Chapter Five

Challenging Stereotypes about France’s Banlieues by Shifting the Focus?

Introduction

Although the films analysed in the last chapter all tried to challenge ways in which young residents of France’s banlieues are represented, several unwittingly confirm negative stereotypes that associate these areas with crime and violence. Some films also failed to adequately explore the origins of important stereotypical visions and fell into a further trap identified by Rosello: ‘The decision to pronounce a stereotype leads inexorably to a moment when the stereotype has to be uttered and . . . even this type of meta-utterance, this distanced repetition of a framed stereotype involves a minimum, unconscious yet unavoidable element of allegiance.’¹ This view is echoed by the assertion by Chalcraft and Noorani that ‘the contestation and manipulation of dominant terms by subalterns can be seen as consolidating the legitimacy of these terms’.²

This chapter will take a somewhat different approach to that of chapter four by assessing to what extent focusing on community life and cultural activities makes it easier for films about France’s banlieues to challenge negative stereotypes. Whilst the four films in this chapter all acknowledge the existence of social problems and tensions in France’s banlieues, they primarily accentuate positive aspects of life in these areas. In doing so, they devote less time to examining relations between young people and the police, and instead identify sources of solidarity and hope on suburban housing estates. This establishes a potential means of sidestepping the influence of stereotypes that associate France’s banlieues with crime and violence. However, the approach of the films studied in this chapter is not without its own potential pitfalls. As Rosello argues, negative stereotypes about unrest in France’s banlieues must not merely be
replaced by equally stereotypical positive representations of life in these areas:

Even if the sensationalist apocalyptic predictions favoured by certain factions of the mass media are greatly exaggerated, it is just as silly to pretend that the banlieues are prosperous cradles of diversity, bilingualism, biculturalism, mutual respect, and tolerance among different waves of more or less well settled immigrants.³

The simplicity of the overly positive approach criticised by Rosello above would do little to further the cause of those who challenge dominant power relations as well as media and political discourses about France’s banlieues. When this problem of overly accentuating the positive is considered alongside the risks associated with tackling stereotypes head on, it is clear that film-makers wishing to challenge hegemonic representations of France’s banlieues have to negotiate their way carefully around several challenges.¹

The extent to which the directors of the films studied in this chapter avoid reinforcing elements of hegemonic discourse about France’s banlieues without providing an overly rose-tinted view of these areas is a key issue. It is also important to concentrate on if and how they challenge cinematic or televisural norms through their films, and the degree to which their films explore local and universal issues. This chapter will explore these questions by comparing four films by different directors. The first half of the chapter will compare two documentaries that adopt differing strategies in seeking to counter negative representations of France’s banlieues. Bertrand Tavernier’s De l’autre côté du périph’ (The Other Side of the Tracks, 1997) provides a prime example of the work of a director who is unafraid of being confrontational and vitriolic, whilst Christophe Nick adopts a more contemplative approach in Les Mauvais Garçons (The Bad Boys, 2005). After assessing and comparing these methods, the second half of this chapter will consider two films that primarily concentrate on cultural and community activities in the Seine-Saint-Denis area to the north of Paris. Hugues Demeule’s documentary 93: l’Effervescence (Effervescence, 2008) and Abdellatif Kechiche’s fiction L’Ennui (Games of Love and Chance, 2004) illustrate how this sort of approach makes it possible to (re)present French banlieues without engaging as closely with the sorts of stereotypes evoked in the previous chapter. Bringing together these four films also provides a way into crucial debates.
For example, to what extent is the ideological basis of republicanism important to both the directors and protagonists of these films, and what does this suggest about relations between urban centres and suburban peripheries in contemporary France?

The four main films in this chapter have been chosen, in the case of the first three, due to the way that responding to, or challenging, conventional negative representations of France's banlieues is their very raison d'être and in the case of L'Esquive due to its originality in utilising a Marivaux play to make sense of the lives of its young protagonists. Films by many other contemporary directors also focus on cultural vibrancy within suburban housing estates in France that stems from involvement in musical activities, and especially hip-hop. This is true of films by Malik Chibane such as his 1997 fiction Nés quelque part (Born Somewhere, 1997) and Jean-Pierre Thorn's hip-hop 1996 documentary Faire kifer les anges (Making the Angels Rock). Recent years have seen (re)presenting the often stigmatised Seine-Saint-Denis département almost become a subgenre of the banlieue documentary as films such as Yamina Benguigui's 9/3, Mémoire d'un territoire (9/3, Memoir of a Territory, 2008) and Jean-Pierre Thorn's 93: la Belle Rebelle (The Beautiful Rebel, 2011) have respectively placed the evolution of the area within a socio-historical context and examined its diverse cultural vibrancy.

These additional films described above are doubtless all worthy of study in their own right although they generally, with the exception of Jean-Pierre Thorn's 93: la Belle Rebelle, focus less closely on how cultural activities can broaden perspectives of and within suburban housing estates. If 93: l'Effervescence is studied in detail here instead of 93: la Belle Rebelle, it is in part due to a desire to avoid returning to themes that are evident in Thorn's representation of suburban France and hip-hop culture in On n'est pas des marques de vélo (see chapter three) and so as to increase the number of different directors whose work is analysed in this book. Given the context described in the paragraphs above, the four films analysed in this chapter can be seen as the tip of an iceberg whose true size has become increasingly visible in recent years.

Bertrand Tavernier's De l'autre côté du périph'
(The Other Side of the Tracks, 1997)

De l'autre côté du périph' was initially broadcast in two parts (of eighty-five and sixty-four minutes) on the television channel France
2 on 7 December and 14 December 1997 and it was not released in cinemas. France 2 also helped fund its production by reportedly providing 1.3 million francs. The fact that the two episodes were each watched by 2.5 million spectators means that its television broadcast saw De l'autre côté du périph’ reach a significantly larger audience than is achieved by the vast majority of banlieue films released in French cinemas. Although Bertrand Tavernier is primarily a director of fictional films, De l'autre côté du périph’ is one of several significant documentaries that he has made. For Alison Smith, Tavernier is a director whose 1990s films ‘ask[ed] questions about the dominant representations of French history (La Guerre sans nom, 1992), society (De l'autre côté du périph’, 1998 [sic]) and institutions (L627, 1992, Ça commence aujourd'hui, 1999)’. The fact that three of these four films are fictions indicates how a preoccupation with socio-historical issues is not restricted to the documentary films of Tavernier’s oeuvre. What unites these four works is a preoccupation with how the French state wants to represent itself and its institutions, and the role of the state in addressing social and political problems. Tavernier’s 2001 double peine documentary Histoires de vies brisées that is analysed in chapter three arguably marked a continuation of the trend identified by Smith that is discussed above. However, as this chapter will show, De l'autre côté du périph’ features subtle differences in tone, atmosphere and cinematic techniques compared to Histoires de vies brisées.

The very title De l'autre côté du périph’ is symptomatic of how Tavernier explicitly evokes hegemonic discourses and stereotypes that he seeks to challenge. It encapsulates how banlieues are sometimes perceived as the poor relations of city centres, or seen as symbols of a different and unruly France. The way that Tavernier engages with existing negative clichés is indicative of his film’s origins. Following the publication of the Manifiest des 66 cinéastes (The Manifesto of the 66 Film-makers) in 1997, which called for fairer treatment of the sans-papiers and those who shelter them, Tavernier was told by government minister Éric Raoult that ‘integration is not about acting around’? In other words, Raoult simultaneously sought to emphasise the seriousness of integration and question the extent of the film-makers’ ability fully to comprehend this. Furthermore, Raoult (the minister for Municipal Affairs and Integration) suggested that each of the sixty-six signatories should spend a month in a location he designated in order to gain
a greater appreciation of what he perceived to be the reality. Raoul
tinvited Tavernier to go to the Cité des Grands Pêchers in Montreuil.
This context demonstrates that although Tavernier sought to
challenge dominant power relations, he was playing a game whose
rules were dictated by an opponent and he has acknowledged that
he made 'a sort of film to order' so as to 'respond rapidly' to Éric
Raoul. Consequently, Tavernier appears to have given credence to
elements of the stereotypes he opposed via a 'meta-utterance'. This
is particularly evident as the film starts with Tavernier reading the
letter he received from Raoul in order to establish a list of argu-
ments to disprove. He does this as an off-screen narrator whilst a car
drives along Paris's boulevard périphérique (ring road) towards
Montreuil. In the first half-hour of De l'autre côté du périph', Tavernier
systematically tackles key assertions from Raoul's letter and keeps
score before announcing a 5–0 victory over the minister. Tavernier's
almost vitriolic approach is evident at the start of the second part of
the film, when he proudly announces that the 1997 legislative elec-
tions in France mean that Raoul is no longer a minister. The
personal nature of this confrontation is clear when Tavernier points
out that he is still a film-maker. This shows that De l'autre côté du
périph' is very much a film where Tavernier displays a clearer sense
of anger and desire to blame representatives of the French state
than in Histoires de vies brisées. In the former film, his at times vitriolic
tone is noticeably different from his more measured and calm
approach in the latter. His closing comments in De l'autre côté du
périph', like most of his voiceovers in the film, are made as an off-
screen narrator. Despite remaining a predominantly off-screen
presence, the centrality of his role as narrator and his personal
combat against Raoul at times draw attention away from the resi-
dents of Les Grands Pêchers. For some critics, such as Carrie Field,
this would breach an important principle of documentary film-
making. Field is in favour of 'presenting the material in an analytical
structure that's accomplished in the editing room, if possible, and
letting people deduce for themselves - aided by an analysis you give
in the way you structure the material'.

The directness of Tavernier's voiceovers, especially his criticism
of Raoul, means that he adopts a noticeably different approach to
the one advocated by Field. His voiceovers, particularly in the open-
ing and closing minutes, make his film sound like a call to action
from a well-meaning left-wing intellectual. In other words, Tavernier
often treads a fine line between speaking for and speaking with those he films. As established in the analysis of Spivak in this book's introduction, this is an extremely important power relations issue. However, Tavner is aware of this and employs certain techniques that counteract his ‘speaking for’ role and tries to shift the emphasis towards his interviewees. This is particularly important due to his status as an outsider in relation to those who he films. He is from Lyon rather than Paris, and from a better-off background than most of his interviewees. His journey towards Cité des Grands Pechers at the start of the first part of De l'autre côté du périph' reinforces his status as an outsider and creates a different type of starting point to Histoires de vies brisées, which was shot in his native Lyon. He mentions that he needed to be careful when starting to film since the residents of the Cité des Grands Pechers felt stigmatised by the way television crews conventionally represent the banlieues. Tavner's integration into life on the estate appears to have been aided by the fact that it was the residents who initially invited him to meet them rather than vice versa, and he mentions this at the beginning. This empowers the residents by portraying their actions – rather than just those of Tavner or Raoul – as the catalyst for making De l'autre côté du périph'. Most of the film involves the estates' residents describing their daily lives and Tavner's refusal of tight editing further empowers them by allowing them considerably more time to formulate opinions than short television news reports offer. This process demonstrates how the desire to give a voice to those who are often denied one that motivated Tavner to make Histoires de vies brisées was also a motivating factor in the production of De l'autre côté du périph'. The latter film may be primarily about perceived otherness that is based on where one lives rather than being an immigrant who has broken the law, but both seek to challenge the ways in which their protagonists are at times perceived to be symbols of different, unruly and undesirable elements present within French society.

Despite Tavner's genuine desire to seek to give banlieues residents an opportunity to express themselves in a way that challenges the workings of much of the mainstream media in France, his use of the end credits of De l'autre côté du périph' to thank the residents for holding the camera during certain sequences is perhaps somewhat condescending. Although involving the residents in the shooting some parts of the film was a means of potentially empowering, it
could also be seen as a largely symbolic action given that Tavernier and his son Nils were the people who decided what to film and how to edit the footage. That said, their stylistic simplicity helps to focus attention on the words of the residents, in addition to making it easier for them to participate in the film’s production.

The footage used in most of *De l’autre côté du périph’* appears to have been shot using a shoulder-mounted camera and the interviews are filmed at locations around the housing estate that provide a flavour of living conditions and daily life. The camera generally maintains a reasonably tight focus on the person talking although several panning shots give a wider view of the estate. This demonstrates that Tavernier uses filming techniques to avoid diverting attention away from the residents and what they have to say, and this partially counteracts his presence as a narrator. Certain locations are deliberately used to reinforce the vision of life on the housing estate that Tavernier’s film projects. Several scenes are filmed in or around sports pitches, sports centres or after-school clubs so as to highlight the lively community spirit in the area. This community spirit is particularly evident in the middle parts of both episodes of his film and it shifts the attention away from directly responding to stereotypes about *banlieues* and integration. He also avoids creating the sort of overly simplistic positive image of life on a suburban housing estate described by Rosello.11 Tavernier provides a more nuanced perspective by including footage that acknowledges the existence of some criminal activity on the estate. A scene where a community worker explains that not all estates are full of people who cause problems is followed by another in which a delivery boy addresses the camera having fallen off his motorcycle after a bullet or pellet was fired at him from the window of a tower block. In talking about the shooting, a teenager from the area jokes that ‘once again it is a case of the social malaise’.12 This use of irony demonstrates his awareness of terms used in standard discourses about the *banlieues* although the incident to which he refers does little to challenge notions that associate such areas with crime and violence.

However, Tavernier seeks to explore the context within which the shot was fired at the delivery boy in a manner that introduces important nuances. Both the young people on the estate and local adults, including the police chief, describe how such events are often motivated by boredom. The police chief complains that not enough officers are assigned to the area, but also says that it is not as unruly
as some suggest. The opinions of police and the young residents of the state suggest a degree of mutual understanding that is singularly absent from much more violent films such as *Ma 6-T va cracker*. Although we do not actually see the police and young people interacting in Tavernier’s documentary, the film provides reason to be more optimistic about their relations in France’s *banlieues*. Tavernier reinforces this message towards the end of the first part of *De l’autre côté du périph’* by showing community, sports and educational projects that bring together people of different ages and backgrounds, and argues that it would be wrong to reduce life in areas like La Cité des Grands Pêchers to conflicts between young people and the police.

By thus refusing clichéd images of young people from suburban housing estates, Tavernier challenges the way that French politicians sometimes seek to make electoral gain from portraying France’s *banlieues* as areas that are out of control. In the second part of *De l’autre côté du périph’*, he uses editing techniques to discredit negative representations of ethnic minority residents by parties such as the Front National. This is a strategy that is much less evident during *Histoires de vies brisées*, and a prime example occurs when we see a customer in a bar complain about black people who ‘make a right mess, eat sitting on the floor and bring in drugs’. As if to respond to these accusations, we then see Tavernier visit an African community centre where he is well received and discovers a soup kitchen staffed by volunteers. Whereas Tavernier often responded to the written words of Raoul’s letter with the spoken words of his off-screen narration in the first part of the film, the second part also shows him using editing techniques and the words of others in order to challenge assertions. Tavernier continues this process by showing an unemployed white French interviewee, François Fontaine, explain how people in the African community centre are polite and well integrated, and that he feels at home when he visits its soup kitchen. The fact that it is a person who is white, French and unemployed who says this is significant as such people form a key part of the target electorate for the Front National. This sequence thus challenges discourses that would stereotype white French residents of the *banlieues* as racists.

This process of demystifying various forms of stereotypes is mirrored by the way that Tavernier pursues his exploration of relations between young residents of the Cité des Grands Pêchers and
the police by refusing to portray the police simply as violent aggressors. He implies that there is a difference between deliberate and calculated aggression and ineffectiveness or a lack of training. In the second part of De l'autre côté du périph', a youth worker named Bouba Sangaré says that the police 'are not trained how to speak to young people'. This is supported by Jean-Pierre Brard (mayor of Montreuil) who questions why the police so frequently carry out identity checks on people known to them. It is also made clear that the police are not the only state representatives in the area who have a role to play in addressing problems. Bouba Sangaré argues that schools do not do enough to deal with children who need extra help and that this is why young people loiter in stairwells.

The power relations issues that are discussed in the film are a feature of daily life in many suburban areas in France, which means that the pertinence of De l'autre côté du périph' extends far beyond the Cité des Grands Pêchers in Montreuil. This is reinforced by Tavernier's focus on both local and universal issues as the second part of the film draws to a close. Tavernier's left-wing sympathies do not prevent him from criticising the political left in France. He tells of how the new left-wing government's interior minister, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, effectively endorsed Raoul's hostile approach by describing film-makers who signed the petition against the Debré law as irresponsible. This also demonstrates that a change in government did not make his film any less relevant and is symptomatic of how contemporary politically engaged film-makers in France often express their frustration at the action (and inaction) of both right- and left-wing governments concerning law and order. It is interesting to note that Tavernier's later documentary Histoires de vies brisées was released in 2001, by which time Chevènement had ceased to be interior minister. Indeed, this may explain why there is a greater tone of hope at a time when the members of the national campaign against the double peine 2001–3 felt that they were lobbying a government that would be sensitive to their reasons for opposing the law.

Despite the negativity surrounding the way in which certain declarations of the left-wing Chevènement appeared to suggest that he would adopt a similar stance regarding law and order to that of the right-wing Raoul, Tavernier seeks to provide a more uplifting ending to De l'autre côté du périph'. He does so by showing the residents of La Cité des Grands Pêchers talking about their hopes and aspirations. Although he also refers back to Raoul's initial letter as
the second part concludes, the residents' visions of their future reduces the extent to which it is structured around responding to Raoul. When Tavernier mentions Raoul's letter within the closing moments of *De l'autre côté du périphè*, he expresses much less animosity and vitriol than at the start of either part of the documentary. He mentions that the letter actually had some positive effects despite the negative feelings it provoked among residents of the Montreuil estate. He concludes by thanking Raoul for sending him to the Cité des Grands Pêchers, and giving him the possibility to meet a wide range of people to whom he pays tribute. After several panoramic shots of the estate, and footage of Tavernier's initial meeting with its residents, the final phrase of the film is a question that one of the residents asked at this initial meeting: 'when the film is finished, what is going to be done?' This is an acknowledgement by Tavernier that, as a filmmaker, he can encourage people to look at situations in a certain manner, but that ultimately people such as politicians also need to take action. This ending is similar to that of *Histoires de vies brisées* and, indeed, those of films by several other directors whose work is studied here.

**Christophe Nick's Les Mauvais Garçons (The Bad Boys, 2005)**

*Les Mauvais Garçons* is a documentary inspired by a desire to comprehend the true complexity of urban violence in France. Like Tavernier's *De l'autre côté du périphè*, Christophe Nick's film sets out to examine life in the *bandes* in a manner that avoids stereotypes and sensationalism. Despite this similarity, there are also significant differences between the two directors' methods. Whilst Tavernier's film was a direct response to a specific event (receiving Éric Raoul's letter), Nick's film was part of a wider project with more general objectives. His documentary is less determined by stereotypes that he wishes to challenge and explores wider issues about violence in urban and suburban France; it also provides greater historical contextualisation. These differences stem in part from the fact that Tavernier and Nick are quite different types of directors. Tavernier is primarily a maker of fictional films, who has made documentaries such as *De l'autre côté du périphè* and *Histoires de vies brisées* between larger projects working on fictional films. Contrastingly, Nick is a journalist and documentary film-maker whose work frequently deals with socio-political issues, such as the workings of the French media.
Les Mauvais Garçons was part of the Chroniques de la violence ordinaire (Accounts of Ordinary Violence) series, which was the result of six months of research and two years of filming in the Creil area between 2001 and 2003. Given that it was filmed and edited over a much longer period than Tavernier's De l'autre côté du périph', it is reasonable to assume that Nick's documentary had a larger budget. Whilst the location in which Tavernier filmed De l'autre côté du périph' was effectively determined by a political opponent, Nick himself chose to shoot his documentary in Creil. He has explained this choice in the following terms:

We wanted to understand, not to judge; to stay for a long time so as to see stories and personalities evolve. We had chosen a part of France with which everyone can identify. Neither too large nor too remote: a rural environment in a regional conurbation, with outlying estates.¹⁹

This demonstrates Nick’s desire to provide more in-depth analysis of life in the banlieues than is often seen in television reports. His decision not to film in a banlieue that corresponded to negative stereotypes means that he avoided restricting himself to exploring clichés and was able to delve deeper. In an interview on the France 2 website, Nick explained that his approach made it possible to explore the root causes of why people turn to violence.¹⁷ Similarly, he stated that he wanted the Chroniques de la violence ordinaire series of films to be ‘not just another TV show’ and that he hoped that they would lead to reflection and debate, adding that ‘these films have been planned and produced in order to be useful’ and that ‘it is up to everyone to make use of them’.¹⁸ This has echoes of the end of De l'autre côté du périph' where Tavernier speculates about what will happen once his film has finished. Nick appears to hope that the end of his film will be a starting point in a process leading to greater understanding of the issues facing many of France’s banlieues and not merely the end product of his time spent in Creil. His comments also suggest that he sees his film primarily as a social resource rather than a cultural artefact.

The quest to achieve greater understanding of such issues leads to the important issue of how Nick gives residents of the La Commanderie estate an opportunity to express themselves. The importance of how to film life in the banlieues, and consequently represent their inhabitants, is evoked in the opening phrase of the
film: 'you do not just go onto a housing estate with a camera any way you fancy'. In an interview on the France 2 website, a member of the gang 'Les Scoots' described their suspicion towards journalists by stating that 'when journalists come and hang around here, we always wonder what they want, what they want from us, what they can do for us'. Nick refers to journalists' negative representations of the banlieues at the start of Les Mauvais Garçons when he ironically says 'welcome to the worst of the worst' as the camera zooms in on the La Commanderie estate.

The quotations above help to explain the climate of distrust that exists between many banlieues and journalists. The consequent need to create a bond of trust was taken into account during the making of Les Mauvais Garçons. One of the film crew, David Carr-Brown, lived in La Commanderie during the filming in order to gain the trust of its residents and to get to know them. This is similar to what Tavernier did when making De l'autre côté du périph’ and how Mathieu Kassovitz and several of his actors prepared for the shooting of La Haine. A closeness between Nick and those he films is evident in his narration of Les Mauvais Garçons, which is generally in the first person plural and the imperfect, and gives the documentary ‘the feel of a travel diary’. This is also reflected by the way the footage is generally filmed with a hand-held or shoulder-mounted camera that is easy to use whilst people walk around the estate. The lack of captions giving interviewees’ names or job titles helps to differentiate the footage from what is often seen in television news reports. The refusal to label or categorise interviewees allows them a fuller reign to express their opinions without creating distinctions that might make some people’s views seem more worthy than those of others. Anticipating potential criticism of his approach, Nick argued that ‘speaking about violence does not mean showing it in a complicit manner but, rather, understanding where it comes from’.

The way that Nick seeks to understand the sources of urban violence in places like La Commanderie is indicative of how Les Mauvais Garçons seeks to give credence to the views expressed by locals who highlight socio-political issues that have affected the estate. The history of the estate is placed within the context of post-war urban development in France. Nick comments on archive footage that illustrates how problems such as social exclusion, poverty, unemployment and poor living conditions are the
consequences of a series of events rather than a purely recent phenomenon. For example, news reports from the 1960s show that gangs and the concept of juvenile delinquency can be traced back half a century to a time that precedes the arrival of many immigrants in France and the advent of immigration as such a heavily politicised issue.

Footage of the construction of La Commanderie is also particularly striking as it highlights how the estate was intended to symbolise development and progress, providing new flats for people wishing to move out of overcrowded central Paris. The publicity encouraging people to move to an idyllic newly constructed estate is in stark contrast to the footage that we see of slums and temporary settlements. Nick's commentary explains that La Commanderie rapidly declined as a result of developers' running away with the money that they had received from residents, which created financial problems for many people and resulted in the estate's going into liquidation. Later on, he mentions that politicians have repeatedly justified their lack of intervention to tackle the problems in La Commanderie on the grounds that it was a private housing project and not the state's responsibility. However, the inclusion of several pieces of archive footage shows that the French state has at times demonstrated awareness of the need to intervene. First, a 1980s report shows François Mitterrand visiting Creil to inspect projects aiming to change the image of certain banlieues. In addition, footage from 1995 shows Jacques Chirac promising to do his best to prevent factory closures in the area, which he was ultimately unable to do. These images help to place the history of La Commanderie within a regional, national and international context. This approach helps to redress frequent oversimplifications whereby problems associated with France's banlieues are often evoked without taking into account the importance of a range of local factors.24

Despite the estate's progressive deterioration, Nick's film identifies signs of solidarity and social interaction in the area in a similar manner to Tavernier's De l'autre côté du périph'. This is often achieved via his focus on the key figure of Marylou Chevillo, a caretaker and former nurse who appears able to understand and get along with most of the residents of the estate, including the young members of gangs such as Les Scoots. Footage of her going about her daily tasks punctuates the film, illustrating the important role she plays in maintaining relative decorum on the estate. The presence of
solidarity is also poignantly evoked by a mechanic and squatter called Sam who explains that people look out for each other in his block. He is filmed in close-up when describing how this solidarity contrasts with the way he was abandoned by his own family. This accentuates the personal and affective dimension of solidarity rather than merely alluding to it as an abstract political concept. Thematically, it is also in keeping with the way that many films set in the banlieues show support for central characters that comes from groups outside traditional family structures (for example, gangs, clubs or community projects), and that act as a surrogate family.

Although some residents of La Commanderie held the members of the gang Les Scoots responsible for the estate’s problems, it is clear that the gang members become reflective as they describe their life on the estate. This is reminiscent of the way that Éric Pittard’s Le Bruit, l’odeur et quelques étoiles demonstrates young banlieue residents’ potential for thoughtfulness rather than thoughtlessness. One example in Nick’s film involves a gang member known as LB, expressing regret at not having paid more attention whilst at school. In a newspaper interview, another gang member (Claude) mentions that seeing Nick’s film made him, and his fellow gang members, aware of ‘the sad reality of the life we were leading’. In other words, watching the end product increased the sense of empowerment created by participating in the film.

Les Mauvais Garçons challenges stereotypes by showing gangs such as Les Scoots to be at the centre of peaceful and legal activities aimed at improving life in and around La Commanderie, and these are precisely the sorts of events that the French media often ignores when talking about the banlieues. This point is made by Nick when he describes how rival gangs in the area called a truce following the death of a gang member named Moby. This is followed by footage of a march organised in his memory – that we are told did not receive any media coverage – and then a rap event organised in homage to Moby. Involvement in rap music becomes a form of escapism for Les Scoots and leads them to reflect on what they want from life. Again, this is in part a consequence of the presence of Nick and his production team, who helped them to hire material in order to record a rap single and shoot a video. When discussing this approach, Nick commented that his team’s approach to filming was different to the way that social workers go about their work as they had not sought to maintain a distance between themselves and the
people that they were filming. In other words, Nick and his team did not set out to be distanced neutral observers. This is similar to Tavernier’s approach in *De l’autre côté du périph*, which is evident when he pays tribute to the residents of La Cité des Grands Pêchers at the end of his film.

Comparing Tavernier and Nick’s films teases out both similarities and subtle differences. Although Nick’s *Les Mauvais Garçons* does not set out to criticise an individual in the same way as Tavernier’s *De l’autre côté du périph*, Nick’s film nevertheless questions the actions and inaction of politicians and the French state. In his narration, Nick argues that the emergence of gangs and partial ghettoisation of areas such as La Commanderie is a consequence of the departure of state representatives such as doctors and social workers. This has left the police among the rare state representatives in the area and led to a sense of abandonment. It is somewhat apt that we see a fire engine come to put out a fire near the end. The engine acts as a metaphor for the way that politicians often become interested in areas such as La Commanderie when something goes wrong, but generally appear less interested in introducing projects aimed at preventing problems from arising.

When politicians appear in *Les Mauvais Garçons* they seem isolated from the reality of life in La Commanderie, particularly on one occasion near the beginning of the film when a group of them arrive on the estate on foot rather than in a motorcade due to fears about the reactions such an arrival would provoke. The breadth of the shot and distance from which they are filmed demonstrates that their arrival generates no evident reaction. The conclusion of Nick’s film questions the actions and inaction of politicians over a long period, as well as poor urban planning. Footage of a tower block’s being demolished is accompanied by Nick asking how many generations will be forced to bear the costs of this poor planning. He describes members of gangs such as Les Scoots as symptoms rather than causes of the problems that have become associated with the banlieues. As the screen goes blank, Nick announces that Marylou Chevillo, the popular caretaker who appeared to be playing a major role in holding the estate together, died during the 2003 heat wave in France. As the end of the film is marked by the destruction of tower blocks and the death of Marylou, one is led to wonder how and when problems in areas such as La Commanderie will be resolved. Footage of tower blocks
being knocked down provides a visual metaphor for Nick's hope that his film would accelerate 'a social process of reconstruction'.27 As with Tavernier's conclusion to *De l'autre côté du périph*, spectators are encouraged to think beyond the film about what the future holds for such areas.

However, Nick's more discreet approach to being a narrator provides greater space for the residents of the estate to talk about their own experiences. The fact that Nick spent a much longer period filming in Creil than Tavernier did in Montreuil – two years as opposed to two months – also provided him with more footage from which to construct a story that follows identifiable characters over a longer period. In this way, the former is in many ways more effective as a political film, and also more engaging. It provides more of a narrative hook for spectators to seize and negotiates a clearer path for itself by concentrating more closely on a smaller number of main characters.

**Hughes Demeurde's 93: L'Effervescence (Effervescence, 2008)**

Hughes Demeurde's 2008 documentary *93: L'Effervescence* acknowledges the challenges facing certain banlieues following the autumn 2005 riots, but also moves beyond the riots to examine positive developments in the Seine-Saint-Denis area. Seine-Saint-Denis is département number ninety-three in France and the mere evocation of this number in French is a frequent shorthand for the district, and often a range of socio-political problems associated with France's banlieues. In this fifty-four-minute-long documentary that was shown on the television channel France Ô, Demeurde set out to 'provide another perspective on the area' and 'do away with its bad image without being overly idealistic'.28 France Ô is part of the France Télévisions network and is associated with programmes that focus on France's overseas territories and their inhabitants and describes itself as 'a channel of all cultures and of openness on all worlds'.29 The fact that the France Télévisions group of channels includes a channel with such a remit creates a window of opportunity for film directors who are interested in subjects such as immigration and diversity. However, channels such as France Ô generally attract much smaller viewing figures than older mainstream counterparts within the France Télévisions network such as France 2 and France 3.
Demeude's film was released within months of Yamina Benguigui's documentary 9/3, Mémoire d'un territoire (9/3, Memoir of a Territory), but had a subtly different approach. Benguigui's film seeks to place the predicament of present-day Seine-Saint-Denis within a historical context and analyses the evolution of the area over several decades. Whilst this is something that Demeude does to a certain extent in 93: L'Effervescence, he maintains a greater focus on the present and the future and also concentrates more specifically on cultural and community projects. Consequently, it better compliments films such as Tavernier's De l'autre côté du périph' and Nick's Les Mauvais Garçons that also primarily examine the present and the future.

When talking about his film, Demeude has described Seine-Saint-Denis as a 'multicultural territory full of effervescence'. The use of the adjective 'multicultural' is significant as multiculturalism is incompatible with the notion of a single and indivisible republic that theoretically does not acknowledge differences between individual citizens. What it potentially suggests is that the difference-denying thrust of republicanism obscures the rich and diverse composition of areas such as Seine-Saint-Denis. Within his film, Demeude adopts a different approach to that of Tavernier and Nick by not taking on the role of a narrator, and explains that this was geared towards 'giving a voice to the inhabitants [and] describing the area without judging'. However, he does include both archive footage about Seine-Saint-Denis and views expressed by several French academics who are experts about the banlieues.

At the same time as challenging the frequently negative way that Seine-Saint-Denis is represented in the media, Demeude acknowledges that the area has experienced, and continues to experience, certain challenges or problems. As with Del Debbio's, Banlieues: sous le feu des médias, the starting point is some of the sounds of the 2005 rioting that are accompanied by a black screen so as to avoid reusing highly familiar images. This is followed by a short extract from a television documentary that refers to the tension in the area. The inclusion, albeit brief, of these images could be seen as detracting from Demeude's aims of encouraging people to view Seine-Saint-Denis differently, but they are swiftly contextualised. This is initially done by the academic Hugues Lagrange, who argues that the French authorities and media generally failed to understand the diversity of reasons why young people rioted in 2005. Rioting is also
described as futile by the former tennis player Yannick Noah, who states that there are other ways of expressing oneself. He is filmed at a tennis scheme in La Courneuve, which allows Demeude's film to move on from referring back to the riots by considering more positive aspects of life in the area in the years since those events. A recurring theme in the film is the notion that, whilst the autumn 2005 riots caused a lot of damage, they also heralded the start of new aspirations for young people in Seine-Saint-Denis. This is frequently demonstrated via its preoccupation with employment (as opposed to unemployment) and young people's involvement in cultural and community initiatives.

In order to challenge the stigmatisation of the area, Demeude presents Seine-Saint-Denis's diversity as an asset. This idea is voiced by local politicians and business people who enthuse about the dynamism that this generates in socio-economic terms. As if to reinforce this point, many of these speakers are filmed at outdoor community events such as festivals. However, the situation is also made tangible when business people discuss the area when sitting in their offices. Jean-Luc Petithuguenin, the managing director of a recycling company, tells of how his business has grown from forty-five to over two hundred employees in a decade and a half. He argues that this success disproves those who doubted the business potential of his project's important focus on employing a diverse workforce in order to tackle inequalities and promote regeneration.

Although diversity is frequently celebrated in Demeude's film, some interviewees seek to downplay it as a mundane feature of daily life. Cristina Lopes, artistic director of a performing arts venue, is a prime example:

"I always have difficulty when I am asked the question about the cultural diversity that we feel, the richness of this multi-ethnic area. We experience it so naturally today that we no longer ask the question. We are the second, third generation of children of immigrants in the area so I do not conceptualise it at all, it is part of my daily life."

Lopes's description of life in Seine-Saint-Denis is similar to the notion of conviviality that Gilroy sees as 'refer[ring] to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities everywhere'. Despite this suggestion that diversity is
the norm rather than the exception, its presence in Seine-Saint-Denis is still celebrated by many of those interviewed.

Whilst downplaying the significance of Seine-Saint-Denis's diversity could be negatively interpreted as a refusal to celebrate an attribute of note, it could also be seen in another manner. It can be placed within the context of the many ways that Demeude's film challenges the 'othering' of French banlieue that represents them as deviant, distant or different in comparison with the rest of French society. By concentrating on the arts, sport and community projects, L'Effervescence examines issues that generally receive little media coverage compared to stories that confirm negative stereotypes. Demeude effectively takes certain subjects associated with suburban France and turns them on their head. For example, he evokes employment a lot more than unemployment and his focus on companies who have relocated to Seine-Saint-Denis challenges the notion that banlieues are areas of relegation. The construction of the Stade de France and Pleyel Pianos's relocation to Saint-Denis are both held up as signs of the area's economic dynamism. Some employers specifically mention that the reality of what they see around them on a daily basis is in stark contrast to what is often shown in television news reports.

The evocation of dynamism brought by employment adds another layer on top of the cultural dynamism that Demeude uncovers. This cultural contains interactions between art forms associated with urban culture (for example, rap, break dance, graffiti, beatboxing) and elements such as theatre, classical music and sculpture. This helps to reduce the extent to which Seine-Saint-Denis appears a poor relation to Paris. The local Member of Parliament, Patrick Braouezec, emphasises this on several occasions. Due to Saint-Denis's being one of the first places in France where elements of hip-hop culture such as rap and slam emerged, he argues that:

_There is a real sort of osmosis between what happens on a national level and in this territory, as if this territory were actually conveying modernity, conveying its very contemporary side, [which is] very current since it is really at the heart of social issues._

This declaration challenges the notion that suburban areas such as Seine-Saint-Denis are on the margins of French society by asserting their centrality and importance to French life and culture. Here, it
is important to note that the ‘social issues’ that he evokes are positive and consequently very different from the array of negative clichés that inform dominant representations of France’s *banlieues*. In visual terms, this sense of dynamism and movement is conveyed in the sequences between different interviews or scenes in the film. These short transitions often feature moving trains or cars and people walking about, as if to highlight social mobility. This contrasts with the way that some characters in *banlieue* films appear immobile and passive. What Demeude’s film provides is precisely the sort of rearticulation that Chalcraft and Noorani see as a key means of challenging hegemonic discourse. Indeed, an architect at one stage evokes the need to ‘rewrite the city using another vocabulary’.

The notion that it is necessary to establish another vocabulary suggests that challenges remain when it comes to establishing and promoting the largely positive image of Seine-Saint-Denis that is evident in Demeude’s film. This is acknowledged by the academic Emmanuel Bellanger, who observes that areas such as Roissy have seen a lot of investment but others such as Clichy-sous-Bois and Sevran remain very poor. Members of a group called *Qui fait la France* also evoke the concept of equality and argue that true social equality is something that Seine-Saint-Denis needs more than superficial government initiatives. They suggest that lasting change depends on providing the area with the same level of spending on schools, transport and cultural initiatives as more well-off areas of Paris. This notion is re-emphasised just before the end of the film by Emmanuel Bellanger and two local councillors. However, the film ends on an upbeat note when local Member of Parliament Patrick Braouezec again challenges hegemonies by stating that ‘it is not because the *banlieues* are doing badly that society is doing badly; it is because society is doing badly that the *banlieues* are doing badly’. This is followed by the closing scene from a play that evokes the need to welcome difference and whose closing song celebrates diverse neighbourhoods.

Despite this generally uplifting tone, it is worth assessing to what extent *L’Effervescence* creates a convincing argument and works well as a film. When analysing the way in which Seine-Saint-Denis is presented, one might ask whether the film overdoes its celebration of diversity. In general terms, John Hutnyk is one of several people who have criticised celebrations of multiculturalism for often being politically vacuous or doing little to address wider issues such as
existing hegemonies. Even if one accepts this as a weakness of the film, it is important to note that Demeude also provides more concrete examples of the dynamic nature of Seine-Saint-Denis by paying attention to employment as well as cultural and community groups. However, Télérama critic Florence Broizat felt that the film’s form detracted from its message as it was somewhat ‘muddled’ and there were overlaps between the views expressed by several interviewees. In addition, a largely positive review of 93: L’Effervescence by Ndembou Boueya of the Bondy Blog suggested that it would have been good to see more young people expressing their opinions in the film.

Given the complexities of the conflicting aspects of life in different parts of Seine-Saint-Denis, Demeude largely succeeds in creating a nuanced and much needed documentary that provides many examples of ways to challenge stereotypical negative representations of France’s banlieues. Whilst the presence of several academics who act as experts within 93: L’Effervescence arguably draws some attention away from the residents, it does help to place personal experiences within a socio-historical context. Although the inclusion of experts contrasts with strategies adopted by other directors discussed in this book (such as Carole Sionnet and Jean-Pierre Thorn), Demeude nevertheless manages to create a structure for his film by using images of daily life in Seine-Saint-Denis and does not act as a narrator. Although it may have certain flaws, the film helps to empower the residents of Seine-Saint-Denis by allowing them to describe aspects of their lives that rarely feature in most French media coverage of the banlieues and that are generally not overly dictated by pre-existing stereotypes.

**Abdellatif Kechiche’s L’Esquive**

*(Games of Love and Chance, 2003)*

Hugues Demeude’s 93: L’Effervescence shares with Abdellatif Kechiche’s L’Esquive the fact that it shows how young banlieue residents’ involvement in the performing arts can broaden their horizons and help to challenge stereotypes about the banlieues. However, Kechiche did not make this his prime objective and has insisted that he did not act like a youth worker or social worker. For him, the priority was instead to make “a pleasurable and entertaining film” rather than to use his film primarily as a means of making
a socio-political point. Nevertheless, its title hints at a desire to challenge stereotypes at least indirectly. As Rosello notes, *esquive* was a term discussed by Barthes in analysing how language can provide a powerful means of battling with an opponent in a way that favours ‘a nonviolent response that requests swift and adroit movements rather than confrontation’.

This sort of eluding and evading provides a potential means of avoiding pitfalls associated with tackling stereotypes head on. Furthermore, it is in keeping with the theatrical masquerading and quid pro quos that are a feature of the Marivaux play *Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard* (Games of Love and Chance) performed by the schoolchildren in Kechiche’s film.

The positioning of a well-known piece of French theatre at the centre of a film set on a suburban housing estate constitutes an important way in which Kechiche sought to challenge negative images associated with the *banlieues*. This placing of a recognised art form (theatre) in an unconventional setting is a key way in which the film challenges received ideas about the *banlieues* and their young inhabitants, and this is furthered by the way in which Kechiche went about casting and producing this film. As well as questioning the frontier between city centres and *banlieues*, the film also blurs the boundaries between fiction and documentary, and those between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture.

Kechiche’s novel approach appears to be one of the reasons why he struggled to obtain financial support when wanting to make *L’Esquive*. He argued that producers’ initial lack of interest was because ‘the subject is not seen as one that sells . . . and in addition there are no stars’. This meant that *L’Esquive* ultimately came out over a decade after Kechiche had written the original script. In other words, Kechiche’s project suffered due to the extent to which it departed from conventional representations of the *banlieues*. *L’Esquive* rarely depicts subjects such as violence, crime and drugs that are frequently present in press coverage of France’s *banlieues*. The casting for the film illustrated the way that residents of the *banlieues* come to expect to be represented in a way dictated by these sorts of stereotypes. Sabrina Ouazani, who plays Frida, stated: ‘when I went to the casting, I was expecting the usual waffle: gang rapes, the big brothers who hound female family members, delinquency’.

Within the film, the idea of performing in a play appears alien to some of the young residents of the housing estate. When Krimo
(the central character) decides to perform in his class’s production of Marivaux’s *Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard*, one of his friends reacts by saying ‘you’re doing theatre like a queer!’

This suggests that performing in a play is not compatible with the way that his friends perceive (heterosexual) masculinity, and makes his desire to participate in the play all the more significant. Kechiche, who was born in Tunisia, feels that his Maghrebi origins have led to him suffering from such prejudices in his own acting career. This shows that cultural activities can sometimes reproduce social and racial prejudices rather than act as a means of tackling them. Shohat and Stam see this tendency as being particularly pertinent to minority filmmakers. They argue that ‘to a certain extent, a film inevitably mirrors its own process of production as well as larger social processes’ and point to the fact that ‘at times, many minoritarian film-makers directing films about police harassment have themselves been harassed by police’.

This latter point is applicable to several of the films analysed in this book, including *L’Esquive*. *L’Esquive* features a scene where a group of children are treated aggressively by police who check their papers, and some of the cast members were also stopped by police for identity checks during the time that they spent working on the film.

The way that Kechiche went about not just making a film about a Marivaux play set in the *banlieues*, but also with a cast featuring many young people with no prior acting experience further challenges prejudices that associated specific cultural forms with people of certain origins. These elements create an interesting parallel between *L’Esquive* as a film and the Marivaux play within the film as a key element of both is the question as to who can or cannot take on certain roles. Distinctions between characters in the film make this clear. For example, the central character in the school play, Lisette, is played by a character named Lydia. Lydia, along with Rachid (who plays Arlequin), is the most natural of the members of the class involved in the play. It is notable that Lydia is played by Sara Forestier, who is the only young member of the cast with significant acting experience prior to *L’Esquive*. Furthermore, Forestier gained this experience in theatre. She also differs from many of the other cast members because she comes from central Paris rather than the *banlieues* and apparently not from an ethnic minority background. Her status as a potential ‘odd one out’ raises questions about how and why people are cast in leading roles. Although
Arlequin is played by a character named Rachid who is of North African descent, Rachid does not possess certain characteristics (such as dark hair or a tanned complexion) that would be likely to lead to a French audience instantly identifying him as being of Maghrebi descent.

These aspects of the casting of *L'Esquive* illustrate how it blurs the boundaries between fiction and documentary, and demonstrates a deliberate attempt by Kechiche to construct his film in a way that contributes to its challenging of stereotypes. A sense of proximity is created from the beginning of the film where we see a discussion in a group of teenagers. It is filmed using a hand-held camera and frequent close-ups mean that it is not always possible to see the whole face of the person talking. The scene, which takes place outside a block of flats, looks unstaged due to the lack of scene-setting and the way the camera remains close to those talking, occasionally moving slightly within a small space. This method of filming helps to position the spectator among the group. High tower blocks are often visible in *L'Esquive* and are the backdrop against which the pupils rehearse the play. These buildings are visible both through the window of the classroom where the pupils rehearse in school and also when the pupils rehearse outside after school. These buildings provide a reminder of where the play is being rehearsed and take on a theatrical dimension as the film begins and ends with someone shouting up to a person at a flat window, which is reminiscent of scenes in plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Near the start of *L'Esquive*, it is Krimo who goes to call on Magalie and near the end Lydia goes to call on Krimo. The play within *L'Esquive* resonates with the young people precisely due to its parallels with issues of difference and exclusion in their own lives, and there is something theatrical about the interactions and exchanges that are part of their daily lives.

The parallels between Marivaux's *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard* and the lives of the children performing it are in part teased out by the teacher organising the rehearsals. She tells the students that *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard* is a play in which the rich act as if they were poor and the poor act as if they were rich. She also explains that the play involves characters who struggle to escape from or hide their origins as the rich fall in love with the rich and the poor fall in love with the poor. The teacher identifies language as one of the main elements that exposes differences between the characters. In
L’Esquive, there is a clear difference between the formal literary French of the play and the modern (sub)urban French used by the young people when they are talking to each other. However, what unites both is that they differ from the sort of French that cinema-going audiences in France would be used to hearing in most films. In addition to the language of the Marivaux play being rich and poetic, it is important to note that Kechiche has described the language spoken by the young people on the housing estate as also being ‘very rich in terms of images, cultural mixtures... a language of liberty, inventiveness, pleasure, sensuality’. Thus, the spectator is invited to appreciate both forms of language as well as the contrasts and interactions between them. This helps to establish a counter-discourse that challenges high-brow attitudes that would represent young people from the banlieues as being inarticulate and unable to express themselves.

Although the language of Marivaux’s play contrasts with that of the young residents of the housing estate, this does not obscure the many parallels between the play and their daily lives. Shortly after splitting up with his girlfriend Magalie, Krimo is attracted to Lydia after seeing her try on a dress for the play. He then uses the play in order to try to get close to Lydia by persuading Rachid to give up the role of Arlequin. But when Krimo gets involved in the play, he clearly lacks the presence, conviction and acting skills of Rachid. During one after-school rehearsal, Krimo tries to kiss Lydia but she moves in order to avoid his somewhat clumsy advances; in French one could say ‘elle l’esquive’ (‘she dodges him’). Thus, even though Krimo convinces Rachid to give up the role of Arlequin, he is not able to achieve his objective as it is clear that Lydia does not want to go out with him. Lydia’s reluctance to get together with Krimo is largely due to a series of theatrical misunderstandings about whether Magalie is still trying to get back with him, and whether it was Krimo or Magalie who initiated their split. One of Krimo’s friends, Fahtî, takes on the theatrical role of the intermediary in real life by trying to get Krimo and Magalie back together and encouraging them to discuss their feelings. In both cases, his efforts are clumsy and ineffective.

Krimo’s and Lydia’s failure to get together and Rachid’s reasserting the role of Arlequin mirror the sense of destiny that the schoolteacher evoked in her explanation of Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard. As the film concludes with the performance of the play at
the school's end-of-year celebrations, a short play performed by a group of younger children dressed as birds provides a metaphor for Krimo's predicament. One of the youngest children in this play is called Abdelkrim (Krimo's full name) and needs to be coaxed by a teacher during the performance in much the same way as Krimo had to be prompted by his teacher at rehearsals when he took over the role of Arlequin. At the end of the young children's play, some of the birds talk of having been on a long voyage whilst others say that it was just a dream and that they are still exactly where they were before. This has parallels with the way Krimo's attempt to participate in his class's play did not get him where he wanted and adds a pessimistic note to the end of the film by suggesting that it is difficult to escape one's roots.

Nevertheless, the film as a whole skilfully challenges stereotypes by associating themes from a work of high culture with the lives of young people who are sometimes seen as antithetical to elite culture, effectively calling into question the notion that there is a clear boundary between high and popular culture. However, it is unclear whether being involved in a school production of Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard will have the same effect on the lives of all the children. For example, Krimo remains unable to express his feelings and engage with what he is being taught in school. Nevertheless, discussions between other class members in the film demonstrate that involvement in the play allows them to discover a new interest that they are keen to pursue. L'Esquivé's status as a fiction rather than a documentary helps to explain why it does not ask questions about the future as explicitly as the documentary films analysed in this chapter, although its similarly open-ended conclusion leaves spectators wondering what the future will hold for the pupils who perform the play. Although Krimo's failures could be seen as rendering the ending pessimistic, the importance of the lengthy sequence in which the children perform their play creates cause for optimism. A variety of types of shots of the audience – including tracking shots and close-ups – reveal their pride in the play and provide a sense of warmth and community that contrasts with the way that banlieue films often feature isolated young people who do not enjoy such support or encouragement.
Conclusion: side-stepping banlieue stereotypes?

The four films that I have analysed here demonstrate different, but nevertheless similar, ways of counteracting stereotypes about France's banlieues. The first two can be more clearly defined as direct responses to challenges or specific elements of hegemonic discourse on France's banlieues even though the extent to which they evoke existing stereotypes varies. Whereas Tavernier's film owes its existence to its director's anger at the attitude of Éric Rohmer towards suburban housing estates, Nick gives himself more freedom by not letting pre-existing stereotypes define his film's role to the same extent. Nick thus delves deeper by analysing the roots of at times violent exchanges on suburban housing estates and take a reflective approach that contrasts with the sensationalism present in certain elements of the French media.

However, despite the fact that Nicolas Sarkozy is not mentioned in the film, one could see Nick's film as a reaction to his actions as interior minister.\(^{53}\) In this role, Sarkozy often evoked the theme of insécurité (security problems) and the need to adopt a tough stance when dealing with perceived problems in the banlieues and immigration. By not mentioning Sarkozy, Nick maintains a broader perspective on socio-political issues affecting the banlieues. In so doing, he avoids entering into the sort of confrontation that Tavernier has with Éric Rohmer in *De l'autre côté du périph*. Nick's greater sense of detachment means that he does not draw as much attention away from the people he films as Tavernier does in *De l'autre côté du périph*.

Whilst, \(^{93}\) *L'Effervescence* demonstrates awareness of negative images associated with the banlieues, it does not seek to involve itself in debates about the stigmatisation of the banlieues to the same extent. Instead, its cultural focus demonstrates that the banlieues are places where young people are engaged in positive and lawful activities. Manuel Boucher argues that hip-hop is an art form that makes it possible to "think positively" about disadvantaged areas, to transform the overflowing energy of young people from housing estates into cultural dynamism", and Demeure shows that other cultural forms are also capable of achieving a similar effect.\(^{54}\) In addition, his interest in employment rather than unemployment also contributes to his film's attempt to rearticulate a vision of France's banlieues.

Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Exilé* provides an image of daily life in suburban France that is arguably further removed from negative
stereotypes and clichés than any of the three documentaries. In so doing he eschews cultural forms traditionally associated with French _banlieues_ by concentrating on the power of theatre. Despite being written almost two and half centuries before the appearance of Kechiche's film, Marivaux's _Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard_ is highly relevant to the cast in the school play. Both Kechiche's _L'Esquive_ and Demeule's _93: L'Effervescence_ illustrate the ways in which cultural activities can provide the means for young people in suburban France to express themselves and broaden their horizons. This accentuation of the positive, rather than challenging the negative, facilitates the creation of counter-hegemonic discourse that is not overly determined by the dominant power relations that it seeks to challenge.

However, the problems that Kechiche encountered in financing and producing his film suggest that failing to engage with recognisable stereotypes can make mainstream distributors worry about a film's marketability. In other words, at least referring to some recognisable stereotypes can be perceived as making a film more accessible even if it does not provide an in-depth problematisation of such issues. However, appealing to universal values can also be a means of grounding one's point of view within a recognisable framework without being as constrained by responding directly to the agendas of others. Although not all of the films studied in this chapter evoke the importance of France's republican political traditions, their accentuation of positive aspects of life in suburban France provide much evidence of the third element of the republican trinity of _liberté, égalité, fraternité_.

Although certain key principles of republicanism provide a means of drawing together key elements of the four films analysed in this chapter, there are also subtle differences as to the visibility and portrayal of representatives of the republican nation state. In the first two films (by Tavernier and Nick), political representatives at the heart of the French state are criticised by more local representatives (including members of the police) who appear to be more aware of the realities of suburban France. Taken together, the two films that are based more closely on young people's involvement in cultural activities show representatives of the state who enable young people to express themselves in positive ways that provide a potential means of escaping from the negativity associated with the stigmatisation of France's _banlieues_. This is true of the
local politicians in *93: L'Effervescence*, who are shown in a much more positive light than those in *Les Mauvais Garçons*. In *L'Esquivé*, it is an inspirational teacher who broadens the horizons of many of the members of one class by involving them in a production of a Marivaux play and showing them how it is relevant to their lives.

This element of *L'Esquivé* exemplifies the way that all four films identify sources of hope by showing that not all French suburban housing estates are areas where young people's lives are defined by crime, violence and clashes with the police. Nevertheless, all of the films conclude with reasonably open endings that point towards an uncertain future for those who live in France's *banlieues*, indicating that they are not merely replacing clichéd negative representations of suburban France with equally simplistic positive perspectives. As previously mentioned, the extent to which the respective films refer to existing stereotypes, or set out to tackle them head on, varies. In this chapter, each film appears to be less concerned with responding directly to stereotypes than the previous one and gradually moves further away from an agenda determined by ideas it opposes. This should not be taken to mean that fictional films are necessarily more counter-hegemonic than documentaries, but indicates, rather, that concentrating on less familiar subject matter can go hand in hand with a quest to establish a thematic or political approach that is similarly unconstrained by directly responding to existing socio-political stereotypes.