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Philippe Met and Derek Schilling, eds. *Screening the Paris Suburbs: From the Silent Era to the 1990s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. xii +216 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. £75.00 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-5261-0685-6; £90.00; (eb). ISBN 978-1-5261-0779-4.

Review by Peter J. Bloom, University of California, Santa Barbara.

This edited volume is an important contribution to conceptions of geography and French cinema. The fifteen contributions address the banlieue in film as geographic suburb and mise-en-scène that is both incidental landscape and elemental context for cinematic storytelling. The editors describe the focus of the volume as a series of “diachronic and synchronic perspectives” that advocates for a complex understanding of “banlieue cinema” cutting across various film genres and ideological perspectives (p. 2). Overall, the volume demonstrates how notions of banlieue cinema allow us to reconsider well-known French interwar and postwar films with an awareness of the postcolonial and hip-hop discourses that have over-coded an underlying historical context. The richness of this approach lies in how it foregrounds spatial dynamics within the Hexagon, or metropolitan France, as supplemented by longstanding histories of migration and regional idioms. Co-editors Philippe Met and Derek Schilling point to the geo-critical terms of Bertrand Westphal’s context for the “suburban habitat” (p. 3). It is within this context that human spaces and the mimetic arts coalesce as an enabling perspective for understanding the historical heterogeneity of banlieue culture. A wide range of perspectives thus describe and reconsider the “space of periphery” in French cinema.

In fact, Tristan Jean’s essay (chapter seven) points to an etymological analysis of banlieue as the area surrounding the city within the radius of one league (*lieue*), a varied historical measurement, over which the municipal government can exercise its judicial authority (*le ban*). By referring to the work of David Leyval,<sup>[1]</sup> he also recalls how the pejorative nuance of banlieue as paired with *banalité* implies taboo and omission, even banishment. While these insights foreground Jean’s discussion of Georges Franju’s cinema in relation to representing the grotesque, the implied sense of cinema in the larger context of the volume is a narrative form that specifies a shifting series of oppositions from a geographical bird’s eye view to the proximate. The editors point to Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling” in attempting to summarize the various contributions, and yet the individual discussions are far more wide ranging in scope.

As I summarize and comment on most of the chapters in the text to follow, it should be noted that the contributions are primarily organized in loose chronological order. Some of the chapters (chapters one, six, eleven, twelve, thirteen) compare films from different periods and emphasize a thematic approach, an argument, or foreground the work of a filmmaker as auteur. The range

of approaches means that particular chapters could be conveniently excerpted for discussions of films screened in a course. In fact, I watched some of the films mentioned in the text that I might use in a New Wave Film History course this coming year. Fortunately, each chapter is relatively self-contained with notes and references at the end of each chapter. In reading the volume from cover to cover, redundancies of overlapping themes appear from one chapter to the next such that similar discussions of the same films reappear, but this might be unavoidable given the organization of the collection. In addition, there is very little guidance on access to the films under discussion, which is unfortunate given the richness of the discussion. In the discussion to follow, I have chosen to adapt a series of brief summaries, remarks, and critical references that may assist interested readers in selecting chapters of relevance to their ongoing work, but it should be noted there are many remarkable insights of great interest throughout the volume.

The first chapter, by Annie Fourcaut, the well-known urban historian, establishes a historical basis for national geographies of French cinema within the terms of regional industrialization starting in the 1860s. She establishes a complex layering of historical traces in which representations of the banlieue in French cinema remain an underlying trace. Two films, *La Zone: Au Pays des chiffonniers* (Georges Lacombe, 1928) and *Aubervilliers* (Eli Lotar, 1946), loom large in her overview of the shifting phases of banlieue cinema as part of an ongoing historical inheritance. This renewed and expanded discussion of the origins of banlieue film builds on her influential essay published in French.<sup>[2]</sup> Roland-François Lack (chapter two) then continues to explain that many of the earliest French films were shot in indeterminate zones between larger cities, as in the case of La Ciotat (Lumière), Montreuil-sous-Bois (Méliès), Joinville-le-Pont (Pathé), among other sites. Lack emphasizes how a geographic zone, or the space in-between as not quite urban, suburban, nor rural becomes an important staging ground during the early years of French cinema. It is a liminal space that was undefined, such that for the first twenty-five years of French cinema, the exact shooting location of French cinema was not a priority but merely incidental to early approaches to narrative construction. This perspective complements André Gaudréault's emphasis on storytelling in early cinema by means of examining the history of editing conventions such as cross-cutting.<sup>[3]</sup>

Rather than the identity of the locale, it is the function of roads, rivers, and canals as spaces of freedom in Jean-Louis Pautrot's discussion of films by Jean Epstein and Jean Vigo (chapter three) that looms large as sites of attraction. This remarkable discussion specifies the notion of the *film fluvial* or the river film subgenre as a means of establishing contrasts between an earlier period of *l'oeil-péniche*, as coined by Richard Abel, to a quickened pace of the roadway films. Through an emphasis on immobility and mobility, Pautrot concludes with extended commentary about *La Glace à trois faces* (Jean Epstein, 1927).

In the chapters to follow, the notion of *la zone*, an abbreviation of *zone non aedificandi*, comes to specify a context for the interwar banlieue. This term itself refers to a 250-meter setback from a fortification upon which no permanent building was legally permitted. Keith Reader's contribution (chapter four) examines how the banlieue is featured in several films during the 1930s with a detailed discussion of *Nogent, Eldorado du Dimanche* (Marcel Carné, 1929) as a means of inventing the banlieue as license for erotic transgression and criminality. Margaret C. Flinn's discussion of Julien Duvivier's films during the 1930s (chapter five) picks up on the thematization of the *guinguette*, or roadside tavern, as a utopian space of leisure. She coins the notion of "banlieuetopia" in reference to Foucault's notion of "heterotopia," but further specifies it as a mirror of a distinctly French working-class interwar space of national identity (p. 62). Eric

Bulot's discussion (chapter six) thematizes the notion of the *juste milieu* by way of three films from different periods in order to demonstrate how debates about artistic integrity and popular cinema may be understood from the margins. The essay relies on an inventive address to "suburban cinema," as he calls it (p. 82), through a dialectical act of distancing and a comparative discussion of *Ménilmontant* (Dimitri Kirsanoff, 1926), *Le Sang des bêtes* (Georges Franju, 1949), and *Colloque de chiens* (Raúl Ruiz, 1977). One of the most remarkable insights that Bulot brings to bear is the figure of the decapitated head, or the headless body, as a figure that becomes an apt geographic metaphor for geographic dislocation.

The four chapters that follow (chapters seven, eight, nine, and ten) focus on specific films in the work of well-known filmmakers that bring out a dimension of banlieue culture. Tristan Jean's etymology of banlieue creates a basis for his own discussion of Franju's work (chapter seven), particularly *Le Sang des bêtes* (1949) and *Les yeux sans visage* (1960). Malcolm Turvey's discussion of Jacques Tati (chapter eight) focuses on the particular uses of the suburban home in the case of *Mon Oncle* (1958) and the ongoing satire of suburban modernity. The following essay by Elisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck (chapter nine) focuses on Maurice Pialat's 1961 personal essay film *L'Amour existe*. It is described as an attack on the suburban home and the very question of whether love exists or is overdetermined by the lived environment. The film explores the effects of exchanging complacent suburban limitation for safety and a complex engagement with melancholia and loss. The narrow focus on an examination of the film within the broader terms of Pialat's oeuvre is an approach that carries over to Térésa Faucon's essay (chapter ten) focused on Jean-Luc Godard's "suburban years," that have been described as one of the most creative periods in his oeuvre (p. 126). These films, produced from the late 1950s to late 1960s (among other films shot in an array of spaces outside of Paris), feature a variety of exurban landscapes including the high-rise housing projects in La Courneuve (*Deux ou trois choses...*, 1967), the office buildings in La Défense (*Alphaville*, 1965), and the shantytowns of Nanterre (*La Chinoise*, 1967). Citing a number of earlier interviews with Godard about his filmmaking process, Faucon describes Godard's approach to location as a starting point in making several of these seminal films. The chapter culminates in a discussion of borders, the affective experience of massive low-income housing complexes (HLMs or *Habitations aux Loyers Modérés*), and the popular iconography of fast cars in a narrative context that connects the banlieue to Godard's cinematic aspirations during this period.

In the next three chapters (eleven, twelve, and thirteen), a more thematic approach is adopted. Philippe Met takes up the staging of the French *polar* genre (or thriller/detective fiction) in describing the landscape of the action in a wide range of films from the interwar period through the late 1980s. Staging, atmosphere, and an increasingly identifiable landscape become an important locus of action and alienation. A dystopian vision grips many of the protagonists in these films as they are identified with a well-defined landscape that shifts historically from *noir*-like settings to an increasingly overdetermined soulless landscape. Camille Canteux expands the media context for exurban spaces to the *grands ensembles*, or the massive housing complexes outside of Paris and Lyon, as with the case of Les Minguettes or Sarcelles. She picks up on themes of regeneration and erasure in her discussion of how these geographic regions and housing projects were conceived. In addition to a corpus of banlieue films, she also refers to television broadcasts, interspersing these with a more detailed history of the *grands ensembles* that were part of a public debate regarding quality of life and the pauperization of residents. Perceptions of these housing complexes shifted as they became associated with sensationalist news stories of crime

and suburban violence, marking the *grands ensembles* as a negative space that represented the undoing of *Les Trente Glorieuses*, or the prosperous era that preceded it.

The negationism of what the *grands ensembles* came to embody by the late 1960s in Canteux's essay is then followed by Derek Schilling's discussion of a series of films that take up the housing complexes that replaced them in the post-1968 era (chapter thirteen). Schilling points to a number of filmmakers whose work has engaged with these settings, including Jacques Baratier, Jean-Luc Godard, William Klein, and Agnès Varda, but devotes more focused attention to the various feature films and earlier television documentaries by Eric Rohmer. These films address the state of housing and the *villes nouvelles*, which were under construction during the 1970s and 1980s in Marne-la-Vallée and Cergy-Pointoise. The newly built planned communities lend themselves to a broader social critique of the constructed basis for happiness and its relationship to the expectations of its residents. The opposition between the planned community and the often unplanned nature of lived subjectivity becomes sociological threshold during the 1980s.

It is from this point that David Vasse picks up on the social cinema of Jean-Claude Brisseau (chapter fourteen) whose films demonstrate the bitterness and disenchantment among residents who live in the French *cités*. His first film, *La vie comme ça* (1978), was followed by a series of short films and the later features, *De bruit et de fureur* (1986) and *Céline* (1992). Most of these films take place in the suburb of Bagnolet, where he was a high school teacher, and the young protagonists are typically faced with magnetic force fields of downward mobility and struggle for salvation that are shown through metaphoric illusions. Brisseau's work was actively encouraged by Eric Rohmer, and his work marks an important transition towards unsentimental depictions of banlieue sociality and its relation to human nature. The final chapter of the volume (chapter fifteen) is focused on the ruins of the so-called red suburbs through a close reading of Hervé Le Roux's film *Reprise* (1997). The documentary relies on a re-edited fragment from the 1968 strike at the Wonder battery company located in Saint-Ouen, located on the outskirts of Paris. The foment of 1968 is compared to the transformed landscape in 1995 and the marginalization of the red, or previously socialist-identified, citizens of Parisian suburbs in the wake of ongoing gentrification. Given recent retrospectives associated with the fiftieth anniversary of May 1968, Guillaume Soulez's commentary about this film brings to light the shifting context of what was once part of a red belt political imaginary within a suburban context.

In closing, the contributions in this volume allow for a reconsideration of banlieue geographic contingency as suburb, projection, and social space that has always been integral to French cinema. The films and television documentaries under discussion function as an archive that allows us to understand the debates and features of the continual transformation of the French suburbs during the twentieth century. Many of the contributions to this volume open up a new register for examining social relations and larger questions that a wide array of French filmmakers continue to examine in their work. More writing about these films and the banlieue context is forthcoming<sup>[4]</sup> and the increased availability of the films under discussion may allow for further scrutiny of this important perspective and intervention into the study of French cinema.

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## NOTES

[1] David Leyval, *La banlieue, l'épreuve de l'utopie* (Paris: Publibook, 2009).

[2] Annie Fourcaut, "Aux origines du film de banlieue: Les banlieusards au cinéma (1930-1980)," *Sociétés et Représentations* 8(1999): 113-27.

[3] André Gaudréault, *Du littéraire au filmique: système du récit* (Paris: Méridiens-Klincksieck, 1988); for a relevant translated excerpt, see André Gaudréault, "Detours in Film Narrative: The Development of Cross-Cutting," in Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker eds., *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), pp. 133-50.

[4] Steven Ungar, *Critical Mass: Social Documentary in France from the Silent Era to the New Wave* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

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