Reframing the creative city debate from locally-based artistic activities. The case of independent films scenes in Paris suburb

Hélène Morteau, Elsa Vivant

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to open a discussion on utilitarian approaches to the territorial embeddedness of creative activities, using the concept of "scene. This concept highlights the desire to create as a defining feature of artistic creation, compared to other human activities. The article presents the results of a survey conducted with stakeholders in the independent film scenes in north-eastern Paris. It stresses the importance of self-training and self-production in the emergence of these independent cinema scenes, and highlights the role played by cultural policies in their structuring. Yet these independent scenes seem disconnected from urban and economic development policies, despite their support for creative industries. The concept of scene offers an alternative theoretical framework to analyse and understand the local anchoring of an artistic community led by the share of aesthetic or moral values: for the ones, a certain vision of filmmaking based and traditional techniques, for the others, a political will to voice as postcolonial subjects.

Keywords: independent cinema; artistic scene; Paris; creative city; creative industries

Reframing the creative city debate from locally-based artistic activities. The case of independent films scenes in Paris suburb

The film industry's territorial embeddedness and the structural changes that this industry has undergone have been the subject of several publications, some of which have contributed to forging the analytical framework for the structuring of clusters of creative industries. These clusters are reinforced by endogenous territorial resources, be they geographical (landscapes, local history), economic (an entrepreneurial and financial ecosystem), socio-technical (technological industries, skilled labour) or political (tax incentives, provision of space) (Leriche, Rubin 2018). The studies reported in the literature shed light on the ways in which technological and artistic environments are intertwined and inform one another. They also show how relations of interdependence in the industry are reinforcing the trend towards the clustering of audiovisual firms (Storper 1989, Storper, Christopherson 1987; Leriche, Scott 2008, De Propis, Hypponen 2008). While they have emerged in distinct theoretical contexts (Pilati, Tremblay 2007; Cinti 2008), the terms "cluster", "ecosystem", and "district" are often used interchangeably to describe forms and relationships between stakeholders in an economic sector within a territory. They are also used to analyse how policy makers and economic and urban developers try, with differing degrees of success, to create fiscal, real estate and infrastructural conditions that encourage their development. These theories often serve to design or defend policies aimed at supporting these sectors when they seem to bear the promise of economic development (Greffe, Simonet 2008, Molho, Morteau 2016 ; Cooke, Lazzeretti 2008 ; Lazzeretti et al. 2012 ; Santagata 2002), even though the policies are sometimes out of touch with the realities, needs and practices of the cultural industry stakeholders themselves (Lefevre, 2016 ; Morteau, 2016; Currid 2009). Artists and professionals in creative circles are increasingly challenging these policies (d'Ovidio, Morato 2017) as their impact on the cost of living in cities (and rising rents in particular) is directly detrimental to them (Vivant 2013).

The primacy of utilitarian approach to creative activities' territorial embeddedness obscures that which makes art unique compared to other human activities: the desire to create.. A survey on film production networks and self-production showed that this singularity of the act of creation, as an expression of self, is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of their local involvement and of the gap between these practices and the local policies for economic development through culture. On the fringes of mainstream or commercial cinema, other forms of cinema are developing underground, which are rarely visible to regular distribution channels. They are characterized by economic structures that are fragile and usually self-produced. The emergence of these independent film scenes is driven by strong aesthetic choices and made possible by public mechanisms designed to support artistic creation and education programs. This article presents two aesthetic scenes of this French independent cinema. Both are embedded in a particular territory, the north-eastern suburbs of Paris, which plays a crucial part in their aesthetic choices and structuring process. For some of these

filmmakers, this territory is historically the birthplace of cinema and of its techniques, which they want to keep alive in a context of digitization. For others, it is a symbol of the *banlieues*[1] as a place of spatial, social and symbolic relegation of discriminated populations.

This article presents the results of an in-depth investigation carried out under a research project that investigated the relationships between the different artistic worlds located north-east of Paris. Some thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders on the independent film scenes (filmmakers, producers, support policy operators, festival and cinema programmers, observers) and managers of independent cultural venues. This study was a follow-up to previous research conducted by the authors on creative industry clusters, and was informed by the ethnographic observations of one of the authors during a research residency at a cultural institution in the area. This empirical work leads us to a discussion on the relevance of standard explanatory models for creative ecosystems and of operational materialization of the notion of a creative city. Andy Pratt has repeatedly highlighted the inherent contradictions of creative city policies, pointing to tensions between the social and artistic implications of cultural policy and economic development objectives (2010, 2011).

We propose to move away from the term "creativity", which refers to modelling the phases prior to innovation processes (Paris 2010), in order to return to the intimate and aesthetic meaning of artistic creation. To this end, we use the concept of scene from the sociology of culture, to put aesthetics back at the centre of the relationship between an artistic practice and a territory. This concept also stresses the importance of aesthetic proximity in the emergence, structuring and embedding of networks of stakeholders and practices in independent filmmaking. The concept refers to people, practices and objects that revolve around a particular cultural domain (a style of music or a literary genre, for example) (Straw, 1991). This perspective emphasizes the structuring role of aesthetic proximity in the creation of an artistic scene, that is, a network of stakeholders embedded in a territory where an artistic form emerges through its history, its aesthetics and its public policies. The concept of the scene was defined by sociologists of culture (Bellevance and Guibert 2014, Woo et al 2015) and was also exported to urban studies (Lloyd 2002; Silver et al. 2011, Silver, Clark 2016). It offers a model for analysing the relationship between an artistic movement, its audience, the territory in which it is embedded, and its atmosphere (Silver et al. 2011, Emin and Guibert 2017). The scene evokes, on the one hand, the territorialized organization of an artistic activity that spawns novelty (new styles, new genres) and, on the other, a particular urban atmosphere related to the way in which cultural activities are embedded in a territory, and to values shared by various stakeholders in this territory (Ambrosino and Sagot-Duvauroux 2018 ; Borelli 2011; Silver et al. 2011). A scene is therefore an ecosystem comprising stakeholders, places, networks and values, as well as customs and protocols that are inherent to a domain which is both the product of a territory and a component of its identity. The notion of scene also presents the possibility of

[1] Translator's note: while "*banlieue"* translates directly to "suburb" in terms of geography, the term has taken on a connotation in France that is the very opposite of the American "white picket fence" ideal of middle-class suburbs. When the French term appears in this text, it is to be understood in a sense which, to an American reader, would probably best translate to "the projects".

dissociating aesthetic issues from the economic issues raised by the notion of independent cinema. An activity's independence is often understood in relation to the dominant companies in the industry. The economic independence of so-called independent cinema is however very relative, due to the role played by the *Centre National du Cinéma et de l'image animée* (CNC – national motion picture institute) in financing French cinema, compounded by the oligopolistic organization of the industry (Augros, 2013). To speak of independent film scenes highlights the aesthetic and artistic implications of these forms of filmmaking which, at least at the time of the investigation, were not market driven. Faced with the vertical logics of the film industry (Creton, 2003)[2], individuals organize themselves to create independent films in any genres, which are produced outside media conglomerates and demand a certain autonomy with regard to commercial cinema's production methods, conventions and policies. Here, independent film refers not to a style or an aesthetic, but rather to a practice that claims to go against mainstream cinema (Hurault-Paupe, Murillo 2013).

Much like Emin and Guibert (2017), who use this understanding of scene to study the workings of stakeholders in relation to a musical subculture (punk) in a French rural area, we analyse the structuring of two scenes of independent film in northeast Paris. Their emergence stemmed from very different expectations for filmmaking: either to defend radical aesthetic and technical choices, or to use film as a medium for political discourse and to change the image of the *banlieues* and their inhabitants. We first describe national and local specificities regarding the role played by public policies in supporting cinematographic creation, and then explain how the independent filmmakers organize to carry out their film projects and broadcast them on the fringes of the mainstream. The concept of scene offers a framework to understand the dialectic relationship between local embeddedness and international distribution. These case studies question to the implicit expectations of public policies to support creative industries.

A TERRITORY OF CINEMAS

The French case is an ideal example to reconsider the place of aesthetics in local artistic dynamics. Support for artistic creation is at the heart of cultural policies, and its relationship with economic policies to support creative industries is at times ambiguous (Alexandre, 2015). The historical role of public authorities in supporting cinema is essential to the emergence of these independent scenes. The French State and local authorities have long implemented regulatory policies aimed at protecting film creation and promoting its plurality, by tempering the effects of the market while supporting the cinema economy (Vernier, 2004). This is reflected in the way the *Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée* (CNC) structures the industry, in indirect policies to support artistic employment through the unemployment

[2] Before it can be launched, a film must go through the various stages of the film-making industry, from its conception to its release: production (gathering and combining all the resources necessary to produce a film), distribution (commercially promoting the product by choosing its release date, the number of copies and the level of promotional investment), and release in cinemas. At each of these stages, many players are involved: studios, producers, distributors, broadcasters, etc.

insurance scheme for intermittent workers in the entertainment industry, and in a training system in public schools (Creton, 2004). Additionally, as in other countries, many local authorities encourage filming on their territory (via tax incentives or administrative facilities) to support the employment of professionals in the filmmaking and visual effects industries. Thus, compared to many other countries, French cinema enjoys access to resources and production conditions that facilitate aesthetic risk taking *a priori*. Yet, for various reasons, many film-makers develop their film projects outside the usual production and distribution channels.

In the northeast of Paris[3], incentivizing policies for the cinema and audiovisual production industries have contradictory objectives that are reflected in the organizational split between culture and youth policies on the one hand, and urban and economic development policies on the other. In recent years, the economic and urban development strategies of Plaine Commune have been structured with "culture and creation" as keywords (Préfet de région *et al*, 2012). This vision plans the creation of new workspaces for the creative industries, support for the development of these activities, and the inclusion of artistic projects in real estate developments. It can be seen as a differentiation strategy in a context of competition between territories within the Parisian metropolis itself, to attract real estate investments towards more or less ambitious urban regeneration projects (Aubry, Blein and Vivant 2015). In calling Plaine Commune a "territory of culture and creation", local authorities emphasized the historical embeddedness of audiovisual industries in the territory (where the first studios were created at the beginning of the 20th century) and the presence of a dense artistic network (Plaine Commune, Notre Atelier Commun et Polau 2010; Thomas 2010; Verdalle, Rot, Sauguet 2008). As warehouses were converted to television studios in Plaine Saint-Denis in the 1980s and filming or post-production equipment rental companies have settled there, this territory tends to have an important place in the audiovisual industry (Camors 2006, 2010). Yet these activities remain dependent on decisions taken in other areas (Paris and its western suburbs) where the dominant players in this industry (television channels, financiers, producers) are located (Scott 2000). Despite its historical roots and the importance of this territory for the audiovisual industry, the economic weight of the industry (and of cultural industries in general) remains marginal, both locally (Lebeau 2014) and with regard to the entire metropolis (Camors 2006, 2010). Public support policies for the project to set up film studios led by EuropaCorp (called *La Cité du Cinéma*) can thus be seen as a way to incentivize this industry and, in the framework of a territorial communication strategy, also as a promotional argument for neighbouring real estate developments.

In parallel with these actions carried out by the authorities in charge of economic and urban development, this territory is marked by a strong political will for cultural democratization, social inclusion and support for creation. This can be explained by the tradition of municipal communism. With regard to cinema, this is materialized by an image education program in schools and a network of more than twenty public cinema theatres which put on art-house (*art-*

[3] That is to say mainly Plaine Commune, a group of nine towns located in the north of Paris and the *département* (county) of Seine-Saint-Denis.

et-essai) films and films by local directors (Augros 2013) . Local authorities support art creation and projects that do not meet economic criteria with programs such as author residencies, training and initiation workshops, support for creative short films, broadcasting through festivals, etc. Various operators – be they public (Office Municipal de la Jeunesse d'Aubervilliers), para-public (cinema 93) or non-profit organizations (Côté Court, Périphérie, Espace Khiasma, L'Abominable) – offer networking and training spaces for future professionals. Several filmmakers from independent scenes thus shot their first films thanks to training and support mechanisms financed by local authorities. Their films were screened at subsidized local festivals[4] and shown in public theatres.

DESIRES FOR CINEMA

Far from the objectives of economic policies aimed at creative industries clusters, cultural and educational policies contribute to the development of independent film scenes by training and professionalizing young filmmakers and technicians. They support a more diverse cinematographic representations of *banlieues* as much as the expression of a singular artistic perspective. They have allowed the emergence of independent film scenes and new cinematographic aesthetic forms marked by the desire to make films differently, unfettered by the economic contingencies (and temporalities) of the market and the industry, and thus to support a unique voice, gaze and relationship to art.

Using the camera to experiment

Since 2014, an association of filmmakers (*L'Abominable*) has been occupying a building in Plaine Commune, earmarked for demolition. This temporary use space, in a peripheral yet accessible area, is a spatial translation of the association's project: to be on the fringes, in uncertain spaces, to carry out artistic projects whose audiences can only be small, and which will only be screened in dedicated spaces and festivals. The pun in its name *l'Abominable* – which could read as "*Labo minable*" (pathetic lab) – refers to photographic development *labo*ratories and experimental *labo*ratories, as this association is part of the DIY movement that emerged in alternative circles in the 1990s, at a time of technological upheaval and digital transition (Cervulle, 2010). It operates on a cooperative basis and provides filmmakers and visual artists with the tools to work on analog media, allowing them to process their negative or reversal films, apply visual effects or change formats, edit, work on sound, and make copies. New members are trained in the use of these machines, to share and keep these endangered techniques alive. The type of post-production equipment it provides is becoming rare and new generations of directors and technicians are unfamiliar with it. Yet learning to use it guarantees creative autonomy.

[4] Génération Court, Côté Court, Cinébanlieue, Les Pépites du Cinéma, Regards Jeunes sur la Cité, Urban Film Festival

"*The aim is to allow people to become autonomous. There is a lot of emphasis on this: we do not provide services. We are not there to...we are not providers. People come to do their work, to share tools, to help each other. In other words, you go and see people who are available here who will be able to give a hand if you don't know how to use a title bench. You're going to be trained and the aim is to become more and more autonomous. That's a very special mentality*" Project Manager, L'Abominable.

These filmmakers, most of whom were trained in prestigious art schools, defend aesthetic and technical choices that run counter to prevailing trends. In the age of digitization, they choose to work the old-fashioned way, with conventional photographic equipment. By re-appropriating the tools of production, they defend an independent craft and art, a practice that is linked to the materiality of photographic film and its. They produce filmic works of art with very limited budgets and outside the usual distribution channels. These artists claim to represent experimental cinema and stand against established writing and aesthetics. This type of cinema is an aesthetic practice and a statement, in times when the film industry is undergoing upheaval triggered by the advent of digital technology. The aim is therefore to appropriate and teach methods and know-how before they are lost, to revive the tools of photographic film in order to show a different kind of cinema (Cervulle, 2010).
L'Abominable's choice to settle in the Plaine Commune area is due partly to sheer opportunity: the availability of cheap premises close to Paris. It also allowed the association to recover equipment discarded by neighbouring studios and post-production laboratories (such as Studio Éclair). The location moreover offers proximity to other stakeholders in the independent artistic scenes located in the area (e.g. Mains d'œuvre, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers). This experimental film scene remains insular and propelled mainly by self-produced directors and specific distribution channels (Cervulle, 2010). Films that are post-produced at *L'Abominable* are often distributed by experimental film cooperatives, by the artists themselves, or by art galleries. The films are shown in specific circuits on a local, national (Fidé in Marseille) and international (Doc Lisboa, Viennale) scale. These festivals' audiences belong to networks of insiders. Films are also distributed within the contemporary art world, from the most institutional to the most independent venues. In this multi-scalar dynamics, the visibility and survival of this type of cinema depends largely on the ability of its stakeholders to join international networks while benefiting from the resources of the Parisian metropolis.

Using the camera to fight prejudice

Using the camera to carry the voices of underprivileged communities and take a different look at these stigmatized areas is the motivation of another independent films scene that journalist Claire Diao calls *Double Vague* (Double Wave)(2017). The name *Double Vague* refers to the image of a wave rolling in from the fringes, that is, from the *banlieues* to the centre. It is headed by a new generation of French filmmakers of immigrant descent who proudly claim their dual postcolonial identity. The term *Double Vague* is also an explicit reference to the *Nouvelle*

Vague[5], although these directors do not identify with it. Instead, they usually refer to American cinema where they do find the ethnic diversity that has long been lacking on French screens. Their desires to film is fuelled by the will to offer an alternative representation of minorities and to break with the caricatured images of the *banlieues* conveyed by the media, especially during the 2005 riots[6].

> "*From 2005, after the crisis in the [hoods], there was this awareness: the image that the media conveys of us is not the right one. We have to move. As much on the side of directors as on the side of festivals. We need to create places where we can show something else*." A Double Wave producer

To this end, and with an urgent need to film and create, these self-trained directors organize themselves without seeking first to integrate mechanisms of public support for cinema production[7]. They thus breathe new life into methods of training, production and distribution. Having access neither to the training provided by public film schools, which are extremely selective, nor to that of expensive private schools, *Double Vague* filmmakers train on the fringes of the system. Most of them are self-trained. The desire for filming and the need for a means of expression are urgent: they pick up a camera and shoot; their friends improvised themselves actors; their neighbourhood is the natural setting for their films. They use social networks to post their videos and benefit from a broadcasting window that was previously inaccessible, with hopes of being spotted by a major production company. Some gain experience in practical film-making and training workshops given by associations subsidized by local authorities, described in the first part of the paper. As they do at *l'Abominable*, former members who attended these activities go on to train a new generation by volunteering in the structures that supported them or by creating their own schools. Others belong to hip-hop scene: they shoot rap music videos for friends, make hip-hop culture the subject of a film, draw inspiration from the types of organization they observe in hip-hop (peer recognition; creating associations, festivals, labels and production companies; distribution through non-commercial and online channels). In keeping with the spirit of hip-hop, these artists act spontaneously, readily taking up the microphone, the camera, the spray paint, the public space.

> " *Filmmakers have been inspired by hip-hop in that you don't wait for permission, you make the films you want to make. And they have tried to understand how it works to do the same thing: set up an association, a production company, a festival... What's more, many of them are former rappers. There's a total filiation side to it. In the approach there are really a lot of common points. In hip-hop, they created their own labels, their own producers, they started to have gold records, the mainstream started*

[5] The *Nouvelle Vague* is the avant-garde movement in French cinema in the 1960s in which Agnes Varda, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and others participated.

[6] In the fall of 2005, after two teenagers died in an encounter with police, many working-class neighbourhoods were shaken by riots. Our respondents were deeply unsettled by U.S. media's use of the term "no-go zones" or "muslim riots" to describe them.

[7] These forms of autonomous organization of the means of production are reminiscent of the *Black is Beautiful* movement in the United States (Rolland-Diamond, C. (2016*). Black America: Une histoire des luttes pour l'égalité et la justice (XIXe-XXIe siècle).* Paris: La Découverte.).

to take an interest in them when they saw that they were economically important." A Double Wave producer.

Through these self-training and self-production practices, directors are inventing a new way of shooting and making films, adapting editing and production schedules to the availability of resources. Directors promote their first films themselves via social media and crowd funding platforms. They benefit from local distribution channels, in particular local festivals that allow films to reach their first audience. These filmmakers are thus potentially able to access a form of recognition and possibly a producer, a prize or press coverage that can act as a springboard. Their professionalization is reflected in the growing number of production companies and in a change in the scale of their distribution channels (through national and international festivals). Some dedicated workspaces had been set up in the area, such as Commune Image (a business incubator, co-working space and maker space dedicated to cinema) or Médialab 93 (a media incubator created by the advertising agency BETC when it moved there). The emergence of the *Double Vague* and its critical acclaim[8] has prompted stakeholders in the French film industry to create new mechanisms, such as the *Fond Images de la diversité* (Images of Diversity Fund) set up by the CNC in 2007. *La Résidence* is a new training program proposed by elitist public cinema school *La Fémis* since 2015 aimed at young filmmakers who do not meet the usual requirements to apply. However, *La Résidence* remains a parallel and shorter curriculum which does not offer the same training or networking opportunities. Additionally, along with the establishment of the *Cité du Cinéma*, the *Ecole de la Cité* was created (in 2012) by several private producers, to serve as an alternative curriculum for out-of-school youth. *EuropaCorp* has also created a dedicated branch to the production of *Double Vague* films (*UrbanFilm*).
These changes did not come about on their own; they were provoked by the stakeholders of these independent scenes in search of recognition and funding. When they give speeches at awards ceremonies, when books by or portraits of Double Wave filmmakers are published, or when they produce works that serve as manifestos to denounce the criteria for allocating fundings, or put out calls "to decolonize the arts"[9], they are moving towards recognition as stakeholders in the art world, in a process of artifying a film production led by self-trained directors (Heinich, Shapiro 2012). Likewise, the *Manifeste des Labos*, written in 2002, aimed to blow the whistle on the need to support experimental films, which is tossed about between the funding channels of visual arts and of cinema. The CNC has since recognized the existence of this hybrid cinema and now funds part of the activities of *l'Abominable* and other *labos*.

DISCUSSION: THE SCENE AS A TOOL TO RETHINK THE LOCAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

[8] Laurence Lascary's film *L'Ascension* was commercially very successful, and sold over a million tickets. Others, such as Djinn Carrenard (*Donoma*) or Pascal Tessaud (*Rue des cités*) have garnered attention from critics, and some, like Houda Benyanima (*Divines*), Alice Diop (*Vers la tendresse*) or Ladj Ly (*Les Misérables*) have won prestigious prizes.

[9] This is the title of a book published by the similarly named collective: *Décoloniser les arts*.

The north-eastern suburbs of Paris have become a place for independent film scenes. This is the result of a series of factors that we have outlined here by conceptualizing the relationship between artistic creation and territory in terms of scenes, in order to critically examine policies for creative industries support and the presuppositions underpinning them. Yes, this area offers affordable premises close to Paris, the place to be for a newcoming artist. But this is not the only reason why this appeals filmmakers on the fringes. experiences and culture. The concept of scenes offers an alternative theoretical framework to analyse and understand the local anchoring of an artistic community. Following Straw (1991), the scene helps to focus on the territory as a space of shared aesthetic or moral values: for the ones, a certain vision of filmmaking based and traditional techniques, for the others, a political will to voice as postcolonial subjects. This emphasis the creation itself, what motivates artists to invent new aesthetics and new organizational forms that make them possible. The territory is the soil for the emergence of new forms of cinema, within a group of peers who share aesthetic or political affinities. Making films differently and/or with the aim to change the representations of the territory drive the filmmakers to create and invent their own production structures. These scenes emerged outside of the dominant logic of film production, fuelled by a sense of urgency, either to save equipment and techniques (experimental cinema) or to voice a discourse to break up territorial prejudice (*Double Vague*). They have benefited from local cultural policies for artistic creation. The scene is also a stage: this implies a relationship between artists and their audience (Bellevance and Guibert 2014). Here, public support for art creation meet youth policies through the local programs for image education. For instance, directors who have benefited from its support are required to give talks or workshops in local schools to explain their work. Their recognition is also owing to the presence of an insider audience who keeps an eye open for novelties and, through various distribution channels, follows these artists and their films (specialized festivals, artistic squats, contemporary art venues, public space and Internet). Indeed, within the Paris metropolis, there are numerous show spaces forming an audience for alternative artistic proposition, as an amateur and as a fan. The scene reminds the importance of the local atmosphere as source of inspiration for artists that contribute to the making of local subculture or style (Lloyd 2002, Silver, Clarke 2016). Finally, the scene relates both to interactions at the micro level and to global cultural flows, emphasizing the need to adopt a multi-scale perspective on creative environments. The emergence and structuring of independent film scenes should thus be understood within a dialectic frame, between the territory in which they are embedded (north-eastern Paris) and an international space of production, distribution and recognition. Analysing the emergence of new forms of cinema in terms of scene rather than cluster underlines the predominant role in this movement of cultural policies (image education, support for creation and distribution) rather than economic development policies (tax incentives, ad hoc real estate developments). Indeed, the filmmakers of these independent scenes find resources, spaces, inspiration and support in the territory. However, their projects take shape outside of urban planning and economic development

policies set up to encourage the formation of a cluster of creative activities benefitting well-established players in the cinema and audiovisual industry.

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