi's breathtaking architecture. Xavier much like the Surrealist-inspired "Gaudiphiliacs" discovers sensuality in/at Gaudi's work, "[f]or what [is] Gaudi but dreams in stone, soft architecture, the architecture of ecstasy" (Hughes 466). Similarly the frequent use of fragmentary montages, are not unlike Picasso's cubist style. Finally Xavier's dream sequences, and the recurring theme of the functions and facets of the brain allude to Xavier's psychological transformation and connect to the surrealist work of Dalí. Memory and dreams fuse in these onerous scenes, and become a way of processing the intercultural experience and transforming it into art.

Xavier's experience like his narrative art is neither linear nor facile. Towards the end of the film, he suffers an intercultural and identity crisis. After being dumped by his French girlfriend he spirals into a quasi depression, exacerbated by his guilt over his affair with Anne-Sophie and begins to have hallucinations, in which, ironically he encounters Erasmus. Fearing a major breakdown, he turns to Jean-Michel for treatment. It seems no coincidence that Jean-Michel's neurological expertise is in the study of the connection between memory and language. While undergoing the CT scan, Xavier relives in dreamlike manner the experiences that have led him to this moment in time. These images point to a threatened sense of self indicative of an ethnocentric regression as Bennett suggests: "The threat is to one's sense of reality and thus to one's identity, which at this point is a function of one cultural reality." (Bennett 35) This is best illustrated by Xavier imagining that he has lost his mother tongue. As Jean-Michel explained in one of their first meetings, a bilingual person suffering from amnesia tends to lose their second

language. Thus, it would seem Xavier's inversion of this phenomenon suggests fear of losing his "Frenchness," perhaps personified by his ex-girlfriend. In surviving this breakdown and recounting it as a "surreal artist," Xavier regains his mature self and finds his artistic voice. Ultimately, Xavier's intercultural experience and the art that surrounds it allow him to access, reconcile, and love his fragmented self. Like Maurois he is also an artist, who interprets and recounts his experience of self in this new intercultural Europe. "Il en est de la lecture comme des auberges espagnoles, on y trouve que ce qu'on y apporte." Much like the proverbial *Auberge espagnole* suggests, Xavier's ability as a writer was not acquired in the auberge but an inherent part of himself that he had yet to accept and assume.

By the end of the film, and in writing the novel, Xavier has reconciled his splintered, evolving selves to arrive at self-acceptance (perhaps this explains his writing in the nude). Xavier falls in love with the idea of the *auberge* (and all its flaws), which is not unlike his own experience of self. In this regard the messy cultural *mélange* of the *auberge* serves as a metaphor for the construction of self, within a larger, intercultural context. The film thus lives up to its title, offering to each inhabitant the opportunity to examine and enjoy his or her contribution amidst the others', much as the "new" Europe will ultimately create for each citizen an intercultural home to which each brings a multiple, yet coherent identity. Thus Xavier and his flatmates present a working model or workshop, which symbolically outlines the challenges and pleasures of the European Union.

On the surface, "L'Auberge espagnole" seems to be a light-hearted film that uses the clever comedic strategy of the apartment to present humorous cultural clichés. After all doesn't the protagonist end up exactly where he started? What this apparent circularity reveals, in fact, is the real growth of Xavier who, upon his return to Paris, chooses the life of a writer, that is, the one he had always dreamed of, over the secure job waiting for him at the Ministère. Thus Xavier the narrator contradicts his own introduction to the story in the last voiceover articulating that this is indeed a story about taking off:

Je peux enfin commencer à tout vous raconter. Tout a commencé là quand mon avion a décollé. Non, non, ce n'est pas une histoire d'avion qui décolle. Ce n'est pas une histoire de décollage. Après tout si. C'est une histoire de décollage. Tout a commencé là.

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