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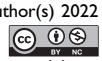

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The anti-city: Representing La Défense in recent French fiction and film

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Abstract

This article begins with the 2009 documentary, *La Dépossession*, by filmmaker Jean-Robert Viallet, suggesting that La Défense is depicted as an anti-city. It seeks to anatomise this trope and chronotope, examining the manner in which a range of recent novels and feature films similarly lament the destructive effects of globalised finance on French society, polity and nation. They figure spatio-temporal relationships between France's present and its historical past, between the anonymity of La Défense and certain unmistakably French locations, between a supposedly 'Anglo-Saxon' mode of capital accumulation and the French nation this is held to threaten. Having identified the characteristic features of this trope and chronotope, the article then turns to consider some of their inherent paradoxes, ironies and contradictions. It points out that the historic centre of Haussmann's Paris is itself the product of an earlier process of violent restructuring and dispossession driven by powerful financial forces and undertaken at the behest of a highly conservative political regime. It is ironic that Haussmann's cityscape should now be presented as a symbol of stable, traditional, if now embattled, French national identity. Perhaps, La Défense should be imagined less as an anti-city than as a location deeply embedded in the complexities, contradictions and conflicts of French history.

Keywords

La Défense, finance capital, America, Viallet, Moutout, Mordillat, Sciamma, Baudelaire, Reinhardt

> Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
> Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel) (Baudelaire 1975: 85)

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At the opening of his study of Marseille, Nick Hewitt invites his readers to embark on a journey through space and back in time, imagining themselves to be rail passengers in 1939 approaching the city on the train from Paris:

> In 1939, the passengers on the eight o'clock train from Paris would have had their first glimpse of Marseille as they emerged from the Nerthe Tunnel north of L'Estaque at just after seven in the evening. After the eleven-hour journey from Paris, it would have seemed to many of the travellers that they had arrived in a country which was, to all intents and purposes, entirely foreign. Below them in the evening light was the magnificence of one of Europe's greatest ports, from which many of them were about to embark, and, in the background, the hillside of Le Panier and the escarpment topped with the nineteenth-century basilica of Notre Dame de la Garde. Out to sea, the roads were dotted both with moored ships awaiting entry to the port and the Iles Frioules, lying off the entrance to the Vieux-Port, including the Château d'If: it was, as the guidebooks agreed, one of the most spectacular deep-water ports of Europe, rivalling the panorama of the Bay of Naples. (Hewitt, 2019:1)

Embarking on this journey through time and space, Hewitt (2019:6) suggests, will help readers realise 'the aim' of his book, namely 'to explore the unique hold exerted by Marseille on the nation's imagination […], by unpicking and supplementing the cultural baggage of the hypothetical passengers on their journey from the North'.

As with his earlier study of Montmartre (Hewitt, 2017), Hewitt has chosen here to study a location that possesses a particularly rich cultural and historical heritage. In this, his approach is similar to that adopted by another practitioner of Anglophone French Studies, namely Keith Reader, whose two monographs devoted to the Marais and the Bastille, respectively, manifest a comparable interest in excavating the rich cultural history of its two chosen Parisian *quartiers* (Reader, 2011, 2020). Indeed, we might argue that these various exercises in French cultural topography rest on the same 'chronotope', the same 'intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships', to employ the term coined by Bakhtin (1982:84) in his influential essay on 'Forms of Time and of Chronotope in the Novel'. According to this particular chronotope, a journey across space, to a location in France, and back in time, to examine that location's history, will reward the reader with insights into French history and culture that will prove not so far removed from the exotic delights and surprises more typically afforded via foreign travel itself.

At the opening of his 2009 documentary, *La Dépossession*, filmmaker Jean-Robert Viallet takes the viewer on a journey that is structured by a chronotope that seems to represent the very antithesis of that at the basis of Hewitt's and Reader's respective exercises in cultural topography (Viallet, 2009). *La Dépossession* is the third and final episode of a series aired on France 3 in 2009 whose somewhat apocalyptic title, *La Mise à mort du travail,* reflected its proximity to the global financial crisis that had erupted the previous year. This third episode opens with an aerial shot of Paris, the helicopter proceeding slowly north along the Seine. In the foreground, on the right of the frame is the green space of the Bois de Boulogne, with the characteristic streets and monuments of Haussmann's Paris clearly visible to the north and east. In the top left of the frame, meanwhile, the glass and steel towers of La Défense can be seen. As the helicopter proceeds north up the Seine, these starkly late modernist tower blocks become ever more dominant, looming over the more recognisably French, historic cityscape to their right. This visual sense of menace is reinforced by the content of the accompanying voiceover:

> Derrière les vitres opaques des quartiers d'affaires, dans des bureaux, des usines, des commerces, en France comme en Europe, comme sur chaque continent, tous les salariés s'interrogent. Les économies tremblent, s'effondrent et une faille abyssale s'ouvre dans un monde qui se pensait confortablement assis sur trente ans de profits phénoménaux. C'est peut-être le point de rupture d'un capitalisme entièrement dévoué à la finance.

At this point, we cut to a close-up of the top of a circular tower block within La Défense itself, the camera panning down its glass and steel façade to emphasise both its opacity and the building's imposing height. We then cut again to a montage of shots of the equally rebarbative façades of a range of other towers in La Défense. As the voiceover intones that we are now entering 'un monde dans lequel l'économie n'est plus au service de l'homme, mais l'homme au service de l'économie', a high-angle shot captures the many white-collar workers, tiny and ant-like when viewed from such a height, scurrying across the *esplanade* to their offices. Where Hewitt's and Reader's respective exercises in cultural topography take us on a journey back in time and through space to uncover a wealth of specifically French cultural and historical detail, Viallet's *La Dépossession* promises or threatens the opposite. For the documentary's opening sequence rests on a chronotope that allies a dystopian vision of France's present and near future to a space, La Défense, that not only lacks any identifiably French cultural or historical cues but that seems to represent a mortal threat to the continued existence of any specifically French culture or history at all. The menace embodied by La Défense is communicated here both visually, by the manner in which its towers loom over and dominate the historic centre of Paris, and verbally, in the doom-laden content of the voiceover.

This initial visual opposition between La Défense and the historic Parisian cityscape will be developed further as the narrative of *La Dépossession* unfolds, so that the financial quarter is figured as a kind of 'anti-city', the antithesis of the city and all the values it is typically held to represent. The term 'city' here should be understood as referring both to the historic centre of Paris and to the core of the democratic Republic itself, the civic space where equal citizens congregate and interact in freedom and fraternity. As this article will show, this figuration of La Défense as anti-city is characteristic not merely of *La Dépossession* but is a recurrent trope in a range of recent novels and feature films that similarly lament the destructive effects of globalised finance on French society, polity and nation. The article seeks, first, to anatomise this trope and chronotope, examining the manner in which they figure spatiotemporal relationships between France's present and its historical past, between the anonymity of La Défense and certain unmistakably French locations, between a supposedly 'Anglo-Saxon' mode of capital accumulation and the French nation this is held to threaten. Having identified the characteristic features of this trope and chronotope, the article then turns to consider some of their inherent paradoxes, ironies and contradictions. After all, the historic centre of Haussmann's Paris that is so strikingly opposed to La Défense in the opening sequence of *La Dépossession* is itself the product of an earlier process of violent restructuring and dispossession driven by powerful financial forces and undertaken at the behest of a highly conservative political regime. Charles Baudelaire, to cite but the most obvious example, would surely have appreciated the irony of deploying Haussmann's cityscape as a symbol of stable, traditional, if now embattled, French national identity.

A portal for global finance

At the core of *La Dépossession* is an account of the activities of a management consultancy firm based in La Défense which has been tasked with restructuring the French manufacturing firm, Fenwick. Fenwick is a well-known firm in France, its brand name having become a synonym for 'fork-lift truck', rather as 'hoover' acts as a synonym for 'vacuum cleaner' in British English. The voiceover explains that the company was 'à l'origine, [une] petite maison familiale, née il y a 150 ans', its manufacturing plant located in the French provinces between Poitiers and Tours, in the small town of Cenon-sur-Vienne. Fenwick has recently been bought out by a foreign consortium, headed by the US private investment fund Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR). KKR are pioneers in the use of leveraged buyouts, whereby new owners borrow large sums to

purchase going concerns that they then radically restructure, driving up productivity and profitability while decreasing liabilities such as wage and pension costs. This restructuring then enables the new owners to sell the company at a high price, paying back the initial loan and pocketing the difference between purchase and sale price.

The consortium led by KKR has engaged the management consultancy based in La Défense to restructure Fenwick in two principal ways. One team of consultants focuses on the salesforce, extracting from the most successful salespeople the secrets of their success, imposing demanding sales targets and setting employee against employee in a competitive struggle for bonuses, promotion and job retention. The second team of consultants focuses on Fenwick's factory workers to introduce Japanese-inspired systems of total quality management and lean manufacture to the production process. These new production techniques will enable Fenwick to produce more products of better quality in less time. Job cuts will hence follow, while workloads for the remaining shopfloor workers will intensify. For both the salesforce and the shopfloor workers, then, work will become scarcer and more stressful, as Fenwick, formerly a French family firm rooted in the provinces, gives in to the destructive forces of globalised finance, embodied by the US investment fund KKR.

The role of La Défense in this depressing scenario is to act as a kind of portal, a space within France that serves as a conduit for destructive financial forces that strike at the heart of French society and national identity, forces coded as essentially foreign in origin, American or Anglo-Saxon. This, then, is the chronotope that structures the narrative of *La Dépossession* and it is exemplified by the montage that accompanies an interview with economist Frédéric Lordon, as he explains the role of Henry Kravis, head of KKR, in developing the theory and practice of leveraged buyouts. The sequence starts with shots of Lordon explaining the difference between 'le capitalisme à l'ancienne', in which great industrialists invested in a durable infrastructure that benefitted the whole community, and today's globalised financialised capitalism that focuses on quick returns whatever the human cost. As Lordon continues, we cut to black and white footage, apparently from the late 1950s or the 1960s, that shows Fenwick's production line of that era before cutting to shots of a procession of Fenwick's forklift trucks driving along a wide Parisian boulevard towards the Arc de Triomphe. As Lordon continues his commentary on the destructive nature of financialised capitalism, a montage of shots alternates between images of the US stock exchange and the interior of a casino, with close-ups of roulette tables, packs of cards and a flashing 'Wheel of Fortune' sign on a fruit machine. In close-up the camera then slowly pans down a list of KKR's current holdings before cutting to a New York street and panning up the opaque, smoked glass façade of KKR's US headquarters. We then cut to a brief scene showing Fenwick's salesforce working with the management consultants, as the voiceover explains these French employees are unaware of the global financial forces behind the restructuring of their working practices. Another cut takes us to footage of Kravis speaking to the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009, laying out his business philosophy. We then cut to a close-up of the road sign at the entrance of Fenwick's hometown that reads 'Cenon-sur-Vienne', before the montage ends with a series of shots of Fenwick's factory itself.

If the cuts between the US stock exchange and the casino highlight that we are now in an era of globalised, so-called 'casino capitalism', the pan up the opaque façade of KKR's US headquarters mirrors the earlier pans up the equally rebarbative façades of La Défense's tower blocks. A visual and conceptual parallel is thus established between destructive American finance capital and La Défense's role as its conduit into France. America and La Défense together are then opposed, both spatially and temporally, to locations and eras that are figured as being specifically French. The French provincial location of Fenwick's factory evokes the supposed certainties of the *terroir*. The black and white footage showing Fenwick's products parading through central Paris

evokes a glorious French past, whether recent, in its depiction of an era of French industrial grandeur at the height of the *Trente Glorieuses*, or more distant, in the images of Haussmann's wide boulevards and the Arc de Triomphe, which memorialise French architectural genius and military triumph, respectively. The *Trente Glorieuses*, Haussmann's Paris and France's past military triumphs are thus implicitly identified as forming part of an unbroken French history now threatened by foreign forces that have entered the nation via the portal of La Défense.

This basic narrative structure, with its accompanying chronotope, is mirrored almost precisely in Jean-Marc Moutout's (2003) fictional feature film, *Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré*. Early in the film, we see its young protagonist, Philippe Seignier (Jérémie Renier), on his way to work in La Défense on a crowded morning RER train. As he journeys to work amidst the hordes of identically dressed office workers, Philippe witnesses a young receptionist, Eva (Cylia Malki), being sexually assaulted and he intervenes to remonstrate with her aggressor. As the two young workers discuss the incident together on the *esplanade* a few minutes later, each expresses their dislike of La Défense as a working environment, describing it as 'une bocale' and 'une fourmillière' before agreeing that 'c'est un peu dur comme ambiance'. As they chat, their conversation takes on a more romantic tone and hence the possibility emerges of their replacing this harsh, dehumanised ambiance with a set of more human, perhaps specifically French values. The implication is that the sexual assault on Eva was itself merely one expression of the kind of asocial, dog-eat-dog ethos engendered in the ruthless competitive environment of La Défense. Philippe will not only protect Eva against the assault, he will also seek to replace its amoral competitive individualism with his more humane, gentler, characteristically French *galanterie*, transforming La Défense from a site of ruthless exploitation into one of burgeoning romantic love.

Indeed, throughout the film, Philippe acts as an embodiment of French youthful innocence that will be corrupted by the American business values of his employer in La Défense. Young, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, Philippe is a recent graduate of an elite Parisian business school, someone of modest provincial origins who finds himself working for the French office of the US management consultancy, MacGregor. Philippe is tasked with implementing a system of total quality management in the factory of French manufacturer, Janson Industries, situated in the provinces, just outside Chartres. Initially, he is enthused by this task, believing it will give the workers greater autonomy in their working lives. Gradually, however, he learns that this new production system is a pretext to increasing workload and decreasing headcount in advance of a hostile takeover bid by foreign asset strippers. Once again then, La Défense is figured as a portal through which foreign, American economic forces enter France threatening to destroy the forms of economy and sociability supposedly safeguarded in provincial France and embodied by more tangible, manufacturing-based forms of capital accumulation. The opposition at the basis of this chronotope is communicated visually from the film's opening. After a montage of shots that pan up and down the façades of La Défense's towering office blocks, we cut to a shot of the interior of Janson's provincial factory. The camera tracks along a line of massive steel presses, whose power and weight are emphasised by middle-aged production manager, Roland Manin (Olivier Perrier), as he accompanies a group of local schoolchildren around the factory on a school visit. Janson's provincial factory is thus figured as embodying a weighty solidity in opposition to the highly mobile, corrosive forces of globalised financial capital for which La Défense, as location of the French headquarters of an American consultancy firm, acts as the conduit. Further, the factory is depicted as a site of French republican education, nurturing the next generation of French citizens in precisely those skills and values that Philippe's US employers threaten to destroy.

Throughout the film, Philippe wrestles with his conscience, unable to reconcile himself to playing his allotted role as agent of the foreign financial forces that will destroy the lives and livelihoods of workers who are not only his fellow French citizens but with whom he also shares his

working class origins. Philippe's struggles with his conscience put pressure on his relationship with Eva. By the end of the film, as Eva stays at home ill, he is faced with a choice. Either return to Eva's side to nurse her or attend MacGregor's end of year office party in a large restaurant on the edge of La Défense. Philippe decides to leave Eva at home and attend the party, thereby signifying his definitive decision to embrace his new identity as a young business executive and hence become a willing agent of global capital. At the office party, the Chief Executive of MacGregor's French branch addresses the assembled employees, prefacing his remarks by joking that he has been chosen for the task since: 'J'ai eu le malheur de passer par une maîtrise de philo. Personne n'est parfait!'. Having delivered a paean to his firm's values of competitive individualism, the Chief Executive then leads his colleagues, Philippe included, in chanting, in heavily accented English, the slogan: 'Work hard! Play hard! Work hard! Play hard!'. Traditional French ideals of learning and erudition, exemplified by the study of philosophy, have thus been abandoned in favour of what are figured as intrinsically American business values. That this represents a profound form of alienation is emphasised by the fact that Philippe, who does not truly share these values, is nonetheless forced to declare his adherence to them in a language that is not his own, in English, the dominant language of international commerce. La Défense is not simply a portal for destructive foreign forces here; it is also the place where idealistic young French citizens are wholly corrupted, forced to abandon their political values, their most intimate romantic desires, their very national identity and submit to global financialised capitalism.

The abandonment of French forms of learning and erudition personified by Philippe's boss is mirrored in the events of Éric Reinhardt's novel *Le Système Victoria* (2011). The Victoria of the novel's title is Victoria de Winter, a beautiful, powerful, seductive business executive, the global *Directrice de Ressources Humaines* (DRH) for a firm that was '[à] l'origine, un fleuron de l'industrie anglaise' but is now 'un groupe à capitaux internationaux, essentiellement américains, implanté dans une vingtaine de pays' (Reinhardt, 2011:33). The novel's narrator, the left-wing architect David Kolski, first encounters Victoria in a shopping mall and bowling alley on the edge of La Défense, locations that seem both anonymous and broadly Americanised in character. David learns that she is in Paris to negotiate with the trade unions at a steel plant in the Lorraine, hoping to persuade them to accept less favorable terms and conditions, ostensibly to save their plant from closure, in truth to make the steel works more attractive to a foreign asset stripper. Like the CEO of MacGregor's French branch, Victoria's ruthlessness in her business dealings is identified as being causally related to her abandonment of studies that might have suggested an investment in more authentically French cultural values. Asked by David whether she studied at a business school, Victoria responds wryly: '"Pas du tout. J'ai suivi des études de philosophie à la Sorbonne. Telle que tu me vois, je suis docteur en philosophie"' (Reinhardt, 2011:106). Victoria's rejection of any of the traditional markers of Frenchness is also reflected in her family origins: born in Barcelona to an English mother and a German father, 'elle s'était toujours vécue comme une expatriée fondamentale' (106).

Victoria's status as fundamental expatriate, her role as senior executive for a US-dominated multinational, her abandonment of her studies in philosophy thus combine with her frequentation of La Défense to make of her a powerful embodiment of the foreign forces of global capital that will destroy the livelihoods of the Lorraine steelworkers. The novel hence rests on the now familiar trope whereby La Défense is figured as the portal through which the destructive forces of global capital enter France to destroy the properly French ways of life previously safeguarded in the provinces. This trope is also at work in the novel's account of the illicit, passionate affair on which David embarks with Victoria. The affair itself allegorises the seduction of left-wing France by the powerful but fatal allure of US-style financialised capitalism. That this is a fatal attraction is emphasised by the novel's *dénouement*, which sees David professionally and personally disgraced, wrongly accused of Victoria's murder by an anonymous partner in a marathon group sex session. At the novel's end, David is hence barred from access to his wife and young daughters, unable to

complete the construction of a new tower block in La Défense, the biggest tower in France. David had hoped this tower would serve as a warning against unbridled capitalism since its form resembles 'un éclair […], ce signe qui met en garde contre les dangers de l'électrocution' (91). This massive tower had also promised some kind of symbolic compensation for David's own fears that his career as an architect represents a feminisation in comparison to his father's job as a manual worker: 'l'âpreté ouvrière de mon père avait muté dans ma personne vers le compromis du tertiaire, illustrant la dégénerescence de l'idéal viril dont s'accompagnait dans la société le développement du secteur des services' (127). His career, marriage and family destroyed, David seeks refuge near to the rural village in which both his mother and grandmother were born, hoping, as he puts it, to 'm'engager le plus profondément possible à l'intérieur de la France' (611). *La France profonde*, family, traditional masculinity and heavy manufacturing industry are hence all posited as natural, wholesome, properly French values and institutions threatened by a foreign form of financialised capitalism, driven by an insatiable appetite for ever more sources of fulfilment. If Victoria personifies those destructive forces, La Défense is the portal through which they enter France.

Le Système Victoria thus mirrors both *La Dépossession* and *Violence des échanges*…in setting up an opposition between La Défense, as conduit for financialised capitalism, and the French provinces, where its victims live. Gérard Mordillat's (2017) novel *La Tour abolie* departs from this trend by bringing financialised capitalism's advocates and victims together to share a single location in a 38-storey tower block situated in the heart of La Défense. 'La tour Magister' is the French headquarters of a multinational insurance company, Magister Assurances run by an American executive, Richard Redmond Robsen, from his palatial office on the top floor. The seven basements and sub-basements of the tower are inhabited by a motley horde of *sans papiers*, homeless, prostitutes and junkies, who represent the victims of the ruthless capitalism personified by Robsen. That Robsen embodies a set of values deeply inimical to established values of French polity and society is emphasised from the novel's opening. Here we learn that on reading the papers each morning in his office, he avoids any articles relating to art or literature: 'rien des arts ou de la littérature. Robsen n'aimait ni les livres ni les musées' (Mordillat, 2017:15–16). Further, he starts every board meeting 'sans passer par les banalités d'usage sur le climat, les transports, l'émission politique de la veille à la télé' (19), hence bypassing the usual civilities that, the novel implies, are key to fostering a collegial workplace. This neglect of the usual social niceties sets the tone for the whole workplace, engendering a culture of dog-eat-dog competitive individualism that manifests itself in two principal ways. First, all of Magister's senior executives betray both their close colleagues and their own wives by engaging in illicit affairs with the wives of their co-workers. Second, as a cost-cutting measure they together plan the closure of the staff canteen, a rare site of genuine conviviality in this ruthlessly competitive environment. The canteen also embodies a form of 'solidarité', in the specifically French republican sense of that term, insofar as the impoverished squatters of the tower's seven basements rely on its leftovers to survive. It is precisely these specifically French values of conviviality and social solidarity that Magister's senior executives wish to destroy, seeing them as products of an archaic and rigid model of French social and workplace relations. As one of the executives puts it: 'ce service s'inscrit dans un système économique général où l'hyper-rigidification des droits des salariés paralyse tout' (p. 23).

The plan to close the staff canteen hence acts as a synecdoche for the threat to the French post-war socio-economic model posed by a US-inspired model of ruthless economic competition. The fact that this conflict between French and US models is played out in La Défense highlights once more its figuration as the anti-city, the locus of those foreign forces understood to be antithetical to French society itself. However, as the novel unfolds, it becomes evident that those foreign forces will not have it all their own way. In anticipation of closing the canteen, Magister's

management orders its employees to spoil any leftovers with *eau de Javel*, so that the squatters in the tower's basements can no longer live off them. If this anatgonises the squatters, the planned closure sparks a strike by the canteen's employees, amongst whom are many *sans papiers* themselves forced to live in the tower's basements. The strike, a resurgence of working-class solidarity that challenges the economic liberalism advocated by Robsen and his senior managers, is given further impetus by a copy of Victor Hugo's *Quatrevingt-treize* (1874) that Saphir, a prostitute, gives to Bollo, a *sans papiers* and former canteen employee (386). A renowned emblem of the French literary culture and historical tradition that Magister's management so disparages thus serves as catalyst to resistance to their economic philosophy. The striking canteen workers are joined by North African and Russian *sans papiers*, who have been squatting in the basements while working on local construction sites. They have been recently laid off because they called an ambulance when one of their numbers fell to his death, an action that alerted the authorities to their presence, angering their employers, who now face heavy fines. Meanwhile, deprived of their source of food, the junkies, homeless and prostitutes become equally restive. The tension reaches its climax at a team-building exercise, during which Magister's executives, equipped with paintball guns, are instructed to make their way from the basement to the summit of the 'tour Magister', shooting their colleagues and rivals as they go, to be rewarded with a sumptuous banquet at the tower's 38th floor. The executives find themselves fighting their way past not only their colleagues but also the angry victims of their firm's ruthless economic practices, arriving at the tower's top floor to discover a horde of famished junkies and prostitutes feasting on the banquet. Omar, a cleaner and North African *sans papiers*, meanwhile, has channelled his anger into djihadism, detonating a bomb that brings the Magister Tower crashing to the ground, like a latter-day Tower of Babel, whose destruction has been caused by the hubris of its wealthy, ruthless occupants.

In each of the texts that make up our chosen corpus, then, La Défense is figured as the anti-city, the locus of and conduit for a set of values and practices that are seen as fundamentally antithetical to French historical and cultural traditions, to specifically French forms of sociability and conviviality. Each of these texts is responding to an identifiable reality that emerged in the wake of the repeated currency devaluations and massive capital flight sparked by the Socialists' attempts at Keynesian reflation in 1981–1984. The infamous economic policy 'turn' of 1983–1984 marked the definitive end of the post-war model of *dirigisme*, the channelling of state funding and specifically French sources of investment to strategically important national industries. The decision was then taken to replace those national forms of investment with foreign capital; banking and finance were hence deregulated, accelerating the emergence of La Défense as a new financial centre and home to multinational financial institutions (Thesmar 2008). In comparison to the state investment it replaced, this foreign capital was more mobile and more impatient for quick, high returns, seeing the erosion of French workers' terms and conditions as one easy way to secure these.

Ironies and contradictions

However, if each of the films and novels we have analysed clearly responds to these realities, they do so in ways that appear rather conservative and sometimes simply contradictory. The recurrent depiction of financialised capitalism as American and destructive primarily because it is foreign surely betrays a certain unquestioned nationalism, even xenophobia. The opposition between La Défense, as conduit for those foreign forces, and the provinces, as the locus of properly French values, risks resuscitating conservative myths of *terroir* in a new form. In *Le Système Victoria*, these conservative tendencies are reinforced by an apparent lament at the destruction of traditional notions of masculinity and family. Moreover, there seems to be a contradiction at the heart of the

montage in *La Dépossession* that sets up an opposition between Fenwick's glorious past and its degraded present, as communicated through the cuts between shots of the US investor Henry Kravis and the black and white footage of Fenwick's products processing through central Paris at the height of the *Trente Glorieuses*.

As we argued, this montage implies that a history of French productive capitalism has been destroyed by the foreign investors who are imposing total quality management techniques onto French workers via a consultancy firm based in La Défense. Later in the documentary, however, it is argued that these TQM techniques are merely updated versions of the scientific management and mass production methods pioneered in the United States by Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford. It is not necessary to be an expert in French labour history to know that it was precisely these American techniques that secured France's economic prosperity in the *Trente Glorieuses* and that their introduction to France was widely perceived as the imposition of fundamentally foreign, alienating practices that threatened traditional French forms of labour and ways of life (Ross, 1995). By a striking irony, the black and white footage that claims to depict lost forms of specifically French industrial grandeur in fact shows a range of products manufactured in accordance with the precepts of Taylorism-Fordism, that is to say with American production techniques that were considered at the time to be alienating foreign impositions inimical to French national identity. At this point, the neat oppositions *La Dépossession* establishes between wholesome French industrial capitalism and its American nemesis, between glorious past and degraded present, begin to look decidedly shaky. If we consider the location of the procession of Fenwick's products, a wide Haussmannian boulevard, the opposition between La Défense, as anti-city, and central Paris, as guardian of French history and identity, seems equally questionable.

For Haussmann's boulevards are the products of the ruthless displacement and dispossession of Paris's working classes. They resulted from a violent reshaping of the cityscape that aimed to facilitate, first, the savage military repression of any new working-class insurgency and, second, the replacement of rebellious working-class districts with spaces of bourgeois leisure and commerce. The footage that *La Dépossession* presents as testament to a glorious, specifically French past now at threat from foreign financial forces operating out of La Défense in fact bears the conspicuous traces of repeated cycles of ruthless, exploitative, alienating capitalist accumulation. Each of these cycles was perceived at the time as destructive of established French ways of life and forms of national identity. Each attempted to pacify social unrest and relaunch capital accumulation at a period of potential crisis. As Harvey (2003:93–105) has shown, Haussmann's restructuring of Paris was a response to a crisis of overaccumulation, a surplus of capital and labour that had triggered the 1848 Revolution. The industrial and urban restructuring of the *Trente Glorieuses*, meanwhile, can be understood as a delayed response to the political and economic crises of the 1930s that had triggered World War Two. The emergence of La Défense as powerful financial centre, finally, was part of a response to a crisis of post-war French *dirigisme* that had triggered stagflation, mass unemployment, capital flight and repeated currency devaluations. Each of these attempts to pacify potential social unrest and relaunch capital accumulation had its own specific characteristics. Yet, each reshaped spatial and social relations in a highly disruptive fashion. Moreover, artists and writers who have sought to make sense of these disruptions have frequently drawn on the same repertoire of tropes. This much is particularly evident in Baudelaire's responses to the radical restructuring of Paris under the Second Empire. It is worth returning to these briefly here not only because they seem to anticipate many of the tropes we have identified in recent depictions of La Défense, but also because they do so in a manner that complicates any simple opposition between France's degraded present and its supposedly glorious past.

Baudelaire Redux

In 'Le Cygne' (1860), Baudelaire alludes to classical antiquity and Racinian tragedy to lament the desolation of Haussmann's new cityscape, hence anticipating our corpus's repeated depiction of La Défense as a place devoid of any trace of French culture, literature or history (Baudelaire, 1975:85–87). Elsewhere, in his essay on the 1855 *Exposition universelle*, he identifies modernity's destruction of traditional cultural value as amounting to the Americanisation of French mores. In a critique of the typical Frenchman of the 1850s that seems equally applicable to MacGregor's French CEO, to Victoria de Winter or Richard Redmond Robsen, Baudelaire (1976:580) lambasts the former's rejection of morality in favour of materialism, attributing such degeneracy to the malign influence of America: 'Le pauvre homme est tellement américanisé par ses philosophies zoocrates et industriels qu'il a perdu la notion des différences qui caractérisent les phénomènes du monde physique et du monde moral'. Baudelaire's rejection of what he terms here 'le culte du progrès' may have been inspired, in part, by the location of the 1855 Exhibition, the huge glass and steel structure of the new *Palais de l'Industrie*, whose striking modernity was surely as disorientating to contemporary Parisians as the towers of La Défense appear to us today (Harvey, 2003:12–13). Baudelaire also seems to anticipate *La Tour abolie*'s staging of a confrontation between modernisation's winners and losers, the return of the downtrodden to haunt the very quarter, La Défense, frequented by the elites responsible for their fate. In 'Les Yeux des pauvres' (1869), the poet and his lover sit on the terrace of 'un café neuf qui formait le coin d'un boulevard neuf', struck by the garishness of its pristine modern interior. This scene of pristine modernity is disturbed by the appearance on the street of an impoverished, famished family, whose eyes communicate an awareness of their own exclusion from these new spaces of leisure and commerce, a family that serves as a synecdoche for all those workers dispossessed and displaced by Haussmann's modernisation of the city (Baudelaire, 1975:317–19). Finally, we might interpret the rejection of philosophy's eternal truths by both MacGregor's French CEO and Victoria de Winter as a kind of present-day 'loss of halo', to use Baudelaire's phrase. Baudelaire's poet stumbles across one of Haussmann's new boulevards, famously losing his halo 'dans la fange du macadam' (1975:352). As Marshall Berman (1982:161) has argued, this 'desanctification' of the poet as communicator of unchanging verities is embodied in the contamination of his French by the English-language word 'macadam', English already in the mid-19th century being the language of modernity and international business. 'Macadam' plays the same role here as does the trite slogan 'Play hard! Work hard!' chanted by MacGregor's executives in *Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré* at the behest of their French boss, a former philosophy student.

The purpose of highlighting these precursors to more recent figurations of La Défense is not to suggest that nothing has changed since the Second Empire. Current globalised financialised capitalism is not the same as the nationally planned industrial capitalism of the *Trente Glorieuses*, which was different again from the capitalism of Baudelaire's time. The point rather is to highlight the dangers of idealising any one of those earlier eras, occluding the forms of exploitation and dispossession that were specific to them in order to set up a false opposition between France's degraded present and its imagined past glories. As we have shown, some such opposition seems to underpin the repeated depiction of La Défense as anti-city. Baudelaire is useful as a reminder that many of these things were once said about what we now too often assume to be the unchanging beauty of Haussmann's Paris. Moreover, if Baudelaire did lament Haussmann's modernisation, he also sought to exploit its new possibilities, finding new sources of poetry and beauty 'dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini' (1976:691).

La Défense as utopia

It is perhaps in this context that we can make sense of the role played by La Défense in Céline Sciamma's *Bande de Filles* (2014). For in this film the financial quarter is figured not as the locus of dystopian, alienating, destructive forces, but as a utopian space of freedom and joyful self-expression. *Bande de Filles* is a *banlieue* film that focuses on the experiences of four young French women of African or Afro-Caribbean heritage. In what Frances Smith (2020:1–2) describes as 'a significant scene' in an 'unlikely location', we see one of the four, Marième (Karidja Touré), dance joyously to an American hip hop soundtrack, J.Dash's 'Wop', on the *esplanade* at La Défense. As Smith (2020:2) describes: 'at this dance at La Défense, her [Marième's] movements are assured, and entirely in synch with her dancing partner. […] Sciamma's camera tracks across a seemingly endless array of girls laughing and dancing together'. Smith is clearly uneasy at the location of this scene, suggesting that the 'uncharacteristic modernity and lack of Frenchness of the setting at La Défense calls into question the representation of black, French girlhood' in the film more generally, rasing the possibility that 'Sciamma equates blackness with Americaness' (74). Indeed, she concludes that the non-French, Americanised setting of La Défense is of a piece with the film's opening scene, in which we see the girls playing American football. Both work together to 'deny the Frenchness' of the film's national location and hence occlude the nationally specific political, social and economic problems from which young French black women actually suffer (74).

What Smith seems to overlook here is the possibility that it is precisely because La Défense is such a decidedly non-French, Americanised space, in short because it is the anti-city, that it represents a utopia to the young black protagonists of *Bande de Filles*. After all, for such young women the French city, as both literal geographical location and figurative republican polis, is often experienced as a space of discrimination, while the French Republic embodies a history of violent colonisation and exploitation. To quote Léonora Miano (2017:13): 'La République elle-même n'est pas perçue par tous comme un rempart contre le pire'. Indeed, the importance of America or, more specifically, of the African-American experience for French ethnic minority youth has frequently been recorded in documentaries and represented in fictional form. As the poet Mounsi explains in Yamina Benguigui's documentary *Mémoires d'immigrés* (1997): 'Otis Redding, James Brown, Sam and Dave, Aretha Franklin … Brusquement, je réalise que les Noirs américains ont vécu la même histoire, leur Harlem, c'est mon Puteaux …' (Benguigui. 1997:161). This is mirrored, in fictional form, in Béni's love for James Brown in Azouz Begag's *Béni ou le paradis privé* (1989). It is also captured in the scene in *La Haine* (1995), in which Hubert listens to Issac Hayes in a cramped bedroom decorated with a poster showing John Carlos and Tommy Smith giving the Black Power salute on the podium at the Mexico Olympics in 1968. The depiction of La Défense as a utopian space in *Bande de Filles* surely needs to be located within this longer history, a history that enables us to understand that is precisely because La Défense represents the Americanised anti-city that it can serve as a utopia for French ethnic minority youth. The chronotope underpinning Sciamma's depiction of La Défense thus collapses the spatial distance between Paris and the United States, alluding to a past history of African-American struggle that seems to offer some hope for that youth's present and near future.

In this sense, criticisms of Sciamma for offering an Americanised vision of her young protagonists' lives seem to miss the point. A more pertinent criticism would surely focus on quite who or what it is that Marième must escape to enjoy her utopian moment in La Défense. For Marième's joyful moment of self-expression at La Défense is heavily dependent on her having escaped the clutches of the young ethnic minority men from the *banlieue* in which she lives, men who seek to dominate and oppress her. Sciamma seems here to rehearse one of the most pervasive and pernicious stereotypes in contemporary France concerning the allegedly inveterate violent sexism of

ethnic minority young men. As Nacira Guénif-Souilamas has shown in her studies of the figure of 'le garçon arabe' and Léonora Miano in her work on 'le garçon noir', these damaging racial stereotypes have deep roots in the history of French colonialism (Guénif-Souilamas and Massé, 2004; Miano, 2017). By a striking paradox, the utopian role played by La Défense in *Bande de Filles* relies ostensibly on that *quartier*'s lack of any specifically French identity but more surreptitiously on the repetition of racial stereotypes deeply rooted in French history.

This article opened by examining the specific chronotope, the nexus of spatial and temporal relationships that seems to underpin recent depictions of La Défense as an anti-city. Travelling to La Défense, it was argued, is typically figured as entering a non-French, Americanised space that represents France's degraded present and near future, defined in opposition to a traditional national identity embodying past historical and cultural glories. Yet, as we have demonstrated, evoking that idealised golden age all too often necessitates making unwitting allusions to its dark side, to the history of dispossession and exploitation concealed behind the apparent grandeur of Haussmann's Paris or the industrial triumphs of the *Trente Glorieuses*. Perhaps, then, when we next take the RER out to La Défense, we should imagine our destination less as an anti-city than as a location deeply embedded in the complexities, contradictions and conflicts of French history. Perhaps, as we travel, we might imagine the spirit of Nick Hewitt looking over our shoulder, a wry smile playing across his face, as he whispers in our ear: 'mon semblable, - mon frère!'.

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