



Grands Ensembles: Retracing a History of Rejection

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Reviewed: Camille Canteux, *Filmer les grands ensembles. Villes rêvées, villes introuvables : une histoire des représentations audiovisuelles des grands ensembles, milieu des années 1930 – début des années 1980*, Paris, Créaphis Éditions, “Lieux habités” series, 2014.

From its very beginnings, the urban model of the “grand ensemble” – the large-scale high-rise housing estate – has appealed to film-makers. For half a century, these films have not only recorded and established image-types but also changed people’s representations of these neighbourhoods – and, more generally, their rejection of them.

Reflections – and doubts – concerning urban policy in France currently abound, particularly on the direction that should be taken by the second phase of the PNRU, France’s National Urban Renewal Policy. With this in mind, Camille Canteux’s recent book, *Filmer les grands ensembles* (“Filming Housing Estates”) is a timely reminder of how the issue of large-scale housing projects is still weighed down by images and stereotypes. From the construction of the first model estate in the 1930s (La Muette in Drancy, in the north-eastern inner suburbs of Paris) to the first demolitions of housing blocks – often referred to as “towers” (or “points”) and “slabs” according to their form – at the turn of the 1980s (e.g. Olivier de Serres estate in Villeurbanne, to the east of Lyon, in 1978; Les Minguettes in Vénissieux, also in the Lyon suburbs, in 1983; the Debussy “slab” on the Cité des 4000 estate in La Courneuve, north-east of Paris, in 1986), large system-built housing estates in France have been extensively filmed and their images endlessly circulated, gradually producing a complex web of representations that has largely contributed to the depreciation of the view we have of these estates, even today.

The grand ensemble as a cinematic object

The first films were contemporary with the first estates: as early as the 1930s, Jean-Benoît Lévy (*Construire* [“Build”], 1934) and Jean Epstein (*Les Bâisseurs* [“The Builders”], 1938) both produced documentaries about the project at La Muette. These first two films paved the way for more prolific activity after the war, first in the form of films acquired or produced by the Ministry for Reconstruction and its successors, followed by television productions (programmes, reports, documentaries, dramas), and lastly cinema productions (documentary films, dramas). In 1945, the ministry’s external relations department began to develop a veritable “audiovisual communication policy” (p. 37). While it never developed “the technical capacity to make its own films”, choosing instead to “call upon independent production companies” (p. 37), the department bought in and above all commissioned films, collecting the information to be used in them, guiding, rereading and annotating scripts, sometimes even drafting commentaries. The aim, in essence, was to “promote and convince of the merits of the policies implemented” (p. 39) by distributing these films via various channels: in-house projections at the ministry, screenings organized by its regional

directorates as part of local exhibitions, travelling screenings as part of campaigns promoting construction and housing, and even projections in cinemas as the first part of double features. These “official” productions were complemented, essentially from the late 1950s onwards, by many other audiovisual productions – some for television (four to five annually between 1957 and 1970, rising to 10 or more a year after 1970), others for the cinema (tens of films, especially dramas, from the late 1950s onwards) – whose formats and content changed “with the transformations of the media that disseminated them” (p. 46). From the late 1930s to the early 1980s, these films productions adopted different outlooks – some institutional, others reflecting alternative standpoints – bringing contrasting views into juxtaposition, with the aim of using images to make the reality of these estates – a reality long poorly understood in the human and social sciences – more intelligible. This reflects how important it is that we gain a better understanding of how this abundance of audiovisual productions helped configure our representations, however scholarly or mundane, of large-scale housing projects. On the basis of a corpus of over 300 works, including films from the collections of the former Ministry of Infrastructure, television shows archived by INA (the French National Audiovisual Institute) and a significant number of documentary films and dramas shown in cinemas during the period in which these estates were built, Camille Canteux “examines the emergence, dissemination and disappearance of certain images and certain themes” (p. 22) and attempts to “identify trends, breaks, continuities” (p. 22) – in short, she patiently reconstructs the genealogy and plasticity of a collective imagination composed of both visual and social imagery.

The permanence of images versus changing representations

In addition to its detailed analysis of a large – and largely unknown – corpus, one of the principal merits of this work is that it clearly shows the three closely interconnected chronological phases that governed the filming of *grands ensembles*. First, from a synchronic point of view, the production of images of housing estates responds to a certain standardization. From one film to another, the same types of image and the same motifs were repeated, producing a series of leitmotifs or stereotypes that gradually became more or less entrenched. As worlds characterized by gigantism and accumulation,¹ these endless townscapes of points and slabs do not truly belong to the domain of the city: we never see anyone arrive there on foot, and the first impression given of these estates is typically via wide-angle views set against a backdrop of (sub)urban no man’s lands.² Furthermore, these outlying neighbourhoods are also shown to be home to something of an “outlier” population: a population where adult men were generally absent and where, conversely, women, children and – especially from the 1960s onwards – “young people” are overrepresented. These large estates therefore constitute something of a feminine world, both domesticated and automated, and are soon struck by a modern form of melancholy, known in French as “*sarcellite*” (“Sarcellitis”,³ similar to the “new-town blues” phenomenon recorded in the UK), identified as a disease essentially affecting women.⁴ These estates and their numerous large open spaces embodied the future and were long portrayed as a paradise for children;⁵ indeed, it would not be until the late 1970s and made-for-television films such as Jean-Claude Brisseau’s *La Vie comme ça* [released as *Life the Way It Is* in English], shot in 1978 but broadcast only in 1994, and *Les Ombres* [“The Shadows”], filmed

¹ See, for example, “Quarante mille voisins” [“Forty Thousand Neighbours”], a report by Jacques Krier and Pierre Tchernia as part of the programme *Cinq Colonnnes à la une*, 2 December 1960; or the film *La Millième Fenêtre* [released as *The Thousandth Window* in English], Robert Menegoz, 1960.

² See, for example, *Les Cœurs verts* [released as *Naked Hearts* in English], Édouard Luntz, 1966.

³ Translator’s note: named after Sarcelles, a northern suburb of Paris that was massively developed as a *grand ensemble* between 1955 and 1975 (see also footnote 13 below).

⁴ See, for example, the report “Une histoire d’amour” [“A Love Story”] within the television programme *Qu’en pensez-vous ?*, 27 September 1963.

⁵ See, for example, the short film *Visages de la France* [“Faces of France”], Marcel de Hubsch, 1954; or “Les espaces verts” [“Green Spaces”], a report by Jacques Frémontier, Daniel Karlin, Michel Pamart and Paul Seban as part of the programme *Vivre aujourd’hui*, Deuxième chaîne de l’ORTF (predecessor of the current TV channel France 2), 27 August 1970.

in 1982, that this particularly tenacious cliché would finally crumble. Lastly, as a world populated by “young people”, these estates for the first time showed the French population an image of the nation’s “youth”⁶ – a theme that would be omnipresent from the late 1960s onwards. This first, broadly constant approach, involving the standardization and repetition of certain motifs, was later complemented by a second, more variable but essentially circular process: the production of images of *grands ensembles* followed a sort of cycle corresponding more or less to the phasing of major building operations that repeated itself from one decade to the next. Each cycle would begin with a series of films devoted to a “major project” that was at the start of its implementation phase. These films, featuring architects, planners and elected officials,⁷ interspersed with views of models and building sites, highlighted the hope and utopian ideals that characterized each new operation. They were very soon followed by films focusing on the first inhabited buildings, including interviews with residents who would typically express the first doubts and criticisms about the project in question, but who nevertheless continued to be presented as kinds of modern-day pioneers.⁸ Next would come films focusing on the project’s failure, adopting a tone of denigration,⁹ swiftly followed by films promoting a new pilot operation that was supposed to correct the mistakes of previous projects. This “circularity of discourse” helps us to understand how, in the late 1950s, it was possible for *grands ensembles* to be simultaneously promoted and condemned in the various audiovisual output of public institutions, with each new large-scale operation being portrayed as better than the last: Toulouse–Le Mirail would put right the mistakes of Sarcelles, La Grande Borne those of Toulouse–Le Mirail, the new towns of the 1960s and 1970s¹⁰ those of older housing projects, and so on and so forth.

From promotion to criticism

Finally, from a diachronic perspective, this “circular discourse” forms part of a more long-term linear trajectory, during which a spectacular image reversal, “from approval to rejection” (p. 123), takes place, continuing up to the present day. During the first phase of this trajectory, from the mid-1930s to the late 1960s, a first generation of images were produced where initial approval and enthusiasm are gradually displaced by doubts. In many films produced and made in the 1950s, such as *Visages de la France* [“Faces of France”] by Marcel Hubsch (1954) or *Maisons d’Alsace* [“Houses of Alsace”] by André Zwoboda (1954), *grands ensembles* are presented in counterpoint to the ancient city, portrayed as unsafe, and its anarchic, sprawling low-rise suburbs. While some criticisms appear in dramas,¹¹ and even in institutional productions,¹² large-scale housing projects continue to be presented – and perceived – as remedies, to uncontrolled suburban sprawl on the one hand, and to the continuing housing crisis on the other, in a way forming defences to deflect criticism. Compared to these representations, which remain nuanced, the 1960s marked a turning point. From Maurice Pialat’s violent diatribe in *L’Amour existe* [“Love Exists”] in 1960, and for the decade that followed, discourse would be dominated by ambivalence in place of deference and

⁶ See, for example, “Les copains de la bande” [“Friends from the Gang”], a report by Jacques Krier as part of the programme *Le Monde en quarante minutes*, Première chaîne de l’ORTF (predecessor of the current TV channel TF1), 30 September 1965; or the film *La Rage au poing* [released as *Raging Fists* in English], Éric Le Hung, 1973.

⁷ For example: Alexis Josic, Georges Candilis and Shadrach Woods in “L’avenir d’une ville” [“The Future of a City”], a report by Robert Clarke, Jean Lallier and Nicolas Strotzky as part of the programme *Entrée libre*, Première chaîne de l’ORTF (predecessor of TF1), 28 January 1965.

⁸ See, for example, the short film *La Cité des hommes* [“The City of Men” or “The Estate of Men”, as the word *cité* has two meanings], Frédéric Rossif, 1966.

⁹ See, for example, “L’enfer du décor” [“Hell Behind the Scenes”], a report by Bernard Gesbert as part of the programme *La Vie ensemble*, Deuxième chaîne de l’ORTF (predecessor of France 2), 8 July 1973.

¹⁰ Translator’s note: the French government introduced a new towns policy in 1965, resulting in the designation of nine new settlements between 1969 and 1973 (five around Paris, and one each near Lyon, Marseille, Lille and Rouen).

¹¹ See, for example, *Les Moutons de Panurge* [released as *Panurge’s Sheep* in English], Jean Girault, 1961; or *Mélodie en sous-sol* [released as *Any Number Can Win* in English], Henri Verneuil, 1963.

¹² In a series of television programmes dating from 1961, Pierre Sudreau adopts a highly critical stance, referring to *grands ensembles* as “brand-new slums”.

hope. The *grand ensemble* of reference at the time was the “new town”¹³ at Sarcelles, to the north of Paris, which Frédéric Rossif had recently filmed for the Société Centrale Immobilière de la Caisse des Dépôts (SCIC):¹⁴ despite its final message, tinted with hope, *La Cité des hommes*¹⁵ (1966) hardly ever departs from an overwhelming atmosphere of melancholy. Above all, television was now giving the people a voice – something the ministry did not do in its films – and one that, more often than not, proved to be critical. The years 1969–1973 round off this development, irredeemably shifting and fixing representations of *grands ensembles* in the collective imagination: the last positive images of these estates were replaced by uniformly negative imagery. In 1973, Gérard Pirès’s hit film *Elle court, elle court la banlieue* [released in English as *The Suburbs Are Everywhere*] dramatically reveals the extent to which *grands ensembles* had, by this time, accumulated all the characteristics of the old suburbs to which they were supposed to be an alternative: as the new archetype of the city in the process of “slumification”, they were now fully assimilated as “pathogenic, criminogenic dormitory spaces” (p. 338). A final shift in their representation took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, by which time they were being portrayed as “a legacy to be managed” (p. 318), with the question of their destruction now openly raised.¹⁶

These insights – limited to one period (the mid-1930s to the early 1980s) and one corpus – today deserve to be extended both to the present day – from the beginnings of French urban policy to the current turning point in France’s urban renewal policy – and to other archives and evidence (p. 35). Similarly, beyond the patient reconstruction of the “‘visual bath’ in which authors, commissioning bodies and spectators were immersed (...)”, the very process of how these films were received deserves to be analysed in detail – in particular from a sociological standpoint. This triple extension of the project would lead to a better understanding of how the explosion and spread of audiovisual images is connected to the development of major public policies, the architectural and urbanistic doctrines and practices of urban renewal, the tireless construction of invaluable historical and sociological knowledge about *grands ensembles*, and the memories and experiences of the residents themselves – fields, approaches and issues that today are (or ought to be) at the heart of public debate.

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His research focuses on the growth of metropolises and the making of urban images and worlds in the 20th century, the lived experience of great cities, and critical discourses of urban modernity. In particular, he is the co-editor of *Le Choc des métropoles. Simmel, Kracauer, Benjamin* (with Philippe Simay; Paris, Éditions de l’Eclat, 2008).

¹³ Translator’s note: the “*ville nouvelle*” of Sarcelles – also known as Sarcelles–Lochères or simply “*le Grand Ensemble*” – was not an officially designated new town, not least because its construction predated the French government’s new towns policy by some 10 years. Nevertheless, the *grand ensemble* undeniably formed a new urban core for the previously semi-rural town of Sarcelles, more than quintupling its pre-1955 population.

¹⁴ Translator’s note: the Société Centrale Immobilière de la Caisse des Dépôts (SCIC), known as Icade SA since 1993, is a multinational real-estate investment company created in 1954 as a subsidiary of the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (a French public financial organization, placed under parliamentary supervision and guarantee, that funds operations of general interest).

¹⁵ Translator’s note: the title of this film is a pun based on the two meanings of the word *cité*; it could be translated literally as either “The City of Men” or “The Estate of Men”.

¹⁶ See, for example, “Pourquoi des HLM à détruire ? Le permis de détruire” [“Why Destroy Social Housing? Permission to Destroy”], a report by Annick Beauchamps and Philippe Madelin as part of the programme *À la bonne heure*, TF1, 30 November 1978.

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