

Introduction

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On the heels of the international hit *La Haine* (*Hate*, Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995), France at the close of the millennium saw a spate of bold, self-styled ‘hood’ films set in suburban council estates that critics were prompt to name – justifiably so – ‘films de banlieue’ (Jousse 1995; Vincendeau 2000). Heralded by the groundbreaking yet overlooked *Le Thé au harem d’Archimède* (Mehdi Charef, 1985) and illustrated by such features as *Douce France* (Malik Chibane, 1995), *État des lieux* (Jean-François Richet, 1995) and *Wesh-wesh: qu’est-ce qui se passe?* (Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, 2001), the distinctively French subgenre showcased multi-ethnic youth whose daily struggles and frustrations are compounded by rampant unemployment, disenfranchisement and conflicts with authority and the institutions of the State. Invariably, action unfolds in and around the graffiti-laden housing blocks of pauperised *cités* whose peripheral status exacerbates the protagonists’ ambivalence toward the French capital, which attracts even as it excludes.

Highly mediated and culturally resonant, this trend in contemporary cinema reflective of a pluri-ethnic European democracy in transition has garnered well-deserved critical attention. The *film de banlieue* – which the English term ‘suburb film’ largely fails to render – has been singled out for its crucial role in unveiling how spatial relegation and territorial confinement correlate to minority ethnic status, and by extension to an existence defined by sharply compromised, if not foreclosed futures. For Carrie Tarr, approaching France’s ‘cinema of difference’ entails a coincidental ‘double focus’ on Maghrebi-descendent *beur* and white-authored banlieue films (2005: 7; 49); the ethno-cultural position of ‘in-betweenness’ experienced by the French-born children of North African immigrants mirrors the banlieue’s own intermediate spatial character and concomitant ‘placelessness’ (21). Emphasising for his part the ‘mainstreaming’ of Maghrebi-French cinema, as well as a burgeoning North African émigré film culture, Will Higbee attests to the continued purchase of the banlieue film on France’s screens into the second

decade of the new century. Even as directors seek to combat stereotype and to steer clear of caricature by moving ‘beyond the banlieue’ in critically self-aware fashion, they work within a recognisable set of themes, décors and social types that the trend-setting, independent films of the 1990s had put into wide circulation (Higbee 2013: 4; 17).

One unintended effect of the banlieue film’s enduring critical and popular acclaim, then, has been to hide from view a longer history of French cinema’s engagement with the suburban milieu and its diverse landscapes. It is the aim of this book to present that longer history to an Anglophone audience in all its depth, scope and complexity. In point of reality, the composite record of cinematic forays into the suburb, we argue, offers far more than a prehistory of the postcolonial banlieue film. The blighted council estate or *cité* is but one of many cultural forms to have imprinted the collective imaginary in France through stories told on the big screen, and not all suburban narratives hew to the parameters of social realism. In place of a narrowly defined ‘film de banlieue’, the fifteen chapters in this volume conjoin diachronic and synchronic perspectives to advocate for a layered, multifaceted understanding of banlieue cinema across various film genres, modes and ideological perspectives.

Indeed, from the medium’s inception at the turn of the twentieth century, filmmakers in France have looked beyond the city’s gates for inspiration and content. Screen representations of greater Paris in particular track the evolution of location shooting, extending from the single and multi-reel films of Pathé and Gaumont before World War I, to fiction features of the 1970s and 1980s shot in postmodern new towns. Across the century, the Paris region today known as Ile-de-France saw unprecedented growth as swaths of farmland, forests and brownfields were developed for industry, housing and infrastructure. In the suburbs, scriptwriters and directors found a vast reservoir of architectural forms, landscapes and human types – including the generic *banlieusard*, or suburbanite – through which to anchor their fictions and harness film’s unique potential to ‘record and reveal physical reality’, to recall the words of Siegfried Kracauer (1960: ix). From the villas and vacant lots of silent pre-war and wartime serials, to the bucolic riverside *guinguettes* featured in poetic realist works of the 1930s, and on to the shantytowns, motorways and outsized housing estates (*grands ensembles*) of the second post-war, the suburban milieu came to form a privileged site in the French cinematographic imaginary.

For the likes of Louis Feuillade, Julien Duvivier and Marcel Carné in the first half of the century, as for Georges Franju, Maurice Pialat and Alain Corneau in the second, the Parisian banlieue is, in its dramatic impact and symbolic weight, arguably on a par with Paris itself, and this despite a steep anti-suburban bias brought about by centuries of state centralisation. No less than the streets of the capital, which have always featured prominently in French films (and in critical studies about them: see Binh 2003 and Block 2011), the banlieue – shot on location or, more rarely, recreated in the studio – can impart an impression

of reality or unreality, novelty or ordinariness, danger or enjoyment. Whether they are made to appear as idyllic or menacing, expansive or claustrophobic, the spaces that filmmakers selectively frame and recompose on the editing table are plural by definition, and are integrated to each narrative so as to convey diverse 'structures of feeling', a term Raymond Williams used to designate the manner in which cultural production mediates the particulars of the lived historical world (1973: 1–8). The rhythms, topographies and evolving patterns of sociability peculiar to the banlieue have accordingly prompted directors to question the material conditions and constraints that determine the shape and colour of modern life.

How then to account for this heterogeneous filmic material, which reflects and reconfigures a no less heterogeneous social and topographical reality? *Screening the Paris Suburbs* makes no claim to exhaustiveness: Paris' outskirts have inspired, in part or in whole, well over one hundred features and shorts, far too many for this selective account to cover in full.¹ Our intent was to blend and to place into dialogue scholarly approaches that privilege, on the one hand, one or more works for the screen by a given director, and, on the other, transversal explorations of a genre (e.g. the crime film, the industrial documentary, the essay film) or a set of associated themes (mobility and freedom, community and class conflict, transgression and marginality, leisure and happiness, etc.). Collectively, these discussions of the ways in which film historically has registered and rendered meaningful the suburban habitat respond to the geocritical project described by Bertrand Westphal, one that 'probes the human spaces that the mimetic arts arrange through, and in, the text, the image, and cultural interactions related to them' (2011: 6). The fact that our chronological endpoint coincides with the emergence of the banlieue film as media phenomenon circa 1995 means furthermore that nearly all titles discussed were directed by the male professionals who for decades dominated the industry, setting high barriers to entry for female aspirants with a few remarkable exceptions, like Agnès Varda in her ironically titled *Le Bonheur* (1964) that turns around a suburban love triangle, and Dominique Cabrera, whose documentaries *Chronique d'une banlieue ordinaire* (1992) and *Une Poste à La Courneuve* (1994) highlight social conscience and the limits of local solidarity.

The opening Chapter 1 by urban historian Annie Fourcaut, 'On the origins of the banlieue film', frames the full historical span of our volume. In her overview, Fourcaut traces the development of working-class suburbia from the 1920s to the 1970s, pointing to the mythical, derelict 'Zone' outlying Paris's line of nineteenth-century fortifications as a creative social and spatial matrix from which subsequent film production would draw its types and themes, and highlighting the transformation of the industrialised, working-class 'black belt' of the inter-war into a politically active 'red belt' after World War II. Representational codes, Fourcaut argues, generally outlived the evolving material reality of greater Paris: well into the era of standardised, state-subsidised modern housing, filmmakers would continue to exploit stock images of suburban poverty and decrepitude

alongside the popular longings for escape or respite, even as they gestured toward the ethnically diverse, embattled world of the banlieue film to come.

The siting of early movie studios in and around the French capital had long-term consequences for the promotion of the suburban landscape as an object rich in visual interest and in narrative potential, observes Roland-François Lack whose focus in 'Lumière, Méliès, Pathé and Gaumont' (Chapter 2) lies on the forerunner years 1896 to 1920. Quick to capitalise on the diversity of views afforded by the half-urban, half-rural neighbourhoods outlying suburban studios at Vincennes, Montreuil and Joinville-le-Pont, directors of the silent era developed practices that, not without editing-room sleight of hand, creatively reconfigured actual topography to the ends of popular entertainment. Viewers of burlesque chase films and of crime serials proved largely indifferent to the precise real-world localisations of the streets, buildings and topographical features projected on screen; what mattered most to them, affirms Lack, was the rapport established between narrative form and mood, between a given character and a sense of place, as in the comic films of Max Linder and the serials of Louis Feuillade – works not coincidentally prized by the Surrealists, who themselves were fascinated by the ragged indeterminacy of the Paris outskirts.

Tropes of movement and passage in works of the 1920s and 1930s qualified suburbia as a locus of temporary release from the constraints of the modern metropolis as well as from a cumbersome rural past, explains Jean-Louis Pautrot in 'Roads, rivers, canals: spaces of freedom from Epstein to Vigo' (Chapter 3). In the suburb, with its manifold roads and waterways, world-weary individuals momentarily reinvent themselves, finding a means of escape if not of outright liberation. The 'transient space' par excellence of inter-war cinema, the suburb proves integral to the forgotten subgenre of the river film (*le film fluvial*), of which Jean Vigo's depression-era paean to sexual and social freedom, *L'Atalante* (1934), is one late example. Commenting on works by Jean Epstein, Jean Renoir and Marcel Carné, Pautrot highlights scenes in which movement – experienced, for instance, behind the wheel of a boat or motorcar – opens up the individual to phenomenological discovery and to psychological renegotiation of the sentiment of reality. Epstein's silent masterwork *La Glace à trois faces* (1927) affords an understanding of the 'accelerating transformation of the world' in which the suburb is not simply a place one escapes to, but a place inescapably touched by death.

In his broad assessment of popular comedies and dramas of the 1930s (Chapter 4), Keith Reader suggests that the banlieue of inter-war sound cinema is as much an 'imagined community [...] as one localisable on a map'. Its dual function as space of socio-economic relegation on the one hand, and as space of leisure and entertainment (song, dance) on the other, recalls a specifically Parisian social geography opposing an affluent, verdant west to the poorer industrial northeast. Examining Marcel Carné's tale of proletarian downfall *Le Jour se lève*, Anatole Litvak's murder mystery *Cœur de Lilas* and Jean Renoir's more genteel *Partie de*

campagne, among other features that seduced audiences of the day, Reader underscores the tensions characteristic of suburban popular sociability separating work and play, poverty and riches, redemption and despoilment.

The ‘progress’ of industry notwithstanding, idyllic or pastoral representations of the suburban milieu remained common across the 1930s, with the waterside *guinguette* as a leading topos. Yet escaping from the city to idealised sites of leisure was only temporary and the rewards tenuous, argues Margaret C. Flinn in ‘Julien Duvivier and inter-war “banlieutopia”’ (Chapter 5). In her close analysis of *La Belle Équipe* (1936), Flinn points to the ‘narrative failure’ of community to take hold in the banlieue despite the best intentions of Duvivier’s protagonists: like all utopian projects, their attempt to establish a micro-society free of the ills of urban centre and provincial village is hampered by the vestiges of class structure and cultural allegiances. Rather than evaluate the workers’ collective enterprise in *La Belle Équipe* solely in terms of ‘failure’ or ‘success’, Flinn casts the very construction of the riverside dancehall as an architectural metaphor for community, in relation to the spatial theories of Louis Marin and Michel Foucault and in the context of themes that coalesced mid decade around France’s Popular Front.

Departing from the strict social geographies of popular narrative filmmaking, Erik Bullot (Chapter 6) addresses marginality and transgression in three experimental or otherwise unclassifiable short films by Russian émigré Dimitri Kirsanoff, Frenchman Georges Franju and Chilean expatriate Raúl Ruiz. Bullot asks, with respect to the recurrent ‘identity crises’ of France’s film industry, whether directors who refuse the reassuring codes of an audience-ready cinema of the *juste milieu* might stake a claim to an art of the periphery. The three shorts on view each expose the internal and external borders of Paris as zones of now latent, now overt violence that contributes to the dissolution of film genre. Scenes of fragmentation, decapitation and dismemberment posit the suburb as ‘a trap door into which fragmented bodies disappear unimpeded’, thus negating any pretence to a balanced and harmonious cinema of the *juste milieu*.

The unnerving, chilling potential of suburban locales was no secret to Franju, whose masterpiece *Les Yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, 1960) remains a unique gem in the horror genre. Tristan Jean (Chapter 7) sees a strong correlation between Franju’s directorial sensibility and eccentric position with respect to France’s film industry, and the ‘geographically and culturally peripheral status’ of the villa-cum-clinic where Dr Génessier subjects his unsuspecting victims to murderous experiments. If Franju’s work routinely defies generic classifications, it finds continuity in its recourse to nocturnal suburban settings that exploit ordinary motifs to fantastical effect. Portrayal of a secluded, economically privileged locale in proximity to the capital ‘cuts against the grain of contemporaneous representations of the banlieue’, notes Jean of *Les Yeux sans visage*, which rejects the nostalgic tone adopted in *Casque d’or* (Jacques Becker, 1952) and in *Mon Oncle* (Jacques Tati, 1958).

This last picture, well known in the Anglophone world, has long been held as a negative critique of the bland, alienating qualities of modern suburbia. Malcolm Turvey (Chapter 8) takes issue with that prevailing assessment by distinguishing in *Mon Oncle* architectural function proper from the comic and ludic uses to which these built forms are put. The Arpel villa with its porthole windows and stacked cubes is itself less an exemplar of the architecture of the 1950s, argues Turvey, than a savvy parody of inter-war French high modernism. Tati thus strikes a balance between the mockery of conspicuous consumption attendant to France's post-war economic boom and the comic re-enchantment of an unruly, unpredictable object world that is functional in name only.

Changing angles, argues Elisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck in her reading of *L'Amour existe*, is precisely what Maurice Pialat aims to do in his depiction of the Paris outskirts circa 1960 (Chapter 9). By turns elegiac and polemical, Pialat's documentary short encompasses an individual life from childhood to adulthood; the history of France from the pre-war period through World War II and the 'Trente Glorieuses'; and visual representations of suburbia stretching from Impressionist painting to poetic realism. Cardonne-Arlyck underscores the formative qualities of an intimate, unseen space in which 'impenetrable beauties' lay hidden, and where love can and, indeed, does exist. Behind the forces of poverty, numbing routine and modernisation that it denounces, Pialat's plangent film essay uncovers what in the banlieue could have been revealed but had remained unsaid, a content that the camera and voiceover narration can never recover in full.

The layeredness of the suburban habitat – its peculiar manner of conjoining different textures, forms and histories so as to offer these up all at once to the eye – explains in part its lasting appeal to filmmakers. In her essay on Jean-Luc Godard (Chapter 10), Térésa Faucon ushers the reader through a host of suburban landscapes and locales, from the villas, cafés and roadways of *Bande à part* (1964) to the high-rises of La Courneuve in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (1967). She exposes the generative and transgressive capacity of a capitalist space in the throes of constant transformation that is shot through with fragments of a long cinema history reaching back to the silent era. In other contexts, like *Alphaville* (1965), Godard seeks out signs of futurity in present-day forms, showing Lemmy Caution moving through sleek, well-lit neighbourhoods of high-rise towers. Referencing Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, Faucon underscores Godard's insistence on indeterminate, liminal spaces where random movements and perspectival shifts complicate any clear-cut divisions between inside and outside.

Traditionally one of the most popular genres on French screens, the *polar* is the object of 'The banlieue wore black' (Chapter 11), Philippe Met's overview of the genre's evolution from the 1950s to the 1980s. While proto-noir and poetic realist films shot before World War II as well as thrillers from the immediate post-war were primarily centred on Paris, from the 1950s onwards a gradual shift toward suburban locales – visible in the iconic career of Jean-Pierre Melville – was implemented through a number of genre conventions and motifs: hideouts,

shoot-outs, railway or subway stations and tracks, deserted roadways, half-built or abandoned villas. The next generation foregrounded the multifaceted reality of new council estates that encroached upon traditional allotments of single-family homes and surrounding wastelands. Even more decisively, Alain Corneau in *Série noire* (1979) and *Le Choix des armes* (1981) added to the genre an insightful socio-logical dimension by broaching issues of violence, alienation and devastation.

The *grands ensembles* seized upon by feature film directors were present throughout metropolitan France, nowhere more so than in the Paris region. Camille Canteux (Chapter 12) explores a three-decade transformation in the televisual and documentary construction of these large-scale housing developments, which well before the riots of autumn 2005 had come to typify the blighted French suburb in the public eye. Early promotional films commissioned by the State housing ministry cast the historic working-class suburbs rimming Paris as overcrowded and unhealthy, in opposition to the rationally planned new estates further afield that promised order, modern comfort and hygiene. As early as the mid 1960s, however, negative aspects of the *grands ensembles* came to dominate French screens, and by 1970, the largest estates were portrayed as immigrant spaces deserted by the middle class and beset with poverty and petty crime. The French State's attempt to redress this stigmatisation by launching the mixed-use *villes nouvelles* in the 1970s and 1980s proved largely unsuccessful, shows Canteux, so pervasive were the images of suburban blight.

Modern French town planning discourse took it as a given that better – that is, rational – architecture would make for better, happier citizens. This position met with opposition in the 1970s as filmmakers looked to the burgeoning new towns to voice the ambiguities of rapid, top-down development. In 'Elusive happiness' (Chapter 13), Derek Schilling asks what sorts of individual and collective compromises the realisation of planned environments entailed in the wake of the failures of May 1968. *Le Chat* (Pierre Granier-Deferre, 1972) portrays an estranged couple who live their final days in a decrepit suburban villa slated for demolition; *La Ville bidon* (Jacques Baratier, 1976) the struggles of junkmen and their families to resist expropriation; and *Le Couple témoin* (William Klein, 1978) the gadget-obsessed excesses of aseptic, postmodern living. More ambivalent is the position of Éric Rohmer, whose protagonists in two installments of the *Comédies et proverbes* cycle (1981–87) laud the new town model for its felicitous conjunction of work and leisure even as they lament its programmed quality. Each of these pictures of the 1970s and 1980s expresses an imaginary solution – destructive in some cases, blithely euphoric in others – to the contradictions of suburban living.

Little known to Anglophone audiences, Jean-Claude Brisseau has been singled out by French critics for having voiced, along with Mehdi Charef in *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède* (1985), themes that would form the core of the banlieue film a decade later. As David Vasse notes in his reading of *La Vie comme ça* (1978), *Les Ombres* (1981), *L'Échangeur* (1981) and *De bruit et de fureur* (1988) (Chapter 14), Brisseau mixes gritty, documentary-like authenticity with surreal flights of

the imagination to create atmospheric narratives in which primal urges and paroxysmal violence are unleashed against the contemporary backdrop of home, school and workplace. In Brisseau's critique of political and sexual economy, the concrete jungle of France's devastated and maligned *cités* is exposed as the locus for contrary forces of subjugation and liberation across gender and generational lines. Vasse shows Brisseau to be both a precursor in his foregrounding of the systemic violence that is endemic to the *cités*, and a maverick whose idiosyncratic vision of human relations sat poorly with viewers and critics of the day.

Suburban violence has imprinted itself upon the collective imaginary in other, less spectacular yet perhaps no less pervasive, ways, notably through labour and its gradual effacement. Our historical overview concludes with an investigation of the layered temporality of the Paris 'red belt' (*ceinture rouge*) immediately outlying Paris. These working-class bastions were a primary theatre for the struggles of May and June 1968, and encompassed the location of the storied, ten-minute direct film *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*, in which a young woman is shown refusing to return to work despite the trade union's vote to end the strike. Twenty-five years later, documentarian Hervé Le Roux ventures to track down this same woman in his aptly titled *Reprise* (1997) discussed by Guillaume Soulez (Chapter 15). Centred on the historically fraught site of Saint-Ouen where the Wonder battery factories once stood, *Reprise* stages an active negotiation among the neighbourhood's past and present inhabitants and the film crew which has come to meet them in order to recover traces of a collective past. Understated in its visual style, *Reprise* qualifies as a 'film de banlieue' in the strongest possible sense: it is a film of and about the banlieue. Rather than revive a more or less faded 'red suburb', affirms Soulez, Le Roux allows actors in the history of working-class struggle to bear witness to the marginalisation of that same history, as well as to confer new meanings upon a site that lies just a stone's throw from Montmartre.

It would be up to another generation of filmmakers, including women like Yamina Benguigui in her made-for-television documentary *9-3, mémoire d'un territoire* (2007) and Céline Sciamma in the César-nominated feature *Bande de filles* (2014), to mine further this territory from the perspective of the post-colony, emphasising concerns that before the early 1980s had largely gone unaddressed in the French political arena and onscreen: questions of national belonging, participation and citizenship, and various forms of exclusion and discrimination based on markers of racial or ethnic identity. Such issues are made only more acute by the underlying territorial divide, at once physical and symbolic, between the capital proper and so-called Paris *extra muros* – in reality, the hundreds of human communities living in the capital's orbit. It is our wish that the present volume bring to light the extent to which that 'outside' space, regardless of its various monikers (outskirts, periphery, suburb or banlieue), has always informed the French filmic imaginary from within.

Note

- 1 Odile Daudet provides a representative filmography of some seventy-five titles in Millot and Glâtre (2003: 47–55).

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