

Film Season: Urban Development and Society in French Cinema

Contents

Introduction	1
The ‘Generic’ City and the Liminal Space in <i>Extension du domaine de la lutte</i>	5
Bibliography	7
Filmography	8

Introduction

It has been suggested that the development of cinema as a cultural form is inextricably connected with urban development, with both phenomena serving as elements of ‘modernity’ and as means of manipulating space and time (Mennel, 2019, p. 2; p. 4; Clarke, 1997, p. 3). This notion is especially true of France, and particularly Paris – it was in the *Grand Café*, on one of Haussmann’s recently-completed *Grands Boulevards*, that the pioneering Lumière brothers held their first public screening (Mennel, 2019, pp. 1-2). Since this event, Paris’ urban development has continued in parallel with developments in cinematography (Mennel, 2019, p. 61), with Paris serving as both an exemplifier of urban expansion (Mennel, 2019, p. 2) and as the hub of the French film industry – therefore establishing itself as the predominant urban setting in French cinema (Bazgan, 2010, p. 96).

The “crowded yet anonymous” nature of the urban environment (Clarke, 1997, p. 3) has various societal consequences – many of which have, in the Parisian context, been captured with ever-developing cinematographic techniques (Mennel, 2019, p. 61). This film season brings together four films – all set predominantly in the Paris metropolitan area – which, through a range of cinematographic approaches, present contrasting experiences of the urban space and of the society that it fosters. These differing representations allow the viewer to form a balanced view of urban development in France, with all its societal implications.

Produced during a period of considerable suburban expansion which saw a proliferation of *grand ensemble* apartment buildings (Hensman, 2013, pp. 444-445), *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (Godard, 1967) is a useful starting point for this topic, and one which presents concerns relating to the *grands ensembles'* perceived privileging of consumerism over social cohesion (Hensman, 2013, p. 445). *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Harel, 1999) serves as a follow-up to Godard's thesis, presenting the modern urban environment, and particularly the *grand ensemble*, as the facilitator of atomised and isolated existences.

These concerns are set aside in *Amélie* (Jeunet, 2001), which presents a nostalgic vision of Paris as a site of social possibilities through its eccentric ensemble of characters, but which has been criticised for both its "*passéiste*" presentation of the capital and for its marginalisation of the city's ethnic diversity (Bazgan, 2010, p. 103; Kaganski, 2001). The opposite could be said of *Divines* (Benyamina, 2016), which brings ethnic minority experiences to the forefront of its narrative of modern urban struggle, presenting the urban environment as one which allows for a range of social configurations – an attribute which has both positive and negative consequences for its protagonists.

Through its portrayal of the *4000 logements* housing project in La Courneuve (Cardin, 2006), *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* puts forward an example of the "generic city", which Elsaesser (2016, p. 26) describes as a network of "high modernist boxes". In *Deux ou trois choses*, Godard presents a complex system of geometric concrete structures, sometimes using close-up shots which deny the viewer a clear sense of space, and occasionally using canted camera angles which amplify this sense of disorientation and unease.

This feeling of disquietment leads into Godard's critique of the *grands ensembles* as spaces of empty consumerism – a concern which is carefully expressed through montage editing and non-diegetic sound. As a group of children discuss the lack of a playground on the *4000 logements* estate, images of indefinable concrete structures are interspersed with an image of an advertising poster which simply reads "*En vente ici*". This juxtaposition reflects the concerns of many of the estate's real-life residents, who complained that, although the development boasted plentiful retail space, there were few places where they could gather and socialise (Hensman, 2013, p. 445). These concerns are summarised in the film's final

shot, which shows a range of consumer products arranged to form a model cityscape, or as Hensman (2013, p. 445) suggests, a model of the *4000 logements* estate.

The 'generic city' of *Deux ou trois choses* is revisited over thirty years later in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Harel, 1999). Just as the milieu of *Deux ou trois choses* is defined by its horizontal and vertical lines (Cardin, 2006), the urban environment of *Extension* is equally geometric and restrictive. In the opening stages of the film, lingering static shots of the *grand ensemble* inhabited by *Notre Héros* – the film's unnamed protagonist – display an environment which is notable only for its featurelessness and its uniformity.

The description of the 'generic city' as resembling "the circuit board of a computer" (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 26) is particularly relevant to *Notre Héros*, who works as a computer programmer at a software company. While *Deux ou trois choses* presents a portrait of the urban environment at a time of increased economic liberalism and sexual revolution, *Extension* is set at the turn of the internet age, which could be considered the successive moment of major societal change. *Extension* therefore serves as a notable point of reflection for the concerns originally expressed by Godard.

The restrictive, indistinct nature of *Notre Héros'* surroundings is reflected in his own life, presented as an interminable cycle of *métro-boulot-dodo* which leaves little possibility for social activity – a situation which is predicted in *Deux ou trois choses* (Hensman, 2013, pp. 444-445). This leads him to conclude, in his internal monologue, that the societal changes of the 1960s had little long-term, positive impact – a view which vindicates the concerns raised by Godard, at least regarding urban development.

In contrast to the featureless, 'generic' urban environments of *Deux ou trois choses* and *Extension*, *Amélie* presents an interpretation of Paris' "recognizable cityscape" (Mennel, 2019, p. 2), in which Haussmann's *Grands Boulevards* connect well-known landmarks such as the *Basilique du Sacré-Cœur*, the *Cathédrale Notre-Dame*, and the *Gare de l'Est*. Even the film's lesser-known landmarks, such as the distinctive architecture of *La Chapelle* Métro station, are viewed from a sufficient distance, and for a sufficient length of time, to register with the viewer as locations which are significant within the film's clear spatial boundaries.

However, the urban environment of *Amélie* is far from an objective reflection of modern Paris – by his own admission, Jeunet sought to create a manipulated Paris in *Amélie*; one

which avoided the detritus and congestion of the modern urban environment to evoke a feeling of nostalgia (Indiewire, 2001). This philosophy is particularly apparent during Amélie's visit to the *Abbesses* Métro station, which is not only unnaturally empty and clean, but is also presented in a yellowed light, reminiscent of sepia photography, with the scene's diegetic *caf-conc'* music adding to its sense of reminiscence.

The manipulated nature of Jeunet's Paris allows for the convergence of its various characters and plotlines. The emptiness of the *Abbesses* Métro station enables Amélie's first encounter with Nino, while the careful placement of street furniture allows her to reunite Bretodeau with his childhood possessions in a scene which represents a crucial point in her character development. The urban environment of *Amélie* can therefore be understood as a "cluster city" (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 30), where urban development facilitates a limitless variety of transitory social interactions.

While *Amélie*'s 'cluster city' is facilitated by nostalgic and manipulated elements, the 'cluster city' of *Divines* is materialised through a narrative which attempts to present the harsh realities of modern urban life (The Pantopic, 2016). The streets and buildings of Paris' *banlieues*, which have often served as "an emblematic space of social exclusion" in French cinema (Higbee, 2010, p. 201), serve here to bring the film's young protagonists together with Rebecca, a local drug dealer – an alliance which brings short-term gain for the film's protagonists, but which ultimately has tragic consequences.

While the *grands ensembles* of *Deux ou trois choses* and *Extension* serve as spaces of potential, or actual, social isolation, the *banlieue* setting of *Divines* functions as a site of social possibilities. Although this environment still represents, as in earlier films, "a world populated by strangers" (Clarke, 1997, p. 4), its protagonists traverse its streets and corridors to bring these 'strangers' into their own narratives. This notion is encapsulated when the protagonists appear at the front door of Rebecca's apartment to offer their work, thereby breaking through the spatial barriers which isolate the protagonists of *Deux ou trois choses* and *Extension*.

In summary, these four films display contrasting representations of urban development and of its societal consequences. Godard's thesis of the modern urban space as a site of social isolation is met with opposing responses in *Extension* and *Amélie*, which serve as respective

examples of the 'generic' and 'cluster' city – while *Extension* vindicates Godard's thesis, *Amélie* presents the urban environment as a site of boundless social possibilities. Perhaps *Divines* presents the most balanced view of the French urban space – one which acknowledges its social possibilities while admitting its potential perils.

The 'Generic' City and the Liminal Space in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*

The opening scenes of *Extension*, during which *Notre Héros* carries out his solitary routines in his modest *grand ensemble* apartment, serve as a useful starting point in understanding the representation of urban development put forward by Harel. The *grands ensembles*, as presented in *Extension*, are neither the 'symbols of modernity' presented in *Deux ou trois choses* (Cardin, 2006), nor the "run-down" conurbations of the *banlieue* film (Higbee, 2016, p. 201). Rather, the apartment of *Notre Héros* is presented in its lived-in state – functional at first glance, but cluttered and unclean when viewed in close-up. This is emblematic of *Notre Héros* himself – a protagonist whose mental state is in disarray following a recent divorce, and who admits to social and sexual isolation, but who also holds a senior position in an emerging industry, allowing him to maintain an air of respectability.

Notre Héros' modest apartment contrasts starkly with his professional environment. The sleek, glass-fronted spaces which he traverses are reflective of the prestige and modernity of his occupation, further reinforcing the imbalance between his personal life and his professional life. Both spaces, however, as well as the cafés, restaurants, and leisure centres visited by *Notre Héros* during his downtime, serve to isolate and atomise the protagonist. *Notre Héros* observes the actions of others through the windows of the film's various buildings, and even listens to the conversations of his neighbours through the walls of his apartment, but he is unable to break through these spatial barriers, resigning himself to a solitary existence. This predicament is further illustrated by the fact that he is typically alone in the frame, regardless of his precise location within the urban space.

The urban environment of *Extension* exemplifies the "generic city" (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 26), with the first indication of its location within metropolitan Paris arriving over fifteen minutes into the film's duration. It is at this point that Catherine, a colleague of *Notre Héros*,

lambasts the capital for what she perceives as its antisocial and uncaring culture, stating “*les gens ne se rencontrent pas [...] on peut crever sur place dans la rue, personne ne lèverait le petit doigt*”. These criticisms could be applied to *Notre Héros*, who is not only unable to break through the spatial barriers of the urban environment, but who also, later in the film, appears completely unfazed upon witnessing the death of a man in a department store.

Extension therefore presents a narrative of social isolation, portraying the ‘generic’ city as an environment which facilitates separation and atomisation, and where spatial barriers have a depersonalising effect, discouraging empathy and humanity. Through his internal monologue, *Notre Héros* draws parallels between the featureless, uniform architecture of his surroundings and the society that it fosters. This stream of consciousness leads to his perception of the urban environment as one which offers the illusion of free choice, but which is, in fact, governed by strict social norms and corporate etiquette, with the only genuine choices being the products that one consumes.

Extension could therefore be viewed as a vindicating follow-up to the thesis provided by Godard in *Deux ou trois choses*. At its heart, *Extension* is a referential film which “yokes together” the concepts of economic liberalism and “social permissiveness” which both gained relevance in the late 1960s (Reader, 2001, pp. 119-120), and provides an update on their effects. Through his internal monologue, *Notre Héros* delivers his assessment of the strikes and demonstrations which occurred across France in May 1968. He describes this period as a temporary state of suspense, after which “*la machine a recommencé à tourner de manière encore plus rapide, encore plus impitoyable*”, implying that the liberalism of the late 1960s served only to create a more competitive and unforgiving society.

As *Notre Héros* contemplates the transitory “*flottement*” which occurred three decades prior, Harel presents a series of static shots which show the empty train station in which the protagonist ponders these ideas, focusing particularly on waiting areas, ticket machines, and platforms. This scene serves as a notable example of the film’s use of liminal spaces, which Dale and Burrell (2008, quoted in Shortt, 2015, p. 634) describe as spaces which are “at the boundary of two dominant spaces”, but “not fully part of either”. In the train station scene, Harel juxtaposes liminal space with liminal time (Shortt, 2015, p. 637) – just as these spaces serve as stop-off points between the place of departure and the destination, the social

unrest of May 1968 represents a moment of pause at the intersection of two chapters of social history.

Similar juxtapositions can be observed in *Extension*'s other uses of liminal spaces, particularly when considering that the film is set at the turn of a new societal era – that of the “information society” (Reader, 2001, p. 120) – as Harel punctuates the film’s narrative with static shots of the staircases, footbridges, and passageways of *Notre Héros*' ultramodern professional environment. As well as serving as the hub of the information age, these spaces evoke a transition, through their liminal dimension, between the liberal society which emerged from the social unrest of the late 1960s (Reader, 2001, p. 120) and a new, technological society.

As in the case of the train station where *Notre Héros* ponders the events of May 1968, these liminal spaces are largely devoid of visible human activity, further reinforcing the film’s concern with urban isolation. *Notre Héros* describes his occupation as “*un encombrement inutile pour les neurones*”, demonstrating that his opinion of the information age is as downbeat as his view of social liberalism. The emptiness of these liminal corporate spaces, therefore, serves to mark a renewed threat to social cohesion in the urban environment.

In summary, *Extension* not only addresses the isolation and atomisation provoked by the spatial barriers of the modern ‘generic’ city, but also refers to both the past and the future in its assessment of the negative aspects of urban development. In doing so, *Extension* presents a ‘liminal’ urban environment – one which fosters major societal changes, often negative, and typically punctuated by a period of uncertainty and suspense.

Bibliography

Bazgan, N. (2010) ‘Female Bodies in Paris: Iconic Urban Femininity and Parisian Journeys’, *Studies in French Cinema*, 10(2), pp. 95-109.

Cardin, A. (2006) ‘Les 4000 logements de La Courneuve : réalités et imaginaires cinématographiques’, *Cahiers d’Histoire*, 98, pp. 65-80. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/chrhc/864?lang=fr> (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Clarke, D.B. (1997) *The Cinematic City*. London; New York: Routledge.

Elsaesser, T. (2016) 'In the City But Not Bounded by It: Cinema in the Global, the Generic and the Cluster City' in Andersson, J. and Webb, L. (ed.) *Global Cinematic Cities: New Landscapes of Film and Media*. London: Columbia University Press, pp. 19-35.

Hensman, R. (2013) 'Oracles of Suburbia: French Cinema and Portrayals of Paris Banlieues, 1958-1968', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 21(4), pp. 435-451.

Higbee, W. (2016) 'Interstitial Cityspace and the Immigrant Experience in Contemporary French Cinema' in Andersson, J. and Webb, L. (ed.) *Global Cinematic Cities: New Landscapes of Film and Media*. London: Columbia University Press, pp. 201-217.

Indiewire (2001) *Interview: The Fabulous Destiny of Jean-Pierre Jeunet*. Available at: <https://www.indiewire.com/2001/11/interview-the-fabulous-destiny-of-jean-pierre-jeunet-80679/> (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Kaganski, S. (2001) «*Amélie*» *pas jolie*. Available at: https://www.liberation.fr/cinema/2001/05/31/amelie-pas-jolie_366387/ (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Mennel, B. (2019) *Cities and Cinema*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Reader, K. (2001) 'Jouissance at the Margins: Phillippe Harel's Extension du domaine de la lutte/Whatever', *Studies in French Cinema*, 1(2), pp. 118-125.

Shortt, H. (2015) 'Liminality, Space and the Importance of 'Transitory Dwelling Places' at Work', *Human Relations*, 68(4), pp. 633-658.

The Pantopic (2016) *An Interview: Houda Benyamina*. Available at: <https://thepanoptic.co.uk/2016/10/14/interview-houda-benyamina/> (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Filmography

Amélie (2001) Directed by J.-P. Jeunet. Available at: Box of Broadcasts (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle (1967) Directed by J.-L. Godard. Available at: YouTube (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Divines (2016) Directed by: H. Benyamina. Available at: Netflix (Accessed: 26 April 2022).

Extension du domaine de la lutte (1999) Directed by P. Harel. Available at: Vimeo (Accessed: 26 April 2022).