The suburbs of France on film 1981–2005

David-Alexandre Wagner
*De la banlieue stigmatisée à la cité démystifiée*
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This thesis brings together and analyses a comprehensive corpus of films set in and dealing with the French ‘banlieue’, literally ‘suburbs’, but now meaning the outer-city estates that house an ethnically diverse population and are strongly associated in the popular imagination with drugs, crime and social unrest. David-Alexandre Wagner usefully brings together a comprehensive corpus of 43 films made between 1984 and 2005 in order to analyse the ways in which the banlieue has been represented across two decades. The size of the corpus allows him to combine a quantitative with a qualitative approach, and thus to claim validity for general conclusions about this genre, or at least sub-genre, of contemporary French cinema.

Part 1 explains and justifies the approach adopted, arguing for the important functions of cinema as a ‘complex prism’ of society and a potential site of social cohesion, discussing the legitimacy of claiming the status of ‘genre’ for the banlieue film in the light of genre theory, and situating this work in the context of existing scholarship. Wagner is at pains to distance himself from certain elements of the anglophone ‘Cultural Studies’ approach to the topic, refusing for example to distinguish between ‘beur’ banlieue films, authored by directors from minority ethnic communities, and those made by white French directors. Part 2 looks at the intradiagnostic world of the films and how, for example, the family, women, delinquency, drugs and violence are represented. The combination of quantitative ‘survey’ approach, backed by tables and figures, and qualitative analysis of particular films certainly lends the argument conviction, even if this is at the cost of much detailed discussion of key films. The conclusions are decidedly optimistic and positive: contrary to much existing work on banlieue cinema, Wagner’s study demonstrates a clear tendency towards the disassociation of banlieue populations and criminality, the positive representation of the family, the greater empowerment of women, and a collective aspiration not towards the affirmation of distinct minority identities, but towards integration into the dominant culture.

Part 2 deals with cinematic form and the aesthetics of the banlieue film. The representation of space and place are highlighted, and the typicality of the filmic devices most associated with banlieue film (e.g. dramatic visual contrasts between estate and city-centre, low-angle shots that foreground the oppressive mass of tower blocks) is contested. Here again an optimistic trend towards a brighter, lighter, more varied approach is identified, particularly since the turn of the 21st century. Soundtracks are shown to observe the same progression, towards an integrated ‘rap pacifié’ that seems to bespeak a reduced concern with the assertion of difference and revolt. Part 4, on the conditions of production and reception, also
disputes the claims made by most critics that people of minority ethnic origin have more difficulty gaining funding to make films, and getting their films shown.

Wagner’s figures suggest rather that banlieue films, whatever their directors’ origins, receive as much funding, as many media reviews, and are as successful at the box-office as any other (sub)-genre.

Wagner’s approach and conclusions can certainly be contested on some points. He misrepresents the ‘anglo-saxon’ use of the category ‘beur cinema’ as tending towards essentialism, when in fact its proponents are at pains to insist on a sociocultural rather than ethnic difference between ‘beur’ and ‘non-beur’ filmmakers: the social experience of French people from ethnic minorities remains, for the moment, different from that of their majority co-citizens. And is it really useful at this point in history to insist on an ‘ethnicity-blind’ approach? Can a truly representative national cinema be indifferent to the origins of its film-makers? And by the same token, could a truly gender-equal cinema be made without paying any attention to the proportion of women film-makers? Postcolonial and feminist approaches to cinema are explicitly or implicitly taken to task here for excessive pessimism and essentialist tendencies, but are in reality more nuanced than this account would suggest. The resolutely optimistic narrative presented here – onwards and upwards towards integration – echoes the discourse of French Republicanism that has always refused a multi-cultural approach in the name of the universal equality of French citizens. The argument is coherently and persuasively put, but a different model of the desirable society would produce a different narrative.

Nonetheless, this thesis represents a thoroughly researched, coherently and persuasively argued contribution to the study of contemporary French cinema, and indeed contemporary cinema more generally. It addresses important questions of the social functions of cinema, as well as of broad tendencies in the cinematic representation of ethnically and culturally mixed postcolonial societies, supporting its arguments with solid evidence and expressing them with eloquent conviction.

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