Looking In, Looking Out; Looking Up, Looking Down – The Power of the Gaze in *Banlieue* Cinema

Although in a literal sense '*banlieue*' refers simply to the suburban area of French cities, culturally, the word has come to imply areas of low-income housing populated by France's poverty-stricken immigrant population. Early films dealing with the *banlieue* – such as Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle / Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1967) and Rohmer's *Les nuits de la pleine lune / Full Moon in Paris* (Éric Rohmer, France, 1984) – were chiefly concerned with contrasting the suburbs and the inner city. It wasn't until the late 1980s when, drawing on the influence of *Beur* cinema, the *banlieue* film emerged as its own distinct genre. Although the landmark *banlieue* film, *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, France, 1995), was released over twenty-five years ago, *banlieue* cinema remains a fertile genre for French filmmakers. Recent examples include *Bande de filles / Girlhood* (Céline Sciamma, France, 2014), *Divines* (Houda Benyamina, France/Qatar, 2016), *Les Misérables* (Ladj Ly, France, 2019), and *Gagarine* (Fanny Liatard and Jérémy Trouilh, France, 2020). As a genre necessarily concerned with racial identity and oppression, one of the most consistent features of *banlieue* cinema is its investigation into the power of looking. In fact, there are four different gazes regularly employed in *banlieue* films. On the one hand, there is 'looking in' and 'looking down', two gazes strongly associated with surveillance, a form of spectatorship which, due to its use by dominant power structures, is commonly racialised.[1] On the other hand, there is 'looking out' and 'looking up', modes of looking which are deployed in opposition to racialised surveillance gazes. As bell hooks says, 'the "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonised black people globally'.[2] While almost all *banlieue* films to some extent acknowledge 'looking in' and 'looking down', only

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[1] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 112.
[2] bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, class and sex at the movies* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 255.

select entries in the genre offer radical reversals – or *verlanisations* – of these gazes. Drawn

from *verlan*, a form of French backwards slang, the term *verlanisation* seems apposite since

not only is *verlan* strongly associated with the *banlieue*, but, crucially, it is also central to the

perception of racial identities in France. Many groups – *beurs* (Arabs), *feujs* (Jews), *kebla*

(Black) – have reappropriated *verlan* terms which were once used as slurs against them.[3]

Banlieue films similarly reappropriate cinematic gazes in order to express minority

experiences in contemporary France.

'Looking,' bell hooks wrote, 'is power'. This is certainly evident in the *banlieue* film,

where dominant systems hold power over the inhabitants of the *banlieue* via two methods of

'looking in'. Firstly, there is surveillance via news and media reportage. Secondly, there is, as

Adrian Fielder notes, 'institutional mechanisms of territorial control', such as police patrols

and 'helicopter surveillance'.[4] This latter form of surveillance is commonly featured – though

not always interrogated – in films told from the perspective of the police. For instance, in an

early scene from *Les Misérables*, Chris (Alexis Manenti) and Gwada (Djebri Zonga), two

officers in a Parisian anti-crime squad, take recruit, Stéphane (Damien Bonnard), on a patrol

of Montfermeil. As they drive along the streets, Chris points out several disreputable figures,

one of whom he claims trained as a terrorist in Syria. At one point, Chris stops the car and

asks Stéphane to help him 'frisk' a Black girl he believes he saw smoking underage. As Chris

launches into a torrent of verbal and physical abuse, the girl's friends complain, and one

starts to record Chris's misconduct on her phone. Chris snatches the phone and smashes it.

Such an incident reveals how the police force allows two White officers to drive around a

predominantly Black neighbourhood and, through the apparent authority of their gaze,

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[3] Natalie Lefkovitz, *Talking Backwards, Looking Forwards: The French Language Game Verlan* (Tübingen: Narr, 1991), 118-21.
[4] Adrian Fielder, 'Poaching on Public Space: Urban Autonomous Zones in French *Banlieue* Films,' in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, eds. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 273.

identify those individuals they consider 'troublesome'. When this gaze is returned – via the camera of a Black person's phone – it is seen as a threat to the status quo. Underlining this point, the bus stop where this confrontation plays out is dominated by a poster reading: '*sans les voir*'.

The oppression of *banlieue* residents is enacted not just through the gaze of authorities, but through media as well. Social anthropologist Loïc Wacquant claims that the popular image of the 'anomie' of 'ethnic ghettos' has been disseminated by French media sensationalism, especially from the early 1990s.[5] In addition to this, Luuk Slooter, in his ethnographic research of the *banlieue*, writes that state and media surveillance not only shapes the conception of the *banlieue* for outsiders, but for the inhabitants of the *banlieue* themselves.[6] Thus, opposition to the surveillance gaze in film has a double function. It can showcase to wide audiences a more accurate image of *banlieue* life, and it can also act as a means through which *banlieue* inhabitants reclaim their own identity.

It is no coincidence that one of the most popular and enduring *banlieue* films, *La Haine*, begins with a long montage of news footage detailing riots and police violence. Later in the film, Vinz (Vincent Cassel) becomes irate when a television crew appears in the housing project and starts to film him from a van. *La Haine* acknowledges the omniscience of media surveillance but also offers alternatives. As with the majority of *banlieue* films, the *verlanisation* of 'looking in' is directed not towards characters within the film, but towards the audience themselves. For instance, following *La Haine*'s opening montage, we cut to a slow zoom-in on the closed eyes of one of our three main characters, Saïd (Saïd Taghmaoui). As the camera settles on a close-up of his head and shoulders, Saïd opens his eyes and stares out at the viewer, reversing the preceding gaze of the news reports. Similarly, Vinz's

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[5] Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 139-32.
[6] Luuk Slooter, *The Making of the Banlieue: An Ethnography of Space, Identity and Violence* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 143.

rendition of Travis Bickle's iconic 'you talkin' to me' dialogue is shot from the perspective of a mirror, allowing Vincent Cassel to address the audience directly. In both scenes, the Jewish Vinz and the Arab Saïd are allowed to express themselves individually and hold the viewer in their gaze. The gaze of the news reports, in contrast, reduce all *banlieusards* to a singular threatening Other. Despite this, it's notable that Hubert (Hubert Koundé), the Black member of what Ginette Vincendeau terms the film's '*black-blanc-beur* trio', is not allowed a moment alone in front of the camera, looking out in direct address like Vinz and Saïd.[7] Even more notable in *La Haine* is the erasure of women, something which several recent *banlieue* films have sought to address.

One such film is Céline Sciamma's *Girlhood*, which follows Marieme (Karidja Touré), a teenager who joins a gang in the suburbs of Paris. Ginette Vincendeau asserts that the 'racial' aspects of *Girlhood* are left 'unexplored'.[8] However, such an assessment is lacking, and by contrasting *Girlhood* with an earlier film, *Entre les murs / The Class* (Laurent Cantet, France, 2008), we can see how Sciamma tackles Black female representation through the deployment of an oppositional gaze. *The Class*, though not set in a technical *banlieue*, takes place in a secondary school serving what the technology teacher describes as a '*quartier pourri*' ('crap district'). Consequently, the film, through its depiction of a working-class, multi-ethnic classroom, reflects, according to Martin O'Shaughnessy, France's 'broader anxieties [which] have converged around the country's *banlieues*'.[9] Cantet films *The Class*'s extensive schoolroom scenes in a *vérité* style. This, combined with the actors' naturalistic performances, means the film often resembles documentary or reportage, two forms associated with the oppressive surveillance gaze. Predictably, the film fails to endow its

[7] Ginette Vincendeau, '*La haine* and after: Arts, Politics, and the Banlieue,' *Current*, May 8, 2012, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/642-la-haine-and-after-arts-politics-and-the-banlieue

[8] Ginette Vincendeau, 'The Parisian *Banlieue* on Screen: So Close, Yet So Far,' in *Paris in the Cinema: Beyond the Flâneur*, eds. Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Palgrave, 2018), 92.

[9] Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Laurent Cantet* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 124.

Black characters with an oppositional gaze. In an early scene, a student named Khoumba (Rachel Reguilier) asks why, when writing exemplar sentences on the blackboard, M. Marin (François Bégaudeau) doesn't use names such as 'Aïssata, Rachid, or Ahmed'. These names, she argues, would more accurately reflect the ethnic makeup of contemporary France. Although Khoumba confronts M. Marin, Cantet does not film the scene in a correspondingly confrontational style. Alternating between Khoumba and M. Marin, traditional shot/reverse shots are used. Contrastingly, an early scene in *Girlhood* sees a teacher tell Marieme she must leave high school to pursue an NVQ. Marieme tries to explain that her low grades are the result of a fractured home life, but her teacher is unmoving, accusing her of not accepting responsibility. Sciamma shoots the entire scene in one take, with Marieme addressing the camera. It as if the audience assumes the perspective of the unseen teacher. Whilst Cantet, in *The Class*, only allows Khoumba to confront her White teacher, Sciamma, in *Girlhood*, allows Marieme to confront the White spectator. This reversal of the racialised surveillance gaze is seen again during the hotel scene, where Marieme and her newfound friends dance to Rihanna's song, 'Diamonds'. Lady (Assa Sylla) mimes the song while making eye contact with the viewer. Underlining the importance of her gaze as 'a site of resistance for colonised black people', Lady points to her eyes as Rihanna sings the words 'eye to eye, so alive'. Thus, to claim that race in *Girlhood* is 'unexplored' is to overlook the ways in which the film interacts with spectatorship.

The oppositional Black gaze Sciamma deploys in *Girlhood* is also evidenced in Houda Benyamina's *Divines*. Throughout the film, Benyamina uses footage shot on mobile phones, presented onscreen in a narrow vertical aspect ratio. Due to the selfie-esque nature of the footage, characters naturally address the viewer. While filming herself, the protagonist, Dounia (Oulaya Amamra), even mimics Vinz's Travis Bickle impersonation from *La Haine*. Therefore, by way of a mixed-media approach, *Divines* not only affords its Black female

characters the power to look, but also showcases modern portable technology as a means through which authentic representations of everyday Black life in the *banlieue* can be broadcast out. This notion of 'broadcasting out' as another reversal of 'looking in' can similarly be found in *Gagarine*, where the relationship between Youri (Alséni Bathily) and Diana (Lyna Khoudri) blossoms via the exchange of visualised morse code messages. Here, outward-moving media facilitates the connection between two oppressed neighbourhoods – Youri's predominantly African-inhabited apartment block and Diana's Romani community: the former soon to be demolished; the latter under fire from the police. Ladj Ly's *Les Misérables*, meanwhile, offers a combination of both 'looking in' *and* 'broadcasting out'. Near the start of the film, we see a young inhabitant of Montfermeil, Buzz (Al-Hassan Ly), flying a drone around his estate. From his iPad, he is able to connect to the drone's camera and spy on his neighbours. The main narrative thrust of the film arises from Buzz's happenstance filming of police brutality. During a confrontation, Gwada shoots a teenager, Issa (Issa Perica), at point-blank range with a riot gun. On discovering the incident has been filmed by a drone, Chris, Stéphane, and Gwada must track down the footage before it is used to discredit their own rewritten version of events. The film shows how methods of 'looking in' may be reappropriated by oppressed peoples to enable resistance.

As with 'looking in', the appearance of 'looking down' in *banlieue* cinema is split into two articulations. The first is a repetition of the surveillance gaze. While the act of looking downwards is sometimes echoed in camerawork – such as the aerial helicopter shot from the turntabling scene in *La Haine* – it is more commonly referred to in metaphors and analogies. For example, there is the story Hubert tells at the start of *La Haine* about 'a guy who falls from a fifty-storey building'. Coupled with an onscreen image of the earth, the protagonist of Hubert's story seems – impossibly – to be looking down on the planet from outer space as he falls. This perspective is further hinted at when Saïd graffities an

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advertisement, changing its slogan from '*le monde est à vous*' ('the world is yours') to '*le monde est à nous*' ('the world is ours'). Similarly, in *Divines*, Dounia complains that she repeatedly dreams of falling and disparages God for looking down and not acknowledging her. Even in *BAC Nord* / *The Stronghold* (Cédric Jimenez, France, 2020), a Marseille-based Netflix release, police officer, Grég Cerva (Gilles Lellouche), expresses his 'dream' to go to outer space so that he 'can see the planet all small'. The fact that this sentiment is voiced by a police officer is indicative of the downwards gaze's connection to dominant White power structures.

A second articulation of the downward gaze is exhibited through the widespread directorial ethos of *banlieue* films. Dominated by 'social realist narratives exploring issues of identity and exclusion', the majority of *banlieue* films, even if featuring action cinema-oriented violence, are *down-to-earth*.[10] There is a question, however, over whether such down-to-earth filmmaking practices are themselves derivative of an oppressive gaze. Does stark social realism, in presenting its subjects as largely violent and misery-stricken merely reaffirm harmful conceptions of the 'anomie' of the *banlieue*? Contemporary *banlieue* films may slowly be turning away from this social realist style and *verlanising* the downward gaze that has been prevalent in the genre for so long. Although Vincendeau is correct in noting that *banlieue* filmmakers have, in recent years, began to downplay violence and to diversify their cinema with more expansive representations of female characters, she does not mention any turn away from social realism.[11] Such a turn away, however, is demonstrated in *banlieue* cinema's most radical reversal of the downward gaze: *Gagarine*.

Before exploring *Gagarine*, it is worth mentioning that it is not the sole recent *banlieue* film to feature upwards gazes and camerawork. It is, however, the only film which,

[10] Will Higbee, 'Diasporic and Postcolonial Cinema in France from the 1990s to the Present,' in *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, eds. Raphaelle Moine et al. (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 142.
[11] Vincendeau, 'The Parisian *Banlieue* on Screen,' 89-90.

through its upwards movements, reverses the downward gaze's complicity with both the surveillance gaze *and* the dominant *banlieue* filmmaking ethos. For instance, in *Dheepan* (Jacques Audiard, France, 2015), our eponymous protagonist, Dheepan Natarajan (Antonythasan Jesuthasan), is shown around a housing estate in Le Pré-Saint-Gervais. The camera gazes up at the *banlieue* towers. However, the fact that this low-angle shot concentrates on a series of suspicious figures means that it conveys a threat rather than mounts a representational opposition. Only in *Divines* does there appear a piece of filmmaking comparable to *Gagarine*. In one scene, Dounia and her best friend, Maimouna (Déborah Lukumuena), pretend to drive a sportscar. Contradicting the strict realism of the rest of the film, Dounia and Maimouna truly appear to coast around the *banlieue* in the invisible car they have dreamt up. This instance of fantasy is assisted by an upward-looking camera. By refusing to look down at Dounia and Maimouna's feet, the real-world choreography which allows our characters' impossible movement remains unseen. Nevertheless, this sequence is an exception amid the largely realist style of *Divines*.

Gagarine, on the other hand, consistently juxtaposes upwards gazes with an equally upwards-looking attitude to *banlieue* life. Breaking with the down-to-earth approach of the genre, *Gagarine* more closely resembles a form of science-fiction-inflected magical realism. Protagonist Youri at one point ascends into the stars in a home-built spaceship. Just like Youri, Liatard and Trouilh's camera is always harking to the skies; the downwards gaze is rebuffed. Encapsulating this, the title of the film appears onscreen following an almost telescopic zoom-in onto the surface of the moon, before cutting to a wide shot of the windows of the Gagarine housing estate. The implication: the residents should look upwards rather than downwards. This gaze is then embroiled with questions of race in the following scene. We see Youri, wearing a Malian football shirt, interacting with various Black, Arab, and Middle Eastern inhabitants of the *banlieue*. From this portrait of suburban life, we cut to

an extremely low-angle shot of a *banlieue* tower, the top left corner of the frame occupied by

a pale sky. *Gagarine* rejects the interracial violence of films such as *Les Misérables* and

instead foregrounds a sense of community, associating such an ethos with a more upwardly

gaze. Tellingly, in one scene, Youri is struggling to climb a construction site crane. To

counteract his fear of heights, Diana makes Youri wear a blindfold so that he is physically

unable to look down. The young lovers – one Black, one Romani – reject the downwards

gaze in order to climb upwards and affirm their relationship. It is notable that the filmmakers,

in wanting to focus on 'people who have huge dreams', felt that they needed to 'take another

point of view'.[12] This filmmaking attitude is again made explicit during the solar eclipse

scene. Everyone in the Gagarine estate, whether using solar viewing glasses or Youri's

homemade eclipse observer, turns their head skyward. As the moon covers the sun, we cut to

home video footage of the *banlieue* from decades past. Such a cut makes clear that the gaze

can record and shape cultural memory, and therefore allow French minority and ethnic

experiences a place in the country's history. As Robert Burgoyne writes: 'the cinematic

rewriting of history has, in the present cultural moment, accrued an extraordinary degree of

social power and influence'.[13] *Gagarine* itself becomes a form of 'cinematic rewriting', as

Cité Gargarine was demolished shortly after filming. Liatard and Trouilh's film is thus a

document through which memories of the housing estate can centre not on violence and

tragedy but on hope and solidarity. This hope and solidarity is expressed through the power

of looking, through the *verlanisation* of the dominant racialised gaze.

Overall, the last twenty-five years of *banlieue* cinema has showcased the significant

role that modes of looking play in shaping the perception of racialised experiences in France.

'Looking in' and 'looking down' are used by dominant power structures to control and

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[12] SensCritique, 'Fanny Liatard et Jérémy Trouilh: L'Interview Popcorns ("Gagarine"),' YouTube, 9:59, June 29, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYSHYsLCvSg

[13] Robert Burgoyne, 'Memory, history and digital imagery in contemporary film,' in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 223.

oppress Black, Arab, Romani, and other minority ethnic groups. Contrastingly, 'looking out' and 'looking up' are *verlanisations* of the dominant gaze and used as acts of resistance. By comparing recent *banlieue* films with older examples, it is clear that the *verlanisation* of the dominant gaze has taken on greater importance in recent years. Sciamma's *Girlhood* uses an oppositional gaze in order to give Black teenage girls a voice. *Gargarine*, whilst perhaps lacking in Black female representation, is, otherwise, the most radical new entry into the genre. With Youri's yearning to escape to the moon, the filmmakers reverse both the surveillance gaze and the down-to-earth filmmaking style of much *banlieue* cinema. '*Le monde est à nous*' becomes '*le ciel est à nous*'.

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