

The Riots in France as Seen Through the ‘Long Take’

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On June 27, Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year-old French citizen of North African descent, was shot dead by a police officer in the Paris suburb of Nanterre when he attempted to drive off during a traffic check. His killing sparked protests and riots across France, especially in the impoverished suburbs (or banlieues), whose predominantly black and Arab residents are the most frequent targets of police violence. As the philosopher Alain Badiou has pointed out: “With utter uniformity, riots by the popular youth in the ‘suburbs’... are provoked by the actions of the police.”

The banlieues have long been plagued by poverty and unemployment. According to [institutmontaigne.org](#),

“these neighborhoods receive less state funding compared to any other areas in France. The national aid per capita in low-income neighborhoods is starkly lower than anywhere else in the country...” The banlieues are consistently underserved, in terms of public investment, the provision of education and child services, and healthcare. For example, the number of day care centers per child under the age of three is six times lower than the national average; and there are 50 percent fewer pediatricians than in the rest of France. Macron has essentially failed to help France’s migrant communities. As one Muslim social worker stated: “It was a dream when he was elected and it turned into a nightmare. I don’t think Le Pen would be any worse.”

Romain Gavras' breathtaking film *Athena* (2022) confronts the rage and frustration of the young people who live in the banlieues. The opening long take of *Athena* is a ten-minute masterpiece of revolutionary cinema, that is, of cinema which is charged with the "Great Refusal," as Herbert Marcuse would refer to the "protest against that which is." This extended sequence renders on film the very logic of revolt; for the long-take and the urban riot are both about the 'construction of a duration,' sustaining a caesura, a gap in the official temporality. That Gavras and his cinematographer Matias Boucard eschewed CGI in *Athena* is simply mind-boggling: "[W]e do everything for real," Gavras says. "The planning, weirdly, was almost military and very precise to create chaos in front of the camera."

The opening take begins from within a police station, so that we see the very place which in two short minutes will be under attack. We follow Abdel (Dali Benssalah), a French soldier recently returned from Mali, as he makes his way to the press gathered outside to inform them of the death of his younger brother by uniformed officers, the third case of police brutality in two months at *Athena*. While Abdel pleads for peace, in the crowd gathered round is another brother, Karim (Sami Slimane) who has emerged as a dedicated rebel ready to lead the brutalized youth of *Athena* into open conflict with the police.

With his act of igniting and hurling a Molotov cocktail at the police headquarters, Karim has made a decision, he has chosen a side—the side of the oppressed, the marginalized, the humiliated. France's far-right likes to blame those living in the banlieues for most of the problems facing the country; however, they are not interested in improving the quality of life of the residents. When riots occur the youth typically rage against what they are used to, the very place the rioters live in. Invariably, the right scoffs at this with such statements as, 'How foolish to destroy what little they've got!' What they fail to recognize however, is that "when something is one of the few 'benefits' granted you, it becomes the symbol not of its particular function, but of the general scarcity... the riot detests it for that reason."

Following the uprising at the police station, we make the journey back to the housing project with Karim and members of his group; and all the while the camera is somehow seamlessly weaving in and out of the van as it speeds along. When they finally arrive, Karim and his fellow insurgents prepare for the police onslaught that they know is coming. Only when they stand overlooking their modern-day battlements does the camera cut away. It is one of the most remarkable shots ever executed on film and deserves to be watched and re-watched not merely for its technical virtuosity, but as an enactment of artistic truth.

The long take is cinematic faithfulness: this is literally the case in the sense that we do not cut away. We are riveted to the time and space as it is determined by the initial choice. So, the long take is fidelity in that we are bound as it were to the event. The long take is the cinematic analogue of resistance, of refusal, of non-compliance. At the most basic level the long take refuses the dominant language of popular cinema which insists upon short takes, basically a pre-digestion of the cinematic material. The dominant mode encourages a certain passivity on the part of the viewer which translates politically speaking into a kind of quietism. By contrast, the long take is the form proper to revolt because of how it uses time and space: it bears the "transgressive mark of excess in its unwillingness to conform to a generalized spectatorial regime."

What the long take insists on is making a choice and then adhering to all the consequences that follow from that initial determination. As soon as the first Molotov is thrown, we are committed to all that follows afterward. The film begins with this decisive act on the part of

Karim: it his launching of the cocktail which truly sets the film in motion, like an orchestra waiting for the conductor to commence. In a sense, time begins with this action. Time begins with an act of transgression. The insurgent brother makes his decision and does not flinch from seeing through every implication of his choice.

“Police violence happens every day, especially if you’re Arab or black,” as a young man recently stated to the BBC. Lanna Hollo, a human rights lawyer in Paris, observed that “What characterizes France is denial. There is a total denial that there is a structural, systemic problem in the police.” The greatness of Athena is that it does not allow the viewer to take refuge in denial. And this is fundamentally because the long take is about continuity, making us see things in spatial-temporal relation to other things. The long take implicates the viewer, the viewer becomes a participant in the action portrayed, the camera is a character. There is no passive shot or frame. At every moment we are involved and cannot extricate ourselves from the situation or watch inertly from the sidelines, as if it is happening to someone else.

The long take forces upon the viewer a kind of resolution, we cannot pretend to remain neutral: it effectively says to us, first, you are in now—don’t pretend you can step out, don’t pretend you can be a mere spectator. And what is more, don’t abandon the fight, keep faith with the resistance, follow through with the decision until the end.

Athena (2022) is available for streaming on Netflix.

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