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Dis-locations: Mapping the Banlieue

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Representations of the French suburbs in contemporary French film have, since the late 1980s, identified an apparent generic specificity that is linked closely to this location. I will explore the narrative tropes of alienation and exclusion - as dislocations - which have dominated the filmic representation of banlieue spaces and their populations before examining examples in which the realignment of sociocultural topographies and film space foregrounds the question of whether representations of the banlieue remain inherently and generically connected to realist discourses dominated by spatial representation of exclusions or whether the over-determined spaces of the banlieue can act as décor, as setting, as wider spatial frame. I will then focus on the presence and function of banlieue spaces and narratives in two recent French films *Girlhood / Bande de filles* (Céline Sciamma 2014) and Palme d'or winner *Dheepan* (Jacques Audiard, 2015), suggesting that the banlieue continues to provide a complex site which both asserts socio-economic specificities and serves as stylized setting through which to foreground other negotiations of territory and agency.

The real and discursive site of the banlieue must be clearly mapped. The parameters of this volume may be seen to suggest that suburbs (their representation and imagining) can be identified as a transnational phenomenon, and indeed that may be the case in their designation as peripheral spaces, located outside of major urban centres yet defined by their proximity to them, sharing socio-historical origins closely associated to the accommodation of different fluxes of workforces. There remain, however, striking differences within this broad definition and perhaps few less emphatic than the spatial and cultural gap between the dominant English or North American discourse of the suburb as homogenous, dull enclave of detached housing and middle class alienation and the dominant post-1980 French profile of the suburb (banlieue) as high-density estates of tower blocks, predominantly immigrant populations, chronic unemployment and social unrest. An inscription of such difference is required at the level of terminology and can be clearly recognized in the

cultural difficulties encountered in the translation of the term 'banlieue'. I will employ the French term 'banlieue' and refer to these areas in general as the outer-city, rather than the suburbs. This latter term may be seen to evoke the loaded term 'inner-city', associated with Thatcherite discourses of the early 1980s in the UK, but this designation has itself largely disappeared from common usage as property development and urban regeneration has selectively reconfigured city centre living (indeed re-branded simply as 'city living') as a site of high economic and social capital rather than deprivation.

The French banlieues are of course not homogenous spaces – the 'banlieues pavillonnaires' - zones of detached housing with gardens, are largely invisible in contemporary French cultural representation, yet form suburban spaces closer in form to their UK counterparts (configurations of streets and housing built in the same period to the same general design) albeit not so closely identified with the middle class. Neither part of the packaged heritage nor the hypermodernity of urban centres, they have been largely subsumed into the cinematic representation of the French new town as bland space suspended between urban and pastoral, as seen in the films of Rohmer and Céline Sciamma (for further analysis of the new town in film see Handyside, 2009).

The built and lived spaces and the cultural and filmic mappings of the banlieues are dominated by the 'grands ensembles' large configurations or sets of intensive high towers ('tours') and medium rise blocks ('barres'), of which the first were completed in 1954 at Sarcelles outside Paris. The late 1950s and 1960s saw the systematic further construction of intensive housing to replace the poorly resourced shantytowns that housed immigrant workers in close proximity to the factories and production plants on the outskirts of French major cities in which they worked. Many of these flats were largely designated as HLMs (*habitat à loyer modéré*) or rent-controlled social housing, and were presented initially as providing greatly improved living conditions and peaceful respite from the city for working-class populations (Vincendeau, 2005, 23). Since the mid 1980s, in the context of high rates of (youth) unemployment, hostile policing and regressive political discourses of national identity and exclusion, the banlieues have been marked by high incidences of social fragmentation and unrest. Dominant media representations have aligned these built

environments very closely with violent crime, social unrest and a discursive space constructed as alien to that of the values of the French Republic and its citizens. They feature in mainstream political, social and cultural discourse as “urban spaces associated with social disadvantage, criminality, and, above all, dense concentrations of working-class immigrant minorities” (Hargreaves, Roger and DalMolin, 2004, 3).

While there is not room here to provide such a historical overview of the presence of the banlieue on film, it is useful to demonstrate the way in which the banlieues were designated as site for the examination of emerging social change. Indeed Hensman asserts that cinema was ahead of its time in articulating site-specific intellectual and cultural discourse on the banlieues, marking out such parameters before literary or indeed mainstream sociological discourses (Hensman, 2013). One of the key films in this context is Godard’s 1967 *Two or Three things that I know about her* (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*) which presents the tower block configurations of the built environment of the banlieues as a further alienating factor in his reading of late capitalism’s privileging of the individual as consumer above all social modes and identities and the consequent prostitution of human relationships and language to follow transactional and commercial models. Godard’s association of the new developments with spatialised trajectories of exclusion and alienation was informed by Lefebvre’s critique of the promotion of collective living as inherently progressive in the context of the marked absence of any consideration of a collective identity shaping the city (Lefebvre 1968). *Two or Three things that I know about her* was filmed in the emerging structure of the four thousand new residences of La Courneuve (literally ‘the new domain’) which were finished in 1963. The ‘her’ of Godard’s title refers not only to the central female protagonist but explicitly to multiple nouns of feminine gender in French – his list including ‘the Paris region’, ‘the terrible law of the tower blocks’ and ‘the Gestapo of structures’ – the last two of which suggest links between the dense grid-like blocks and inhumane incarceration (Godard 1967, my translation).

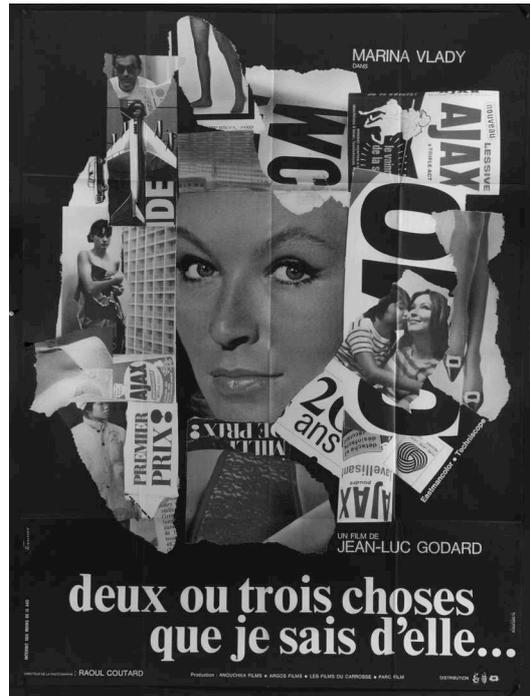


fig 1. French poster for *2 or 3 things that I know about her* (Godard, 1967)

The emphatic visual presence of the tower blocks, with their stark profiles and regular grid patterns forms an important narrative and visual motif in the film. The size and scale of the blocks and the proliferating construction sites of future blocks are magnified by Godard's often abrupt switching between long shot (human figures dwarfed by the buildings) and close-up in profile (projected alienation) and recurring compositions in which these buildings exceed the frame and so remain unnavigable and excluding diegetic spaces to the spectator also. Godard's sinister whispered commentary, a key element in the Brechtian distancing that both expresses and reproduces formally the alienation of his characters, asserts his view that:

‘the reorganisation of the Paris region will allow the government to pursue more easily their class politics and [...] to direct the economy, without taking into account the needs and aspirations for a better life of eight million of its inhabitants’ (Godard 1967, my translation).

As the main character, Juliet Janson (Marina Vlady) – in what remains a problematically gendered projection of the prostitution of labour and broader humanity by capitalism – resorts to a banalised prostitution in order to increase her spending power, her serial alienations from the production of work of all kinds are located firmly in the banlieue, with the ambiguous pleasures of consumer spending and insidious choice-making located firmly in central Paris. Thus the broader

alienations of a rapidly developing consumer society and an increasingly urban population are represented as being wholly located within the banlieues – as they put the location into dislocation. This over-determination was fuelled by a sociopolitical desire to critique the displacement of working class communities from the city centre and a recognition of the cultural and visual impact of the architectural and spatial configurations of the built environment of the banlieues. A stark representation of this projected inherent link is found in the final images of the film, which show a set of brightly coloured grocery packets laid out on grass in the configuration of the blocks and towers of the banlieue, remapping the latter as unlivable spaces of alienating consumerism.

Generic location? Banlieue film

In addition to considerations of the contested representation of such spaces and locations in culture generally, here in cinema particularly, there is a further connection between space and medium through the category of the ‘cinéma de banlieue’ or banlieue film. The term used to designate a de facto genre saw its first usage in the early 1990s to describe ‘a series of independently released films set in the rundown multi-ethnic working class estates on the periphery of France’s major cities’ (Tarr, 2005, 2) and has continued to be a mode associated with auteur cinema rather than commercially-driven production. An interesting exception to this is the high-octane action film *Banlieue 13 (District 13)* (Morel, 2004) and its sequel, which mixes prescient anticipation of inflammatory political statements about the banlieue, narrative exploitation of science fiction dystopia and a projection of parkour as asserting creative mobility and resistant agency in urban space. The emergence of this generic mapping can be seen to echo the profile of the hood movie (with hood as abbreviation for neighbourhood) in the USA in the same period, with key examples such as *Do the right thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), *Boyz n the hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Straight out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991) released in close succession. Whilst the term ‘banlieue film’ asserts the ‘significance of place in the construction of identity’ (Tarr, 2005, 3) and indeed an unusual generic template which privileges location above all else (Higbee, 2007, 38), it does retain other characteristics. These can be identified broadly as; a determining, often fatalistic relationship between narrative and environment, coherent markers of realism, a focus on adolescence or an adolescent mode extended by unemployment and lack of social role, a tense or

conflictual dynamic between local population and State authority and central protagonists who are predominantly young, male and represent diverse ethnicities.

Banlieue film has been presented as linked to other tendencies including the marked rise in profile of young filmmakers in France in the mid-1990s seen as signaling a 'jeune cinema/ young cinema' or 'new new wave' and a re-engagement with the representation of contemporary socio-economic realities. Yet these films do not commonly feature a diverse set of protagonists, are often situated in the post-industrial sites of crisis of Northern France and focus on unemployment as the main driving factor of social, personal and economic vulnerability (see Introduction in Dobson, 2012). Carrie Tarr's compelling analysis of the connections between constructions of banlieue film and that of beur populations -second generation immigrants of north African origin – identifies their common tropes and different narrative trajectories that play across their 'different relationships to space and place' (Tarr, 2005, 21). In discussion of the banlieue film as unstable genre, Carole Milleliri asserts the importance of historical contexts of production and reception in identifying its emergence *as* genre and in delineating its major characteristics (Milleliri, 2011). Such contextual specificity is clearly evident in the sudden rise in profile of the genre after the release of what is commonly seen as the definitive banlieue film, *La Haine / Hate* (Kassowitz, 1995). Both inspiration for the film and the context of its release are closely linked to deaths in police custody and the extensive riots that they triggered. Such marked correspondences of context and content have led to a very specific framing of reception of many banlieue films, which presents one of their major functions as to provide documentary aids to understanding the contemporary social unrest of the banlieues. The then French Prime Minister, Alain Juppé's organization of a compulsory screening of *Hate* for government ministers as instruction provides a striking example of the construction of such direct correlations (Vincendeau, 2005, 84). The dynamics of a double determinism - in which the diegetic space of the onscreen banlieue is seen to determine the fate of the characters and the filmic representation is seen to function as documentary 'reality' suggests that a pre-established perception of the nature of the banlieue leads to the privileging of particular characteristics to form a self-fulfilling genericity. It is striking that perhaps the very concept of 'banlieue cinema' could be seen to reinforce a perception of

spatio-cultural isolation in its close alignment of a homogenized banlieue space with narrative tropes of social unrest and economic marginalization (Wagner, 2011, 455).

As stated above, Kassowitz's *Hate* is commonly presented as the iconic example of banlieue film – and its narrative, in which we follow the impact of the death in police custody of a young man from their banlieue on three friends – Vinz, Saïd and Hubert, contains many features associated with this genre. These include central protagonists who represent an ethnically diverse population, the emphatically fatalistic structure of the film in which we countdown to a designated climax, a sense of a 'radical dichotomy' (Austin, 2009, 88) between urban periphery and central Paris – the latter as site of social exclusion and racism, the extensive representation of neglected and abandoned spaces, the presence of hostile policing and an acknowledgement of reductive media representation of the banlieues. The film combines this generic narrative consonance with filmic elements, which do not fit with dominant models of the banlieue film and include heavily stylized compositions which disrupt realist frames, use of swift changes in focal length to articulate distances other than physical between the characters and their environments and the use of black and white to evoke the heritage of poetic realism rather than 1990s cinema or documentary modes. The fragile social places and solidarity established by Vinz, Saïd and Hubert are overshadowed by the escalating threat of violence that hangs over them and its articulation as brutal ending, yet this last point will be central to my exploration of the dynamic between representation of the banlieue in film as synonymous with exclusion and lack of social place and resistance to both that status and representation through the insistence on the capacity of these spaces as social place.

A series of documentary films, also produced in the early 1990s but reaching a much smaller audience than that of *Hate*, provide some of the most engaged resistance to the representation of the banlieue as site entirely defined by social breakdown and unrest. Dominique Cabrera's documentaries on Val Fourré (a Parisian banlieue) provide a positive and knowing response to the symbolic violence done to inhabitants of the banlieue through a reduction of the spaces which they inhabit to the politically expedient, entwined discourses of marginalization and regeneration which exclude the very notion of functioning communities. Cabrera was commissioned by local government authorities in 1992 to direct a series of documentaries on the regeneration

of *Val Fourré*, a banlieue to the west of Paris (see Dobson 2012 for further discussion of Cabrera's documentary work). This regeneration focused on the demolition of tower blocks and grounded its material and socio-political discourses in terms of such spectacular interventions, which undermine the inhabiting of shared spaces and constructions of communities past and future. One of these films *Tale of an Ordinary Banlieue* (*Chronique d'une banlieue ordinaire*, 1992) counters this flattening of both the spatial and temporal experiences of past tenants by inviting the spectator to join her as political and ethical witness of community through the shared filmic point of view to form what Cabrera describes as a repository of the social and political (hi)stories of the period between 1967 and 1987 (Cabrera 1991) and the possibility of collective living ('le vivre ensemble'). The deserted towers are thus repopulated not by the tenants as nostalgia-feeding phantoms, but through their material and affective interactions with the spaces as they point out where they prayed, played and cried and recall the informal organisations of the building in the form of collective parties, vertical communication from balcony to balcony and games that were specific to each floor of the building. The interview sequences in which ex-tenants describe their intimate and social relationship with these spaces are interspersed with gliding, travelling shots that create a succession of striking compositions of the forms and shapes of the material interiors of the building. Such assertions of the beauty of lived interior spaces and textures counters the stigmatisation of the tower blocks' external profile.



fig. 2 *Chronique d'une banlieue ordinaire* (Cabrera, 1992)

Girl / hood

Cabrera's assertion of the importance of internal spaces and the film's parity of gendered voices also serves to disrupt the dominance of the banlieue genre by male voices and the conventionally gendered occupation of space. In a special edition of *Studies in French Cinema* on women's filmmaking, published in 2012, Carrie Tarr identifies a growing body of productions by female directors that use the banlieue to frame a more complex and inclusive exploration of the relationship between place and identity. Tarr suggests that, subversive by design, these films have engendered the regeneration and transformation of the banlieue film and that, no longer primarily driven by male-orientated action and violence, it has evolved in recent years to reflect the 'more meditative investigations of peripheral spaces in relation to the drama of growing up female' (Tarr, 2012, 193). I will not discuss a range of these films here, but a selection of key examples would include *La Squale (The Squale)* (Fabrice Genestal, 2000), *Regarde-moi (Ain't scared)* (Audrey Estrougo, 2007) and *Tout ce qui brille (All that glitters...)* (Geraldine Nakache, 2010). Common points between them include the tension between female solidarity and social constructions of femininity, the banlieue as space of the policing of femininity and female desires and the reductive options of projected adult femininity. The association of adolescence with the banlieue film is interesting beyond the cultural discourse around the banlieue which associates this 'troubled site' with 'troubled youth' as problem, in its apparent connection between a site and a state which remain both associated with instability, conflict, challenges to authority and transition. It is perhaps these more general associations of instability and precarity and their more ambiguous (and perhaps ambivalent) resonances with the political and socio-economic specificities of the contemporary banlieue, which dominate two recent films which have met with great international commercial and critical success; *Bande de filles (Girlhood)* (Céline Sciamma 2014) and *Dheepan* (Jacques Audiard 2015).¹ They are both largely set in the Parisian banlieue, which serves as site of conflict, exclusion and the transformation of identities. – yet also as a more universal décor in an at least partial challenge to socio-cultural specificity and of the construction of the banlieue film.

Sciamma's *Girlhood* foregrounds the struggle of its young central protagonist, Marième, to negotiate the social codes of gendered identity in the banlieue and the stark and limited options that they offer her. The film's narrative is built on several

elements common to the examples given above, which centre on the challenges to girls as subjects in the banlieue. The central protagonist must negotiate limited opportunities and heavy caring responsibilities, the gendered control of public spaces, the hypocritical policing of her femininity and desire by her older brother, wider surveillance of her appearance and behaviour and the parallel lives seemingly led by young men and women in the banlieue. In *Girlhood*, the quiet and anxious Marième (Karidja Touré) is transformed over a few intense weeks into the fearless Vic (for victory). Faced with an increasingly constrained role in educational opportunity and family dynamics (her behaviour policed by a controlling elder brother Djibril (Binta Diop)) she hangs out with a group of streetwise girls led by the formidable ‘Lady’ (Assa Sylla) and her humorous sidekicks ‘Adiatou’ (Lindsay Karamon) and ‘Fily’ (Mariétou Touré). Marième’s appearance shifts and her confidence grows in relation to the choices offered her – rejecting work as a shift cleaner, violently defending the honour of her gang in a street fight with another girl and acting on her desire for her brother’s friend. Her brother’s violent response to her sexual agency forces her to leave home and she works delivering drugs for a local dealer. The final scenes of the film posit an open, potent ending as she again rejects the options proposed – sexual object (proto-prostitute), laddish co-worker or good wife. Any narrative synopsis does not, however, convey the power of the film which foregrounds performative sequences in which an immersive and affective force-field of collective identity is constructed. The performative mode involves a knowing staging of assertive and positive group identity as practice and takes place outside of the defined spaces of domestic roles and the gendered constraints of public space. Through the use of explicit choreography, saturated colour and filters, striking non-diegetic music and direct gaze at the camera, scenes such as the opening sequence of an American football training session and the hotel room party, assert performative spaces in which identity is formed.

Cultural constructions of girlhood respond repeatedly to the construction of the girl subject with processes of containment (Driscoll, 2011, 257). In relation to constructions of embodied subjectivity and public visibility, the occupation of public space remains a strong marker of a ‘being in the world’ – as subject, as citizen. Alison Bain argues that Hollywood disseminates a reductive image of the spatial practices of teenage girls, reinforcing the idea that their occupation of exterior urban space is

marginal (Bain, 2003, 198). Whilst her study addresses the representation of largely white, middle-class American girls, it remains notable that the dominance of the bedroom space as retreat and of school or college space as sites of social interaction are absent from *Girlhood*. Indeed the only bedroom we see is shared and permeated by anxiety in the face of oppressive discourse on gender and school is seen briefly as a site of social exclusion. The film takes place largely in public space and the domestic, familial space is seen, not as a space of retreat, but as problematic site of an oppressive policing of girls' appearance and behaviour. What remains striking in *Girlhood* is the way in which the girls interact with the spaces of the banlieue to claim some territory for their collective identity.

The film's French title foregrounds a focus on a collective identity – a group of girls ('bande' signalling solidarity rather than the inherent violence of the term 'gang') – which is lost in the choice of English title. The cinema posters also shift from the French version with the direct gaze of four equally positioned black women and the English release version, which features the fragmented body of one of the girls and no return of the gaze. The opening sequence immerses us in a spectacular scene of collective identity and joyous physicality of an American football training session and we realize, once the saturated colour, bright lights and emphatic soundtrack draw to a close, that all the players are girls. The close framing of their bodies together and the volume of shared exuberant chatter diminishes gradually as they approach the residential towers and blocks and modify their behaviour in the face of the groups of boys positioned at higher levels on the walkways and in front of the block entrances. The construction of identity in banlieue space is thus configured from the very start of the film in relation to security in a collective occupation of space and a gendered hierarchy of mobility and visibility. The gendered control of access and circulation in the banlieue is indicated at several points in the film, as the boys' comments and presence constitute an atmosphere of surveillance and spatial privilege. Indeed the banlieue in *Girlhood* is not so much the site of physical violence (although there are brief fights) but one of symbolic violence through which the agency and identity of women is regulated. Such patterns of mobility and occupation of space are central tropes in several films which centre on girls in the banlieue and perhaps most striking in *Regarde-moi (Ain't scared)* (Audrey Estrougo, 2007) which imposes this gendered division as a formal device in which the same series of events are seen first from the

point of view of the boys involved and then, in the second half of the film, from the point of view of the girls.

The gendered policing of public space in the banlieue is visibly imposed, yet *Girlhood* insists upon the possibility of negotiating such control and constructing alternative spaces of resilience and collective identity. The central character, Marième, adopts serial strategies to navigate gender and / as space – an example of her resistance to exclusion is when working as part of the drugs distribution, Marième adopts masculine dress and binds her breasts so as to avoid being identified as a girl along the long sightlines and stark backdrops of the banlieue. *Girlhood* constructs two sets of alternative spaces– those which create a contestatory immersive and affective space within the frame and those which claim physical territories within the banlieue narrative and space. The football training sequence mentioned above and a highly choreographed, stylised sequence in which the girls dance to the whole of Rihanna’s ‘Diamonds’ in a hotel room, construct identificatory spaces in the film that counter the marginalisation and gendered power dynamics at play in the banlieue spaces of the realist setting. Although the spaces associated with such emphatic assertions of collective identity (the training ground and the hotel room) are located in ambiguous relationship to the banlieue, both in terms of their physical location and their avowedly non-realist, performative mode, they remain at the very centre of the affective and sensual mappings of the film, creating an overwhelming impact on the spectator which overwrites other spatial exclusions.

In addition to the creation of powerful filmic spaces of affect, *Girlhood* maps banlieue spaces that are territorialised by the girls as they meet repeatedly in an unused skate park. This space, along with metro platforms and the dramatic expanses of open spaces of commercial district, *La Défense*, provide classic examples of what social anthropologist Marc Augé defines as ‘non-places’ (Augé, 1995). He suggests that these non-places spaces characteristic of hypermodernity (his term) which lack the spatial or social capacity to function as social places as they encourage self-designation as individuals defined by transitory function – for example consumer, commuter. Throughout the film the girls assert their identity in Augéan non-places of shopping malls, metro platforms and neglected public spaces such as the skate park as their own - countering patriarchal spatial control of the most visible sites of the

banlieue by asserting their collective presence in the non-places. This does not signal a problematic alignment of their identity with the empty social signals of the non-place but, supported by their framing as a group in these spaces of mutual support and empowerment, reconstructs them as collective spaces which they occupy as subjects – to build group spaces (perhaps *bande-lieux* in the French) that are both possible within the banlieue and capable of transcending its parameters.

Thus the construction and policing of girl identity and its impact on agency are enforced through the surveillance and privileged occupation of the spaces of the banlieue spaces of the French suburb. However both Sciamma and Estrougo are careful to assert in interview that the discourses of marginalisation explored in their films are not specific to the peripheral locations of the banlieue and should not be plotted exclusively in banlieue spaces. Estrougo asserts that, despite critical assumptions of the auto-fictional origins of the film (she grew up in the French suburbs or banlieue) that the site functions as microcosm and claims that ‘[T]he problem is one of society, not of the banlieue. This is why I refuse the idea of the banlieue film’ (Estrougo, 2007 my translation). The rejection of the banlieue as exclusive site of such practices, is repeated by Sciamma:

‘At the periphery / outskirts, the stakes are the same as everywhere else, but they are not underground (clandestine), they are out in the open. This is why it is a place of fiction, reality exists there in a stronger form, the operations of masculine domination are everywhere, the interaction between private space and public space, the networks of reciprocal surveillance. These are operations that are present throughout society, but there it’s official’ (Sciamma, 2014a, my translation).²

Sciamma’s insistence that the banlieue as site is not the problem itself, but rather a discursive and physical space in which such power dynamics are more visible, can be connected to *Girlhood*’s stylised representation of the built environment. Sciamma’s foregrounding of blocks of plain colour (predominantly yellow and blue), an attention to the geometries of tiles and the clean edges and boundaries of interior spaces undercut the realist discourses which suggest a more narrow alignment between environment and narrative. Indeed, Sciamma’s account of influences on her filmmaking include Larry Clark, Gus Van Sant and David Lynch

(Lemercier, 2014) – the latter two signalling an interest in placing the everyday within a carefully stylised aesthetic driven by colour, form and framing. Her choice of location for the film is also expressed in terms of its filmic impact: ‘...the graphic properties of the banlieue are considerable [...] When you set up the camera in the banlieue you film the lines of flight, modes of circulation, how to be together, how to be alone’ (Sciamma, 2014a, my translation).³ Her criteria of choice remained spatial rather than socio-cultural: ‘I visited lots of areas as I wanted a paved area, a pedestrianized area, clear view of a horizon and the Eiffel tower in the distance’ (ibid., my translation) although this last criteria clearly delineates both distance from and proximity to an iconic mapping of central Paris. When criticized for this stylization, Sciamma’s response reveals common assumptions around apparently neutral, realist aesthetics by questioning whether ‘the choice of filming the banlieue in a greyish light with a handheld camera is not also a stylization?’ and relating her own choices to the stylized aesthetic of Kassowitz’s *Hate*, discussed here earlier (Sciamma, 2014b).⁴ She suggests further that her choice to bring a stylized beauty to the places and faces of the banlieue can only be perceived as untruthful in relation to received, reductive constructions of the same and formulates it as suspect resistance to her representation of banlieue characters and spaces alike as ‘heroic’ (ibid). Indeed Sciamma’s challenging of the assumption that the banlieue cannot act as setting for a universal narrative echoes the film’s assertion that a narrative focused on four black girls can be read as a universal story.

The potency of the banlieues as ‘space of fiction’ is repeated by film-maker François Dupeyron describing them as: ‘zones that you go to when making fiction not just because they have problems, but because they are undefined, rich with the unsaid...’⁵ (Dupeyron quoted in Marguerite, 2015, my translation). Such general topologies of abstraction can be seen to provide unhelpful and politically naïve discourses on the banlieue. Whilst it may be a positive strategy to suggest that the banlieue should be liberated from the generic constraints and socio-cultural associations of the banlieue film to serve as location for a diverse range of narratives - to be narratively and cinematically re-mapped - the danger remains that the site may become fetishized as default site for the exploration of conflict and exclusion.

Conflict zones

It is in the context of this tension between the freer employment of the banlieue as décor, as site for narratives beyond those of the banlieue film and the danger of presenting it as spatial shorthand, reductive site of exclusion and conflict that I will discuss in Jacques Audiard's Palme d'or winning *Dheepan* (2015). The film's narrative contains serial, traumatic displacements. Following the defeat of his forces, a Tamil Tiger fighter (Anthonythasan Jesuthan) improves his chances of gaining asylum in France by taking on a dead man's identity, and the name Dheepan, constructing a fake family (wife and daughter) drawn from a refugee camp and an alternative narrative of their displacement. On their arrival in France he is allocated a job as caretaker in a remote and run-down banlieue, ironically named 'The Meadow' (Le Pré) in the film. Dheepan's 'wife' Yalini (Kalieaswari Srinivasan) longs to join her cousin in England and the 'daughter' Illayaal (Claudine Vinasithamby) educates them in parenting skills. One of the mid-rise blocks of housing in this configuration is controlled by an armed, drug-running criminal gang and Dheepan is given clear instructions on his limited access to these spaces. The gang leader is based in his elderly father's apartment in which Yalini works as carer. The context of escalating violence triggers a violent, militarised response from Dheepan and the final scenes, in which he rescues Yalini from a bloody attack on the gang leader's apartment, present an almost apocalyptic scale of violence which far exceeds the realist codes which dominate most of the film. A brief coda reveals the relocation of Dheepan and his family, with new baby, to a leafy English suburb.

While the film's unknown actors and the dominance of the Tamil language creates an 'accented' space unfamiliar to the dominant discourses of French cinema, the representation of the banlieue functions as perhaps reassuringly familiar sociocultural and filmic space. It serves as site of multiple exclusions and marginalisations in terms of language, cultural understanding (reflecting Audiard's shock at levels of ignorance of the Sri Lankan conflict), economic status and spatial barriers. As the 'family' negotiate the linguistic and social barriers to their integration in a new national space, and in relation to each other through the reconfiguration of their occupancies of the apartment spaces, so the external spaces of the banlieue become increasingly hostile.

Dheepan's experience of the banlieue space as conflict zone, triggered by the resurfacing of military figures and memories, becomes increasingly aligned with his traumatic experiences of civil war. Whilst this may be contained within a realist framing of his experience as clouded by post-traumatic stress disorder and the trauma of losing his real family (indeed Yalini suggests this at several points) the escalation of violence and visual tropes of the vigilante film can also be linked to the vestiges of Audiard's initial project, a remake of the ultraviolent *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971), set in the banlieue (Sotinel, 2015) and the race to get the film ready for Cannes festival entry. Co-writer Thomas Bidegain recounts in interview that Audiard hesitated a great deal before deciding on the banlieue location as he feared reductive readings of the film:

These estates are frequently represented these days. And always recuperated by a sociologising reading as 'banlieue film'. But we are familiar with this problem. For 'A Prophet' we were not immersed in the prison, it was a fantasmic place, but the film was considered as very realist. (Rigoulet, 2015, my translation)⁶

Dheepan was filmed in the Parisian banlieue of La Coudraie and residents who worked on the film see no contradictions between the peaceful milieu that supported the making of the film and the violent denouement, which uses their locality as décor (Marlier, 2015).

The presentation of the banlieue space as war zone is thus sustained across numerous sequences including those in which Yalini and Illayaal are caught up in a gunfight, and features snipers on roofs, armed sentries and the imposition of checkpoints at entry to the estate. The war is not between criminal factions and the 'forces of order' nor indeed between ordinary residents and the police but between gangs with residents and buildings alike as collateral damage. Dheepan's function as caretaker, stubbornly fixing broken systems (the lift, the lighting) is thrown into ironic relief by the broken social mechanics around him and the disconnection between the gang and place (a rare conversation reveals that gang members are recruited from other areas to avoid identification with local residents). The growing militarisation of the banlieue space triggers a spatialised response from Dheepan as he withdraws to a bunker-space

in which he fights his demons and prepares for war before a last, desperate attempt to control the ensuing violence through the demarcation in white paint of a ridiculed ‘no fire zone’. The apocalyptic final confrontation, in which Dheepan rescues Yalini singlehandedly from the site of gang violence, is not wholly supported by narrative rationale (she was in the wrong place at the wrong time rather than a target of violence) and is excessive in its violence. As the generic codes slip from realism to vigilante film so Dheepan shifts from displaced migrant into the trope of traumatised veteran-vigilante or ‘Tamil Travis Bickle’ (Goreau-Ponceaud, 2016). The spectacular, stunt-driven action sequences combine explosions, gunfire, rapid editing and extreme points of view from an independently mobile camera to provide a high-volume, high-octane finale.

The emphatic destruction of the built environment along with the criminal occupants evokes James Austin’s description of representations of the banlieue which project its destruction via a negative spatial imaginary (Austin, 2009, 92). However I would argue that this negative spatial imaginary is imposed here not through the violent destruction of the banlieue, which can be clearly (if problematically) read as aligned with non-realist generic affinities and therefore distanced from realist and sociocultural discourses of the banlieue, but through the brief coda ending which presents resolution as escape to an idyllic English suburb. The almost caricatural idyllic projection of black cabs and harmonious multicultural gatherings in a blossom-strewn English garden, combined with the augmented status of Dheepan’s ‘family’ through a biological child, forms a reductive and closed resolution which is atypical of Audiard’s films (see Dobson, 2008). The narrative resolution of the twin traumas of migrant displacement and violent conflict are thus grounded not in the genre-fuelled violence of the preceding sequences but in the final contrast between the two peripheral environments of French banlieue and English suburb – a contrast which works as retrospective discourse undermining not the banlieue as décor but as lived space.

Shifting suburban sites

Recent examples of the banlieue on film and the banlieue-film have been revealed as not simply putting the location into dislocation, but as engaging with an over-

determined designation of the French outer-city as off-limits, non-place incapable of supporting social habitation.

Girlhood's interventions provide a counter-construction of affective spaces and reclaimed territories of collective resilience and agency that are possible within and beyond the banlieue, thus challenging the mapping of the banlieue as stigmatised site in which exclusion and alienation can be exclusively located, othered and contained. *Dheepan* presents a problematic combination of an exploration of serial displacements, in which the banlieue features at once as innovative decor for a displaced generic specificity (the traumatised veteran narrative), and rejected socio-cultural site of integration (in comparison with the idyllically multicultural English suburb of the film's coda). That both films site their shared respective explorations of the broader questions and power dynamics of 'collective living' ('le vivre ensemble') in the banlieues is emblematic of the sociocultural and cinematic importance of such sites in French cinema and the complex intersectional construction of their spatial and historical (re)locations. The question of whether cinematic representations of these specific suburbs, the French banlieue, can navigate contemporary discourses of striking socio-cultural correlation and of film genre, which over-determine both real and cinematic spaces, is still being mapped.

¹ Its wider sociocultural impact, which there is not time to discuss here, is reflected in its own stars' comments in interview on the personal and cultural thrill of seeing the film posters, a positive image of four young black women, displayed in every town in France.

² 'A la périphérie, les enjeux sont les mêmes que partout ailleurs, mais ils ne sont pas souterrains, ils se donnent à ciel ouvert. C'est pourquoi c'est un lieu de fiction, parce que la réalité y vit plus fort, les enjeux de la domination masculine sont partout, l'interaction entre espace privé-espace public, les réseaux de surveillance réciproque. Ce sont des enjeux qui traversent toute la société mais, là, c'est officiel.'

³ ‘Par ailleurs, les propriétés graphiques de la banlieue sont très grandes [...] et il y a beaucoup de pensée à l’œuvre. Quand on pose sa caméra en banlieue, on filme des lignes de fuite, des façons de circuler, comment on se retrouve, comment on est seul.’

⁴ ‘On parle de stylisation à propos de ‘Bande de filles’, comme si le réalisme, le choix de filmer la banlieue dans une lumière grisâtre avec une caméra à l’épaule, ce n’était pas aussi une stylisation. Sauf que cette stylisation-là est devenue un point de repère. Pour beaucoup de gens, quand on s’en écarte, on stylise. Pourtant, un film aussi important sur la représentation des cités que ‘La Haine’ était déjà un geste très fort de stylisation.’

⁵ ‘[les banlieues], ce sont des zones où on va quand on fait de la fiction pas seulement parce qu’elles sont à problèmes, mais parce qu’elles sont indéfinies, riches de non-dits...’

⁶ ‘La cité est beaucoup représentée aujourd’hui. Et toujours rattrapée par une lecture sociologisante du "film de banlieue". Mais nous connaissons cet écueil. Pour ‘Un Prophète’, on ne s’est pas immergés en prison, c’était un lieu fantasmé, mais le film a été considéré comme très réaliste’.

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