THE REPRESENTATION OF BANLIEUES IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH LITERATURE: A NEW FORM OF ENGAGED REALISM?

ÇAĞDAŞ FRANSIZ EDEBİYATINDA BANLİYÖLERİN TEMSİLİ: YENİ "ANGAJE" BİR GERÇEKÇİLİK?

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Abstract

This article aims to address the following questions: What form does the representation of the banlieues imaginary take in contemporary French literature, and what position does it occupy within the literary field? Can we speak of a new form of mimesis of reality? To explore these questions, three works have been selected from contemporary French literature that represent this imaginary, each written by a different author: Lydie Salvayre's Les belles Âmes (2000), Olivier Adam's Les Lisières (2012) and Mahir Guven's Grand frère (2017). This selection allows for a sufficiently diverse range of works and author profiles, offering relevant insights. The article will begin by analyzing the media portrayal of the banlieues in France and the collective imaginary constructed around this space. It will then analyze how contemporary novels, including those in our corpus, reconnect fictional narrative with social reality by attempting to "heal" from the antinarrativism of modernity. It will also address the concept of engaged realism present in the three novels, focusing on the question of legitimacy in writing about, for, and on behalf of the banlieues. A final section will be dedicated to the techniques of realism in the corpus, through an analysis of these narrative techniques in the three novels. The conclusion will summarize our research and present observations regarding the answer to the question of the presence of a new peri-urban realism in contemporary French literature.

Öz

Bu makale şu sorulara yanıt vermeyi amaçlamaktadır: Fransız çağdaş edebiyatında banliyölerin edebi temsili ne şekilde ele alınmakta ve edebi alanda nasıl bir konumda bulunmaktadır? Gerçekliğin yeni bir mimesisinden söz edebilir miyiz? Bu soruları cevaplamak için, bu edebi temsili gerçekleştiren üç farklı Fransız çağdaş yazarın üç romanı seçilmiştir: Lydie Salvayre'nin Les belles Âmes (2000), Olivier Adam'ın Les Lisières (2012) ve Mahir Guven'in Grand frère (2017). Bu seçkide eserlerin ve yazar profillerinin yeterince farklı olması çeşitli çıkarımların sunulmasını sağlayacaktır. Makale, Fransa'da banliyölerin medyadaki temsili ve bu mekân etrafında inşa edilen kolektif bilinç ile ilgili bir analiz ile başlayacaktır. Ardından, edebi tür olarak Fransız romanının, modernliğin "antinarrativizminden" "iyileşmeye" çalışarak nasıl sosyal gerçeklikle yeniden bağlantı kurduğunu, özellikle ele aldığımız eserlerdeki anlatı teknikleriyle inceleyecektir. Ayrıca, üç romanda var olan 'angaje realizm' kavramını, banliyöler hakkında yazma "meşruiyeti" üzerine odaklanarak ele alacaktır. Son bölümde, üç romanda yer alan bu gerçekçilik tekniklerinin bir çözümlemesini sunarak, eserlerde kullanılan gerçekçi anlatı yöntemlerine odaklanılacaktır. Sonuç kısmında ise, araştırmamız özetlenecektir ve çağdaş Fransız edebiyatında yeni bir banliyö realizminin varlığına dair verilen yanıtlar hakkında gözlemler sunulacaktır. Bu eserlerdeki banliyönun edebi temsili özellikle önemlidir çünkü bu bölgeler hakkında, bu bölgeleri yakından tanıyan kişiler tarafından ve banliyöyü yaftalayan, banliyö sakinleri hakkında olumsuz kolektif bilinci oluşturan medya ve siyasi söyleme karşı bir söylem üretilmesine olanak tanır.

Introduction

French banlieues,[1] the geographical areas surrounding major French cities, are often depicted in both media and literature through images and stereotypes associated with a particularly negative collective imaginary. National and international media coverage of the 2005 and 2023 riots has contributed to the shaping of this collective imaginary, in which the youth from the banlieues are frequently portrayed as "thugs" (in French, "racaille"), a term infamously used by former French President (at that time, in 2005, interior minister) Nicolas Sarkozy, who vowed to "clean them out with a power hose" ("nettoyer au karcher").

In contemporary literature, the banlieues also represent a social and geographical space that increasingly draws the attention of both writers and the public. However, the early works on these areas did not receive much recognition from literary critics or academia, primarily because they were classified within genres considered minor or 'paraliterary.' Over time, the number of such works has grown, and the registers and genres employed have diversified, yet they still struggle to achieve full legitimacy within the contemporary literary field.

This article aims to address the following questions: What form does the representation of the banlieues imaginary take in contemporary French literature, and what position does it occupy within the literary field? Can we speak of a new form of mimesis of reality? To explore these questions, three works have been selected from contemporary French literature that represent this imaginary, each written by a different author: Lydie Salvayre's *Les belles Âmes* (2000), Olivier Adam's *Les Lisières* (2012) and Mahir Guven's *Grand frère* (2017). This selection allows for a sufficiently diverse range of works and author profiles, offering relevant insights. The article will begin by analyzing the media portrayal of the banlieues in France and the collective imaginary constructed around this space. It will then analyze how contemporary novels, including those in our corpus, reconnect fictional narrative with social reality by attempting to "heal" from the antinarrativism of modernity. It will also address the concept of engaged realism present in the three novels, focusing on the question of legitimacy in writing about, for, and on behalf of the banlieues. A final section will be dedicated to the techniques of realism in the corpus, through an analysis of these narrative techniques in the three novels. The conclusion will summarize our research

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[1]   We will use this term instead of 'suburbs' in English, as the two refer to very different social realities.

and present observations regarding the answer to the question of the presence of a new peri-urban realism in contemporary French literature.

COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

In her book *Identités françaises: Banlieues, féminités et universalisme*, Mame-Fatou Niang argues that discourses on the banlieues are predominantly shaped by external representations produced by politicians or the media, rather than by the voices of the inhabitants of these areas themselves, which contributes to the formation of a collective imaginary that particularly emphasizes their violence:

> The ease with which a parallel is drawn between a natural propensity for violence and the banlieue illustrates the notion of an expectation horizon, of projections, and of a mental construction of peripheral urban spaces. Today, it is evident that these spaces are more widely known through the discourse of the media and politicians than through the narratives of their own residents. These externally constructed discourses facilitate the creation, in the collective unconscious, of images that surpass and erase the reality of the periphery (Niang, 2019, p. 44).[2]

The 2005 and 2023 riots left a lasting mark on the collective imaginary, and their media coverage contributed to the entrenchment of certain representations. The 2005 riots followed the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, two teenagers aged 17 and 15, who were electrocuted while trying to escape from the police in Clichy-sous-Bois. The fact that these youths chose to flee from the police at the risk of their own lives is seen by many as a sign of police violence towards young people in the banlieues, evidenced by the increased frequency of what are known as "police blunders" ("bavures policières"). These blunders stem from abusive identity checks and arrests based on "racial profiling" ("délits de faciès") of young people, often from visible minorities, and sometimes have tragic outcomes.

The riots dominated media coverage in France and were also reported internationally for three weeks, until they subsided following the declaration of a state of emergency by President Jacques Chirac on November 8, 2005. According to Dominique Wolton, sociologist and media expert, the riots were a wake-up call from

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[2]   The English translations of the sources cited originally written in French are provided by the authors of this article, except for the quotations from Mahir Guven's novel which was translated into English in 2019. The quotations from *Grand frère* will be taken from the English translation, *Older Brother*, by Tina Kover.

the youth directed at the French Republic, demanding that it fulfill its obligations towards them:

> These young people from the banlieue, by shouting and burning their own cars, not those of the wealthy, reminded the Republic that, yes, they have duties towards it, but that the Republic also has duties towards them. The obligations to integrate have not succeeded for at least two generations; the French universalist model is broken (Wolton, 2006).

The relationship between the youth in the banlieue and the police in France is indeed extremely strained, as illustrated by the narrator of one of the works analyzed in this article. Azad, the protagonist of *Grand frère,* describes these tensions with a touch of irony, while emphasizing the deep resentment the youth harbor toward the police: *"Since I was a teenager I'd been engaging in a sort of dance with the cops titled 'I Love You; Me Neither.' The police were public enemy number one for us."* (Guven, 2019, p.64) Azad later recounts how a "gratuitous" provocation by the police, in the form of an assault on one of the local youth, led to the young people in his neighborhood seeking "revenge":

> So they ambushed him. I was at a tram stop that day. The cop car slowed down, a dented gray Peugeot 307. Pulled up alongside him and the front passenger-side window came down, and the cop took out a fire extinguisher and went to town on him with it. His whole head was covered in white powder and he was screaming, 'My eyes, my eyes!' That same night, vengeance came in the form of Molotov cocktails thrown at a Renault Scenic patrol car and the local station. The message: "Let us live" (p. 65).

Eighteen years after the 2005 riots, new unrest erupted following the death of Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year-old shot by a police officer in Nanterre during what the police described as a "failure to obey a police order." These events have reignited the specter of urban violence, which continues to shape the construction of the French collective imaginary on the Banlieues. This imaginary not only fuels the exclusion and stigmatization of banlieue residents but also exacerbates tensions between the police and the youth from these neighborhoods. Nahel was killed by a police officer who fired at him, claiming he felt in imminent danger and was "within his rights," according to police statements. However, videos filmed and shared on social media show that Nahel displayed no behavior that could be considered threatening to the officers, nor did it justify the use of a firearm.

In their article *Analyse comparée et socio-territoriale des émeutes de 2023 en France,* Marco Oberti and Maela Guillaume Le Gal, who compare the two riots, argue that these riots are primarily the result of an emotional shock following Nahel's death and must be understood in the broader context of the death of African-American George Floyd, killed by police officers during an arrest on May 25, 2020: "*The emotion runs deep, and the parallel with the death of G. Floyd in the United States just a few months prior is inevitable.*" The authors contend that "*it is the impunity of the police that is being denounced, as well as an act perceived as racist,*" since the officer shot Nahel "*without any apparent reason.*" (Oberti and Guillaume Le Gal, 2023, p.1)

This passage from the novel *Les Lisières,* published after the 2005 riots but before 2023, helps to illustrate how the sense of insecurity associated with banlieue youth, especially those belonging to visible minorities, is closely linked to the evening news broadcasts on the country's major national networks:

> I closed the door, wondering what could possibly be worrying him,
> other than the presence of Blacks and Arabs. I remembered how tense
> my father had been the other day, near the Acacias housing project,
> when we passed the bus stop that served the train station. He began
> staring at the ground and hugging the walls, as if one of those guys
> was really going to come after him, just like that, for no reason, as if
> we were walking through a wild, uncivilized zone where violence was,
> if not omnipresent, at least one of many possibilities, as if that place
> really looked like what you see on TV after eleven o'clock at night, on
> M6 or TF1 (Adam, 2012, p. 436).

According to Christina Horvath, the banlieue is "*increasingly and consistently associated with poverty, immigration, unemployment, Islam, drugs, gang rapes, violence, riots, and even terrorism*" (Horvath, 2016, p. 48).

The association of banlieue youth with terrorism is linked to several events, but most significantly to the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks, which marked 2015 and represented a turning point. The collective imaginary was imbued with a new dimension—that of the potential terrorist. According to Azad, this shift also changed the role of the police, who became more focused on identifying terrorists among the youth, attempting to build relationships with some of them to turn them into informants:

> Since Charlie and the thirteenth, we'd been having a whole new love
> affair with the police. Drugs, breaking and entering, car theft—none of
> that was a turn-on for the cops anymore. They're intelligence agents

now, and despite being dead-tired, they're loving it. Gives them a new
reason to live. And, to do the job properly and nab the big guns, they
need eyes and ears on the street, people straight out of the *bendo*, the
projects (Guven, 2019, p. 44).

The representation of the banlieue in literature by authors who themselves come from the banlieue or are closely familiar with it from having lived there, and who seek to include this space in cultural representation and give a voice to its inhabitants, seems particularly important due to the role it can play in deconstructing this collective imaginary. This can serve as a reclamation of speech by and for those directly affected by these generalized and stereotyped discourses, allowing them, through a realist literary approach, to offer their own version of the reality of the banlieues.

RECONNECTING FICTION WITH SOCIAL REALITY

The Novels in the Corpus

The three novels in the corpus each represent, in different ways, an attempt to reconnect the fiction of the novel with social reality. Scholars had already observed the tendency towards a return to the reality in French literature starting in the 2000s, and these novels confirm the presence of a new literary realism that focuses on representing the French banlieues.

Lydie Salvayre's novel, *Les belles Âmes*, is a parodic narrative centered on a "reality tour": thirteen tourists (ironically called *beautiful souls*) embark on a journey organized by the tourism agency *Real Voyages* to explore European poverty in all its forms. The agency has planned several excursions to social housing projects and disadvantaged neighborhoods on the outskirts of major cities in France, Italy, and Germany. This polyphonic novel, with its disorienting stylistic characteristics, not only depicts the banlieue but also examines how both its residents and outsiders perceive this space.

Les Lisières can be considered a narrative of the self, given the numerous similarities between the author, Olivier Adam, and his narrator and literary double, Paul Steiner. The novel features a main character who is a writer, having grown up in the Parisian suburbs, and who did everything in his power to leave as quickly as possible, yet continues to evoke these spaces and their inhabitants in his novels.

Finally, *Grand frère*, which some critics classify as a "crime novel," presents two narrators, two Franco-Syrian brothers who grew up in the banlieue. The younger brother returns to prepare for a terrorist attack in Paris after spending a few years in Syria, where he initially went for humanitarian work. However, the novel proves to be far more complex than it appears, as a final twist reveals that the younger brother's testimony is actually the product of the imagination of the main narrator, the older brother, because the younger brother never actually returned. This novel stands out from the other two works in that it is written in the sociolect used by young people from the banlieues, as both narrators come from that background.

Telling Stories to Heal from Modern Antinarrativism

The realist approach in literature, challenged in the 19th century, faced a crisis of truth and a crisis of representation that led to the temporary distancing of realist projects from the literary canon. Formalist and structuralist theories, by rejecting the idea that literature could faithfully represent reality—due not only to the instability and elusiveness of the real—declared the autonomy of literature from its referent. The return of the real only began in the 1980s, as the decline of these theories marked the start of a new era, where a referential paradigm replaced the previously dominant aesthetic paradigm.

The works of the authors in this corpus proudly bear the scars inflicted on novelistic realism by the profound questioning of the possibility of the novel to represent reality. Indeed, while contemporary literature witnesses a return of the reality, this desire to reconnect with referential narrative is not free, according to Aron Kibedi Varga, from a "*deep unease regarding traditional plot.*" The avant-gardes of the 20th century, having undermined writers' confidence in the notions of character and plot, have left their mark on contemporary authors, whose approach differs from that of their predecessors and is riddled with doubts. As Varga notes, "*One cannot become a storyteller at will; one does not quickly recover from the antinarrativism of modernity*" (Varga, 1990, p. 20).

Contemporary author François Bon, whose works, according to literary critics (notably Alexandre Gefen and Dominique Viart), are among the first to signal the return of realism, highlights in his novel *Daewoo* the difficulty faced by contemporary writers compared to those of previous eras, due to their doubts about their own legitimacy: "*In the past, poems were easier. A city discovered by a traveler from afar, the echo of the words exchanged by men there, the way a building anchors itself in the sky, and no one questioned the legitimacy of writing about it*" (Bon, 2004, p. 117).

In the works of the corpus, the authors, through their narrators, may be wary of the discredited techniques of realism, but they are confident in their legitimacy to write, particularly because their approach carries an engaged dimension: that of bringing into literay representation a segment of French society, namely the inhabitants of the banlieues.

THE ENGAGEMENT OF REALİSM: TO GIVE A VOICE TO THE UNDERREPRESENTED

The Question Of Legitimacy

"Engaged realism" can be observed on three levels of discourse: within the novel itself, through the words of the narrators and characters; through the writers' comments in interviews and discussions about their works; and through reception, including the public, as well as journalistic and academic critiques. In Les Belles âmes, the narrator takes it upon herself to "speak on behalf" of one of her characters, Olympe, who lacks the words to express or even distinctly understand the confused emotions she feels.

> But this revelation, Olympe feels it without being at all able to express it in a sentence. Olympe falls silent once more. And twists her hair into little knots. As she always does when the words refuse to leave her mouth. True misery has this peculiar quality, it can never be spoken by those who suffer from it. This complicates matters. To say the least, it makes them impossible. For no one can speak in place of another. Yet that is precisely what I allow myself to do. To speak on behalf of Olympe. Without a shadow of guilt. Worse still, with the presumptuous certainty of my legitimacy. With the firm conviction that, in doing so, I am obeying both Olympe and myself (Salvayvre, 2007, p. 57).

The legitimacy the narrator/author claims for herself, while aware that she is transgressing certain rules, lies in the fact that she herself was once someone unable to express herself and eventually overcame this obstacle:

> I too was almost entirely unable to express myself in front of those I believed to be the bearers of knowledge, power, and culture. But through effort, through desire and hard work, I acquired the language, I acquired their language to make myself heard by them and, occasionally, to turn it against them (Salvayre, 2021, p. 203).

The author, who is also a child psychiatrist, encountered others during her professional practice—particularly adolescents—for whom using language to express their suffering was especially challenging, because they had to employ the *"language of the enemy"* (p. 203).

> This difficulty in speaking up is something I often observed in the adolescents I worked with in Bagnolet. They all struggled greatly to express their emotions, their pain or joy, their feelings about things, and had an even harder time using 'the language of the enemy,' as Debord would say (p. 203).

The enemies whose language they adopt, according to Salvayre, are the "*bearers of knowledge, power, and culture,"* (p.203) but also, more broadly, those who dominate the rest of society. This term is far from insignificant and carries different meanings, particularly in the context of young people from the banlieues using the French language, which resonates with postcolonial undertones. As Kery James, a French rapper of Haitian origin, alludes to in his song *Banlieusard et fiers de l'être* ("From the banlieue and Proud of It"), this complex relationship with the French language is evident: "*I wield the language of Molière, I master its letters. French because France colonized my ancestors."* (James, 2008)

Beyond the literary representation of those who cannot exist through their own speech, Lydie Salvayre also aims to give a voice to those who are invisible in society, addressing them directly: *"There is also the desire I have already mentioned, to address the invisible, the silent, the nameless—even if they may never read me"* (Schwerdtner, 2020, p. 207) She wishes to speak for them and for the people, but not in their place:

> For if literature, as Deleuze so aptly put it, could invent this missing people, address this missing people, speak with them as equals, that would be magnificent. At the same time, as Jacques Rancière reminds us, we must leave the people the freedom to invent their own text and refrain from speaking on their behalf. Speak for them, with them, but not in their place. Address them, receive their address, but never substitute ourselves for them (p. 208).

A similar approach can be found in Olivier Adam's work, as he seeks to give a voice to the "*silent majority*": "*I still believe that we must look at the silent majority, examine what they endure. Including them in a novel can be very revealing of the human condition*" (TF1Info, 2014). This project of including this marginalized majority

in fiction aims to draw conclusions about human nature and aligns with a Zola-like approach, particularly with the use of the term "examine" ("ausculter" in French).

Olivier Adam's narrator, Paul Steiner, shares his creator's ambitions and explicitly articulates his aim of representing the banlieues and their inhabitants: *"Everything in my books tried to pay tribute to the places and the community where I grew up, to those who shaped me, from whom I had distanced myself but who defined me, even through opposition.* (Adam, 2012, p.390) The author emphasizes in interviews his loyalty to his place of origin: *"I'm also the first to claim my loyalty to that place, to that community, by dedicating all my books to people who come from that world"* (Busnel, 2012).

Olivier Adam seeks to understand why the representation of these people in fiction struggles to find its place in literary production or is often tainted by "condescension" (Busnel, 2012). He believes that this issue is primarily due to the small number of writers who come from these backgrounds, and that even among this small group, some adopt attitudes toward the environment they "escaped" from that lead them to reproduce the discourse of the collective imaginary:

> This way of doing things can be explained quite simply: most writers do not come from those places, so they don't know them. As for the few writers who do, they have built themselves by rejecting the life they consider banal, mediocre, conventional, which leads them to adopt a rather strong irony. This is not a criticism, but an observation (Busnel, 2012).

Paul, his character, while he has also left his original environment, does not reject it as strongly but finds himself in the delicate position of transfuge (classe defector): *"I always felt so bad, dragging along my old complexes as a working-class suburban kid that nothing could ever heal, forever carrying that feeling of belonging to another race, as Annie Ernaux so perfectly described"* (Adam, 2012, p. 453).

He provides an example of a journalist, also a *transfuge* who reproduces the condescending attitude of the dominant discourse toward the people from her original background when she critiques the way he portrayed one of his characters, finding her too intelligent to be "real":

> There was, in particular, this woman who once wrote about one of my novels, claiming it wasn't believable because I had given my heroine—an unemployed cashier, married to a bus driver, living in Calais, and raised in a public housing project—'thoughts, a clarity of mind, and

> an intelligence incompatible with her background.'... The funniest part
> was that this woman herself came from the banlieues and the middle
> class. In such matters, *transfuges* were sometimes the most zealous
> (p. 451).

The narrator's project, which is also that of the author, is essentially democratic and therefore "political"—a dimension of his fiction that Adam himself asserts: "*Writing books cannot simply be the result of wherever your steps lead you; you have to force the gaze. It is both a literary and political endeavor.*" The author takes it upon himself to bring into fiction those he calls the "*underrepresented.*" (TF1Info, 2014)

A similar perspective is found with Mahir Guven, who emphasizes in an interview that "*in the artistic space, part of the population doesn't exist.*" (Kamissoko, 2022) Like Adam, Guven believes that people like those he depicts in his novel, of working-class and immigrant origins, are not in control of the narrative produced about them, and his first novel, *Grand frère,* aims to address this issue:

> I was also fed up with people talking about those from working-class
> and immigrant backgrounds in terms they didn't define themselves. I
> wanted to speak about the inner conflicts of a guy from the banlieue
> facing his own social mobility, especially when he confronts a world
> that isn't originally his (Saint-Louis, 2018).

The narrator of this novel, Azad, becomes the spokesperson for this approach when he argues that too many people, even those who, like academics, hold a position of scientific legitimacy, appropriate the discourse on the banlieue, while it is impossible to understand its dynamics without coming from it. He contends that their narrative lacks realism:

> And when you're not in it, it's not so easy to really understand it. You
> can't just adjust the antenna or rotate the satellite dish to capture the
> ambience. You have to feel the vibe, all the way deep in your gut, to
> really understand the ins and outs of life here. Sometimes I hear
> debates about our hood on the radio, not between politicians or
> journalists but decent guys, like university professors. But even they
> just say useless stuff; it's like someone talking about the jungle—the
> lions and the underbrush—without having been there. Any brother
> from around here who heard them would immediately call bullshit.
> You don't become a banlieusard on the benches of a lecture hall
> (Guven, 2019, p. 39)

The author's approach is not solely sociological or political; it is also aesthetic, as he clearly states that his project is to portray the lives of the banlieue residents in their beauty, and not just through the sociological lens of hardship and misery:

> I believe that all human beings are equal. When they come out of their mother's womb, they don't choose the context in which they're born. We owe them all the same respect. Yet, in the artistic space, part of the population doesn't exist. They are never paid tribute to, or if they are, it's with condescension. Their miseries are told. I wanted to make these characters beautiful. (...) I also try to rely on the real to tell the stories of people's lives and confront society with its excesses and injustices. That's all. I don't go much further than that (Kamissoko, 2022).

This approach is also found in the work of filmmaker Alice Diop, who creates films and documentaries about the banlieue, and in the writings of Pierre Bergounioux, whose works pay tribute to another aspect of society overlooked by the literary field: rural French provinces. Alice Diop reveals in her documentary *Nous* that her films and documentaries express a particular goal: *"to leave a trace, to give an existence, to preserve the existence of small lives that would have otherwise disappeared if I hadn't filmed them"* (Diop, 2020). Pierre Bergounioux beautifully and poetically highlights their shared approach:

> We dare to claim the ambition of pulling from the shadows those who lived, existed, without ever finding a trace, a reflection of themselves or their days on the pages of books or in the images that flicker across a screen (Diop, 2020).

REALIST TECHNIQUES IN THE NOVELS

The "trial" of the realist approach in the 20th century led to a renewal of form among authors seeking to reconnect their prose with social reality. The distinctive nature of these new forms has been analyzed in the doctoral thesis from which this article is derived. Some of these analyses will be synthesized in this section.

The authors of the works in this corpus differ from their predecessors in terms of the scope of their subject matter: they do not claim to present society from a global or generalized perspective, but rather aim to shed light on a part of society that they know intimately or from which they themselves come.

Les Belles Âmes (*The Beautiful Souls*)

Les belles Âmes is the novel in the corpus with the most significant and transgressive narrative features. In this novel, the author entrusts the narration to a mischievous and ironic narrator who plays with the conventions of realist fiction and the reader's expectations. This polyphonic narrative gives voice to a range of characters but blurs the modes of enunciation, leaving the reader uncertain about the identity of the narrating instance that expresses or thinks the statements reported by the narrator.

The reader is thus forced into a playful ("ludique") yet sometimes laborious reading, as they often do not know who is thinking or speaking. This narrator, too involved in the story to be considered a "good" narrator in the conventional sense of realist fiction, has a unique relationship with her characters, openly admitting that she created them entirely: "*He is the only one on this earth, aside from me who invented him, to find him of any interest*" (Salvayre, 2000, p. 19). Frequently employing the technique of metalepsis, which Genette defines as *"the manipulation—at least figurative, but sometimes fictional—of the particular causal relationship that connects, in one direction or another, the author to their work, or more broadly, the producer of a representation to the representation itself",* (Genette, 2004, p. 8) she comments on the structure of her story, and judges the behavior of her characters.

She uses one of her functions as a narrator, the *communicative function,* to explicitly comment on one of her other functions, the *directing* one:

> We will follow the evolution of her inner wanderings while trying to respect the narrative mode, namely: continuous progression of events, interspersed with twists and turns designed to keep the reader on the edge of their seat, and a final happy ending, followed by a long silence (p.119).

However, she ultimately does not keep her promises and ends the story in a way that neither corresponds to what she announced nor to the expectations of the reader, which she anticipates (and appears not to be overly concerned about):

> This is not the way to end a novel, I can already hear the complaints. The bus has broken down in the middle of a highway rest stop. Mr. Boiffard stifles a yawn. His wife nags him. Julien Flauchet is slumped over. Lafeuillade, more dead than alive. And everyone else, completely lost. As for a happy ending, it's a bust! (p. 156).

She openly admits to being overwhelmed (and even *"bothered"*) by some of her characters' behaviors, as in this example where Vulpius, the bus driver, deviates from what she had planned for him and from the expectation of verisimilitude she claims to value:

> In defiance of all verisimilitude, the driver Vulpius made his irrevocable decision in record time. And here I was, hoping for debates, perplexities, extraordinary twists, heart-pounding suspense, and a few dramatic turns to ensure that this novel would captivate its readers— now I find myself quite bothered (p. 119).

This metaleptic confession belongs, according to Gérard Genette, to a topos that has become widely used: that of a creator with diminished authority, whose characters are granted greater freedom, as Genette explains:

> This mode, or sub-mode, which will now concern us, obviously corresponds better to our—let's say, romantic, post-romantic, modern, postmodern—conception of creation, which readily grants it a certain liberty, and to its creatures, a capacity for autonomy that the classical ethos, more grounded or more timid, scarcely envisioned: this can be seen, for example, in the now commonplace topos of novel characters gradually escaping the authority of their creator, and more broadly of the work exerting influence back on the artist (Genette, 2024, p. 17).

These elements, which clearly transgress the realist codes based on the illusion of reality, lead the reader to abandon the "*willing suspension of disbelief*" required by the reading of a realist novel, and to adopt a different reading stance—what Genette calls "*a playful simulation of credulity"* (p. 16).

The use of these narrative techniques corresponds to what Genette describes as a "*metaleptic fiction,*" a narrative where the use of metalepsis is no longer anecdotal but reflects a general tendency that alters the reader's experience:

> The reader, who is assigned an obviously impossible role, cannot grant it their belief: fiction, certainly, but fiction of a fantastic or marvelous type, which can hardly expect a full and complete suspension of disbelief, but only a playful simulation of credulity (p. 16).

Lydie Salvayre's work is neither fantastic nor marvelous, but it borders on the verisimilitude and is "offbeat". It thus belongs to a tradition, as this type of narrator existed in the works of Diderot, Sterne and Scarron according to Genette (2004), yet it renews that tradition by employing it to represent life in the banlieue, through a

very specific use of irony and polyphony. The main goal of this polyphony is to reveal how the dominant discourse influences the way the characters express themselves, regardless of their social class. Indeed, the novel's characters—whether the bourgeois tourists, including a teacher, a journalist, a writer, and a business owner, or the three residents of the "cite": Jason, the group's "vibe manager"; Olympe, his girlfriend and a garment presser; and Vulpius, the driver—are all subject to "*asphyxiation*," and to "*conditioning*." Their speech is, in fact, a "*language without speech*," making them, according to Lydie Salvayre, beings who are "*spoken*" rather than "*speaking*":

> They are spoken through the voices of newspapers, the voice of public opinion, the voice of prejudice, the predatory voice of advertisements and 24-hour news that bombards them from morning to night, in short, the voice of the dominant discourse that flows from those perfect stupefiers that the media can be. They are especially spoken through the voice of economic discourse that pours over their brains in tons and poisons them. Even love is spoken through the words of economic discourse. And art. And culture too. Gone are lyricism and intimate eloquence! Gone is the singular voice! Gone is literature. We express ourselves through stereotypes. Or we shut up (Salvayre, 2021, p. 203).

Each character, indeed, reproduces the clichés and stereotypes of their social class, and, according to researcher Anne-Marie Paillet, the narrator does not take sides among these different opinions: "*By opposing these popular and bourgeois viewpoints, the author remains neutral: irony sends them back-to-back, merely highlighting the social divide*" (Paillet, 2013, p. 147).

The narrator employs all the different types of reported speech, as outlined in the scale proposed by linguist Dominique Maingueneau, who ranks them according to their degree of mimesis, from the most to the least mimetic: narrated speech, indirect speech, lexically contaminated indirect speech or with textual islands, free indirect speech, and direct speech (Maingueneau, 2020, p. 239). However, her preferred method is free indirect speech, which is particularly suited to her approach since, as Maingueneau notes, it is "*especially used for clichés, which are easily identifiable and spontaneously attributed to a voice other than that of the narrator*" (p. 225).

However, the most frequently used mode in the narration is free indirect speech, which, according to Maingueneau, is "a*n original mode of enunciation, which crucially relies on polyphony*" and "*allows two inextricably intertwined 'voices' to be heard: that of the narrator and that of the character*" (p. 227). It also "*enables the subjectivity of*

the quoted speaker to be conveyed while integrating their words into the flow of the narration" (p. 231).

Polyphony, as well as the irony—based on feigned agreement and distance, according to Anne-Marie Paillet (Paillet, 2013, p.147) —can be fully felt in this passage where the narrator reports Olympe's response to the guide's question about the scars on her wrist. Several enunciators seem to blend in this passage: Olympe, the narrator, but also the 'commerce experts' mentioned in the passage. One can also note the mixture of registers, reflecting these different enunciators, with the use of a more formal register—"*evade the question,*" "*serious detriment,*" "*disrupt the sales process*"—and a more colloquial one—'*stupid thing*", "*nice ass,*" "*suppl".*

> And Olympe can't evade the question, though she's tempted to for a few seconds. Olympe made that stupid thing a year ago, when Jason cheated on her with Juliette, who is better than her in every way: she lives in a house and dresses in Morgan. Her scars caused her a serious detriment when she was looking for a job as a saleswoman. Scars don't look good—that's what Olympe has come to understand. They disrupt the normal flow of sales, according to commerce experts, who, on the other hand, say that a nice set of jewelry and good makeup can greatly enhance the process. A nice ass is obviously a suppl. bonus. Often irresistible, it must be acknowledged (Salvayre, 2000, p. 91).

The narrative transgressions of the realist pact, the improbable and comical situations, irony, and polyphony in Lydie Salvayre's Les belles Âmes propose a new form of realism, applied to the reality of the banlieue, with its engaged dimension evident in the discourse of both the narrator and the author.

Les Lisières (The Edges)

In *Les Lisières* by Olivier Adam, the narrator is a second self of the author, a "literary double". Because of the use of an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator the perspective employed is and should be internal focalization. In his previous novels, the author also used internal focalization even when his narrators were not his doubles, putting himself in the shoes of his characters, so to speak. In an interview, the author explained his preference for this narrative mode, stating that it is the best way to understand his characters and to be on the right level, what he calls "being the seismograph of the character's inner states":

> And then there is the adventure of not being a mere observer looking at others, a 'he,' but of engaging in life, living lives other

> than one's own. For me, it's also a way of being at the right height,
> not placing myself above. I need to be one with my character
> (Busnel, 2012).

The question of autobiography arises with this novel due to the similarities between the narrator and the author, but one cannot use this term for a novel that does not present the homonymy between author, narrator, and main character required to consider a work autobiographical. Moreover, the author argues that just because a book is autobiographical does not make it truer: "*For me, the injunction of a strict autobiographical pact is not the most reliable path to creating strong and truthful books.*" (Busnel, 2012)

Indeed, Olivier Adam's double resembles him a great deal: physically, the narrator's description corresponds to photographs of the author—"*Breton features*" and "*the build of a retired rugby player*" (Adam, 2012, p.200). Their lives share several common points: their profession (both are novelists and screenwriters), their family (married and fathers of a daughter and a son), their origins (from the southern banlieue of Paris), their passions (cultural, musical, literary, for Japan), and even the reception of their works in the literary field. There are also differences: Paul is the son of a worker, Olivier Adam is the son of a bank employee; Paul has only one brother (and a secret deceased twin), while Adam has two brothers; Paul's wife is a nurse and has left him, whereas Adam's wife is a writer and they are still together.

The tradition of the literary double is not new, and the author views its use as a tool he would not want to do without, as it allows him to combine the best of both worlds—lived experience and fiction—which do not necessarily exclude one another:

> A book that is not based on experience, on lived emotions, seems
> to me to be pointless and disconnected. And a book that forgoes
> the fictional adventure, the way in which you can extend the
> narrative, universalize it, collectivize it, politicize it by twisting and
> exaggerating certain things and doing other things, such a book
> seems equally pointless and disconnected to me (Busnel, 2012).

The narrator's (and the author's) goal is also to create "*a truer portrait of ourselves than social life allows,*" through the filter of a fictional self (Adam, 2012, p. 254-255). Yet, in practice, Paul realizes that this approach does not work, as the books "*erased no misunderstandings, clarified no contours, and drew nothing clearer or more accurate*" (p. 254) neither for those close to the author nor for unknown readers. For the latter, too, the self does not reveal itself as the narrator might hope

because "*they filled in the gaps, connected the pieces, and invested in the blanks*" (p. 254). In fact, it is the reader's primary role to invest in the text, a "*lazy machine,*" according to Umberto Eco, and a "*fabric of blank spaces, interstices to be filled in, which the one who wrote it anticipated would be completed*" (Eco, 1985, p. 66-67). Paul thus comes to understand what every writer, not just one using self-writing, realizes when faced with readers' interpretations: every reader appropriates the text and draws conclusions or insights that suit them. The narrator's conclusion regarding the fictionalization of the self is not positive: "*in the end, no one ever truly knew who you were, and misunderstanding and incomprehension persisted at every level*" (Adam, 2012, p. 255).

Why, then, persist on this path? According to the narrator and the author, this path serves several functions. The first is the desire to scrutinize one's own existence, one's own personality, to analyze oneself as an author would analyze a character, with some distance, to understand one's motivations. A quote used by the publisher on the book's cover reflects this desire: "*The only thing that intrigued me was to understand the reasons for this distance*" (p. 498). When placed in context, this quote refers to the narrator's reflections following his mother's death, as he tries to understand why he is not as devastated by the loss as he should be. He realizes that he often feels disconnected from the reality of his own life and that he feels less when he experiences something than when he encounters the same situation in fiction.

He also understands that this detachment stems from the growing distance between him and his family. While it may be too late to bridge this gap, he still wants to analyze it to understand it. This approach is similar to that of Annie Ernaux, whom Adam frequently cites as an inspiration, but while Ernaux employs an auto-socio-biographical approach in her works (notably *La Place*), Adam introduces a filter, not directly describing his own life. Moreover, certain events described by Adam, such as his divorce or his mother's death, had not yet occurred in his life. It is as if he uses self-narration by projecting a character similar to himself, like a twin, into a simulation, putting him through certain trials and analyzing the results of this experiment. This approach makes sense because narrativizing the subject is what allows one to truly understand it, as noted by Aron Kibedi Varga, and Olivier Adam seems to apply this logic to his narrativized and fictional self:

> One can only know the subject through narration; a character (real or fictional) never presents itself 'as it is,' but is constituted through the countless stories it experiences. The subject remains

unknowable as long as one tries to define it outside of time and discourse; however, it becomes known if one accepts seeing it gradually emerge through the succession of its narratives" (Varga, 1990, p. 16).

Another function we identify is the autobiographical temptation to retrospectively examine one's life, and when narrating it, to select certain events and assign them a significance they may not have had, creating correlations and causalities to justify or give meaning, in hindsight, to certain choices or behaviors. The narrator is aware of this and calls it *"rearranging things to fit,"*("réarranger les choses à sa sauce") for which he is an expert: *"I spent my life trying to make events coincide that had nothing to do with each other, hoping to find some hidden meaning, some logic, however obscure, even invented"* (Adam, 2012, p. 477).

However, the function that seems most important in terms of realism is that this narrative approach allows for a different kind of representation of reality, one that undergoes the refracting process of the narrator/author's consciousness. The novel is a monologue, but despite its form, it is dialogic and polyphonic because the narrator gives voice to many characters, most of the time preserving their exact words through the use of direct speech. These characters, inspired by real people, thus gain access to the novel and can express themselves, with the narrator acting as an intermediary or medium who transmits their discourse and refracts reality.

This can be described as 'subjective realism,' and what makes it innovative is maybe not its form but its engaged use, in the service of representing the underrepresented. While some may label such self narration approaches narcissistic, it is here, in fact, a sign of narrative modesty, as the author seems to adapt Protagoras' formula: *"the fictional self is the measure of all things."* This assumed 'subjectivism' allows the author to attempt to understand human reality—his own and that of his characters—and thus to communicate his human and social discoveries.

Grand frère (Older brother)

Mahir Guven's novel presents characteristics that also indicates a new form of realism. As previously mentioned, this novel aims to portray a certain youth from the banlieue, but it does so through innovative techniques and adopts an engaged approach. Beyond narration, it is the use of a sociolect, called *Français Contemporain des Cités* (Contemporary Urban French) that contributes to what we call linguistic hyperrealism.

The novel requires a thoughtful reading—and narratological analysis—since it contains traps to challenge the reader's credulity. Upon first reading and before the epilogue, the novel presents a narrative entrusted to two narrators, two brothers who intervene on the same level, even though the main focus is on the one referenced in the title, the older brother. Both narrators begin their story at a certain point in their shared history, leading to a convergence in the present. However, this point of convergence is not fina as expected as it is ultimately found in the epilogue, a crucial element of the novel's paratext, as it provides the true resolution, not only overturning the previous ending but also the entire content of the narrative.

The possibility of such a final twist is hinted at throughout the novel via clues that the narrator has scattered along the way, signaling to the reader that he is an unreliable narrator. These clues take the form of what the author calls "Easter eggs" in an interview, which serve a dual purpose. The author claims to have hidden around fifty Easter eggs in the novel, primarily as references to popular culture (Guven, 2019).

Easter eggs belong to the world of video games, where they represent hidden elements that allow players to unlock actions or aspects parallel to the main storyline. Mahir Guven adds a playful touch of freshness to the concept of intertextuality through this idea. Some of these Easter eggs are more or less obvious (depending, of course, on the reader's cultural background, although they do not necessarily require literary expertise) and do not serve a specific function, while others point toward certain elements of the novel's central mystery: Has the younger brother returned?

The older brother, who believes he saw him getting off a bus while he was at the bus station, is not sure until the younger brother shows up at his place in the middle of the night. Azad, a Uber driver, happens to be in the right place at the right time when he drops off a certain "H. Melville" at the station. It is from this Easter egg that the reader should start questioning, just as the narrator does, the veracity of this vision. But the narrator offers several reasons to doubt: he smokes too much weed, he likes to make up stories to pass the time... We also learn that he was diagnosed with schizophrenia by an army doctor after one of his "delusions" led to the loss of a soldier.

Moreover, the reader is distracted from their initial quest for truth when a second mystery arises: Has the younger brother returned to plan a terrorist attack in Paris? Just when the reader thinks they have untangled fact from fiction and discovered that Hakim only pretended to plan an attack in order to fake his death

and escape the police and his former jihadist comrades, the carefully constructed narrative collapses a few pages later. The epilogue reveals that the entire novel, starting from the supposed return of the brother, is actually the product of a meeting between Azad and a publisher who asks him to write a book in which his brother returns. Thus, Azad grants himself the happy ending that his brother's absence had denied him, while also leading the reader astray. The author, meanwhile, playfully introduces a mise en abyme of autofiction, as he portrays a narrator who claims to be writing autofiction and who presents himself as the author of the novel in a fictional epilogue.

The use of Français Contemporain des Cités (FCC) a term employed by sociolinguists to describe the sociolect spoken by young people in the banlieue, contributes to the novel's realistic function. But there are several risks inherent in using slang in a literary work, particularly this sociolect. The first risk is that the work might "age poorly," meaning it could lose its relevance over time, as FCC evolves rapidly and the terms used have a variable lifespan. The second risk is that readers unfamiliar with this sociolect might struggle to read and understand the novel, and it is with this risk in mind that the author added a glossary at the end of the book, containing nearly 150 words not found in standard dictionaries. Another risk is that the novel might "travel poorly," meaning that translating it could be too difficult due to the use of FCC, and even if it were translated, the work's "essence" might not be fully preserved.

A final risk, as Flaubert pointed out to Huysmans in a letter criticizing the excessive use of slang in Les Sœurs Vatard, is that it might "offend" the reader and "spoil [their] pleasure":

> The core of your style, its very substance, is solid. But I find you too modest for not believing in it. Why reinforce it with energetic and often coarse expressions? When it is the author speaking, why do you speak like your characters? Note that by doing so, you weaken the idiom of your characters. It is no harm if I don't understand a phrase used by a Parisian thug. If you find this phrase typical and indispensable, I'll defer and blame my ignorance. But when the writer uses a heap of words that aren't found in any dictionary, I have the right to revolt against him. Because you offend me, you spoil my pleasure (Flaubert, 1879).

Flaubert understood the use of slang for characters but disapproved of its use by the narrator. However, the words he claims not to have found in dictionaries (maboule, poivrots, bibines, godinette, du tape à l'œil) now belong to the familiar

register of the French language, and this may be the fate that awaits FCC terms once they are "canonized" by their literary representation.

The author dares to take all these risks, and this allows him not only, as he intends, to honor the language of the people from the banlieue—"*The idea is also to pay tribute to the people. When you write in a language they use daily, you canonize that language, you ennoble it*" (Kamissoko, 2022)—but also to create this aspect of linguistic hyperrealism, for there is no doubt that if the narrators in this novel had existed, this is precisely how they would have spoken.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to answer the following questions: What form does the representation of the banlieues imaginary take in contemporary French literature, and what position does it occupy within the literary field? Can we speak of a new form of mimesis of reality?

The article has demonstrated that it is possible to speak of a new contemporary realism focused on the representation of the French banlieue. The authors of the novels in the corpus offer a new form of literary realism that does not replicate the techniques of traditional realism and reflects the questioning of the validity of a literary project representing society—a concern that marked the 20th century.

Several differences can be noted: firstly, the notions of verisimilitude and truth no longer intersect in the same way in these novels, each of which plays with this convention in its own manner. Lydie Salvayre, in her fable of the real, presents a narrator/author who seems to believe in the reality of the characters she created, while also playing with the reader's expectations of verisimilitude. Olivier Adam conceals the reality of his own life behind that of his double yet believes this is how it will be fully revealed in its truth. As for Mahir Guven, he writes a novel in which the reader must solve the riddles by picking up clues throughout the pages, only to be confronted with a surprising final twist, even if they had paid attention to the signals given by the narrator.

The suspension of disbelief is no longer required: these works demand a playful or distanced reading, as they challenge the conventions of the realist "rulebook." According to Philippe Hamon, this rulebook notably included "*a very pedagogical intent to convey readable and coherent information, aiming to eliminate any obscurity*" (Hamon, 2015, p. 119). These novels do not have a didactic goal, but rather social and political aims, and they do not seek to simplify or offer coherence to their readers.

On the contrary, the reading experience they provide is different, requiring the reader to untangle certain confusions: the blurring of fiction and reality in Adam's work, of enunciation in Salvayre's, and of hidden truths behind the riddles in Guven's.

Furthermore, these novels, unlike those of their predecessors, do not claim to position themselves above their characters, and they embrace their subjectivity, which recalls the attitude that Erich Auerbach identified in modernist novelists such as Woolf, Proust, and Joyce. In his work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Auerbach noted that "*this attitude differs entirely from that of authors who interpret the actions, situations, and characters of their personages with objective assurance, as was the general practice in earlier times*" (Auerbach, 2003, p. 410). Indeed, the narrator adopts a hypersubjective stance in Mahir Guven's work, an ironic tone in Lydie Salvayre's, and acts as a "*seismograph of the character's inner states*" in Olivier Adam's work.

These elements constitute the new form of engaged realism implemented in these novels, which explicitly aim to represent a segment of society—the banlieue—and to give it a place in the literary field. However, the literary field has an ambivalent attitude toward this project: the readership has generally embraced it, judging by the sales of these novels (except *Les Belles Âmes*, which had more modest sales), and the works have been translated to varying extents (into fifteen languages for *Grand frère*, and several for Olivier Adam). These novels have been commented upon by critics, especially journalists (*Les Lisières* and *Grand frère* received significant media coverage, *Les Belles Âmes* less so). *Grand frère* and *Les Lisières* have therefore been commercial successes, which *Les Belles Âmes*—a more discreet work—has not matched. However, Lydie Salvayre's overall production, and this novel in particular, have attracted attention from literary and academic critics, with numerous quality articles and even books dedicated to them. This can be explained not by the individual success of these works, but by the authors' position within the field, which is linked to their legitimacy, as well as their age and seniority in the profession. Lydie Salvayre appears to be the most legitimate of the three, both in terms of accolade (literary prizes) and critical recognition.

The representation of the banlieue imaginary in these works is particularly significant because it allows for the production of a discourse about these areas from individuals who come from or know them well, offering a portrayal that seeks to counter the media and political discourse responsible for stigmatizing the banlieue and constructing a negative collective imaginary around its inhabitants. However,

this representation can only do so much, as literature no longer has the same standing in discourse production as its numerous rivals: television and cinema (long-established), as well as the media and social networks.

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Summary

French banlieues, the geographical areas surrounding major French cities, are often depicted in both media and literature through images and stereotypes associated with a particularly negative collective imaginary. In contemporary literature, the banlieues also represent a social and geographical space that increasingly draws the attention of both writers and the public. This article aims to address the following questions: What form does the representation of the banlieues' imaginary take in contemporary French literature, and what position does it occupy within the literary field? Can we speak of a new form of mimesis of reality? To explore these questions, three works have been selected from contemporary French literature that represent this imaginary, each written by a different author: Lydie Salvayre's *Les belles Âmes* (2000), Olivier Adam's *Les Lisières* (2012), and Mahir Guven's *Grand frère* (2017). This selection offers a sufficiently diverse range of works and author profiles, providing relevant insights.

The article begins by analyzing the media portrayal of the banlieues in France and the collective imaginary constructed around this space. It then examines how contemporary novels, including those in our corpus, reconnect fictional narratives with social reality by attempting to "heal" from the antinarrativism of modernity. It also addresses the concept of engaged realism present in the three novels, focusing on the question of legitimacy in writing about, for, and on behalf of the banlieues. A final section is dedicated to the techniques of realism in the corpus, through an analysis of these narrative strategies in the three novels. The conclusion summarizes our research and presents observations regarding the presence of a new peri-urban realism in contemporary French literature.

National and international media coverage of the 2005 and 2023 riots has contributed to shaping a collective imaginary on Banlieues, in which the youth are frequently portrayed as "thugs" (in French, *racaille*), a term infamously used by former French President (then Interior Minister) Nicolas Sarkozy, who vowed to "clean them out with a power hose" ("nettoyer au karcher"). The representation of the banlieue in literature by authors who themselves come from these areas or are closely familiar with them from having lived there, and who seek to include this space in cultural representation while giving a voice to its inhabitants, is particularly important for its potential to deconstruct this negative collective imaginary.

The realist approach in literature, which was challenged in the 19th century, faced a crisis of truth and representation that led to the temporary distancing of realist projects from the literary canon. Formalist and structuralist theories, by rejecting the idea that literature could faithfully represent reality—not only due to the instability and elusiveness of the real—declared the autonomy of literature from its referent.

The three novels in the corpus each represent, in different ways, an attempt to reconnect the novel's fiction with social reality. Scholars had already observed a tendency towards a return to reality in French literature beginning in the 2000s, and these novels confirm the presence of a new engaged literary realism focused on representing the French banlieues. "Engaged realism" can be observed on three levels of discourse: within the novel itself, through the words of the narrators and characters; through the writers' comments in interviews and discussions about their works; and through their reception by the public and by journalistic and academic critiques. The authors of these works differ from their predecessors in terms of the scope of their subject matter: they do not claim to present society from a global or generalized perspective but rather aim to shed light on a part of society they know intimately, or from which they themselves come.

The narrative transgressions of the realist pact, improbable and comical situations, irony, and polyphony in Lydie Salvayre's *Les belles Âmes* propose a new form of realism applied to the reality of the banlieue, with an engaged dimension evident in the discourse of both the narrator and the author.

In Olivier Adam's *Les Lisières*, 'subjective realism' is innovative not so much in its form, but in its engaged use in the service of representing the underrepresented. While some may label such self-narrative approaches as narcissistic, here it is in fact a sign of narrative modesty, as the author seems to adapt Protagoras' formula: "the fictional self is the measure of all things." This assumed subjectivism allows the author to attempt to understand human reality—his own and that of his characters—and to communicate his human and social discoveries.

Mahir Guven's *Grand frère* also presents characteristics that suggest a new form of realism. This novel aims to portray a certain youth from the banlieue but does so through innovative techniques and adopts an engaged approach. Beyond narration, the use of a sociolect, called *Français Contemporain des Cités* (Contemporary Urban French), contributes to what we call linguistic hyperrealism.

This article demonstrates that it is possible to speak of a new contemporary realism focused on the representation of the French banlieue. The authors of the novels in the corpus offer a new form of literary realism that does not replicate traditional realist techniques but reflects the questioning of the validity of a literary project representing society—a concern that marked the 20th century. The representation of the banlieue imaginary in these works is particularly significant because it allows for the production of a discourse about these areas by individuals who come from or know them well, offering a portrayal that seeks to counter

the media and political discourse responsible for stigmatizing the banlieue and constructing a negative collective imaginary around its inhabitants.