If, like me, you were a French teenager in the 1990s, you probably have a powerful remembrance of Mathieu Kasovitz’s _La Haine_ (1995), in particular of the tracking shot that starts from the back of DJ Cut Killer mixing Assassin and NTM’s (the historical reference of Parisian hip-hop) “Nique la Police” (“Fuck the Police”) and Edith Piaf’s “Non, je ne regrette rien” (“No, I do not regret anything”), before slowly flying over the Cité des Muguets in the suburbs of Paris. This film remains a narrative reference to the situation of the Parisian banlieues [suburbs], where the most precarious populations live, which include an important part of the North and West African first and second generations of immigration from France’s former colonies.

The film’s plot is set to start on the following day of massive demonstrations following the arrest by the police of a young man of the cité — cités refer to this particular urban typology of separated groups of buildings that were thought to be used in a quasi-autarkic way — which brutalized him into a comatose state. The first minutes of the film show documentary footage of similar historical protests following Makome M’Bowole’s murder by the police after his arrest in 1993, and Malik Oussekine’s murder by the riot police during a demonstration in 1986. In _La Haine_, the police are the clear antagonists. This is not always true in the individuality of the police officers themselves: persons deal with the power
they exercise in various ways, from an understanding practice of it to the most violent one. However, the police forces, beyond their various incarnations in individual persons, are to be understood as part of the systematic exclusion to which the banlieues are subjected.

La Haine’s tracking shot shows us the cité in its daily dimension and in its contained atmosphere. The world outside of it does not seem accessible and only little activity seems accessible. Earlier in the film, a team of journalists tried to ask questions of the three main characters without getting out of their car, “like in a zoo,” as Hubert (one of the three) says.

Here again lies the strict and systematic separation between the world and the cité. The wall around the banlieue, dramatized in the more recent and popular film franchise B13, is enforced in reality by the void that surrounds the cité. This separating void is both spatial and social as can be seen in the rest of the film when the three main characters spend some time in the center of Paris. This void is enforced by the police as an institution that historically shifted the main part of its activity from intervention to anticipation and the biased expectations that such a change of paradigm implies. This has never been truer in the context of banlieues since Nicolas Sarkozy, as secretary of interior affairs, dissolved the “proximity police” in 2003. Sarkozy, who became president of France four years later, is well-known for having systematically antagonized and marginalized the young (often Black or Arab) population that live in the cités. Ten years after La Haine was released, massive actions occurred in the banlieues against the status quo. The police suppressed these protests and things are supposedly back to ‘normal’ since then. It is difficult not to conclude the same way La Haine does, through this small metaphor:
Heard about the guy who fell off a skyscraper? On his way down, past each floor, he keeps saying to reassure himself: "So far, so good...so far, so good...so far, so good..." But how you fall does not matter: what does is how you land.

.....

Originally published on June 23, 2014