

## In da banlieue: French cinema and social housing

Next week the Northampton Film House are showing 'Gargarine' a new French film, followed by a discussion involving Hope about its themes related to the importance, value and neglect of social housing, and its impact on those most vulnerable and marginalised. It follows on from a previous showing of 'Dispossession' at the Film house as a cinematic exploration of why social housing matters to the poorest and most excluded.

The dismal segregation of the banlieue – suburban, poor local authority housing estates occupied by a mix of all communities but with a concentration of black and arab communities – has been mined by a rich list of French film makers back to the 1970s. *La Haine* (1995) is probably the one that really supercharged the genre, and as Wakeman has argued, the estates have become as stylised and cliché driven as other cinematic views of the eternal city as a whole: "*Overdone, over-imagined and over-cinematized...*".

Many of these films are just exploitative (we are talking about you Luc Besson! – *District 13* (2004)) and the setting is just a backdrop of action and urban colour. Some try seriously to look at the desperate poverty and neglect and the impact on lives that French social policy has failed to address, bringing in the explicit racial issues of these communities, the '*métissage*' or racial melting pot that these communities represent. Its an ongoing and major issue in France, with the hapless French president Macron first scrapping a major banlieue recovery programme and then, this summer, with the shooting of a child in a Marseille project, promising to start a new search for answers: <https://www.thelocal.fr/20210902/marseilles-drug-crime-in-spotlight-as-macron-visits/> .

Two of the latest films, *Les Misérables* (2020) and *Gargarine* (2021) take very different approaches to telling banlieue tales. The first is a gritty, ultimately horrific and no holds barred intergenerational conflict film in the *La Haine* tradition. Police stupidity and inter-community and generational tensions combine and lead to an explosive conclusion. Its an in your face and quite startling film with a lot to say.

*Gargarine* is in a different tempo. No parkour around a housing block, but the gaze is in it's own way as penetrating. This is a study of a young man and his personal relationship to his own community, which for him, and his neighbours, means a great deal. Its a dreamy, beautiful and lyrical view of people and community, of place and belonging. The film shows how housing is not just a building, its about the life that surrounds it and the meaning of place. Its an interesting contrast to earlier banlieue films such as Godard's *Numéro 2* (1975) where the displacement theme of banlieue life, that *no-one* was born there, is replaced here by a study of attachment to those places. Come and enjoy.

*Gargarine* is shown at 6.30 on 22nd September at Northampton Film house.

*Independent Filmmakers and the Invention of the Paris Suburbs* -

Rosemary Wakeman, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 84-95