

# "How can one live without hope for the future?"

## La ville est tranquille (The Town is Quiet), directed by Robert Guédiguian

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25 April 2002

Film director Robert Guédiguian, who began making features in 1980, has a lot of compassion for his subjects. His movies—the best known outside France being *Marius and Jeannette* (1997), *À la place du coeur* (1998) and *La ville est tranquille*, his latest—are all set in his hometown of Marseilles. They deal with the lives, loves and aspirations of the inhabitants of that city, once a major shipbuilding and manufacturing centre but now beset with high unemployment, drug abuse, the rise of the racist National Front and other social problems.

Guédiguian has worked with the same ensemble of actors, which includes his wife Ariane Ascaride and childhood friends, throughout his career. This has created an unusual level of collaboration and trust, evident in the unhurried way that his stories unfold. It has also allowed him to build an extensive archive of footage that he uses to give extra historical depth to his characters.

After years of factory and dockyard closures the Marseilles' working class, which has a large proportion of immigrants and a reputation for militancy, now confronts new problems as hi-tech and tourist companies move in to take advantage of low cost real estate and cheap labour. While unemployment still remains at 17 percent, new investment has pushed up the cost of living and widened the gulf between the newly rich and the bulk of the city's population. This process of social decay was overseen initially by the Communist Party of France (PCF) followed by the National Front, which recently won mayoral elections in the surrounding areas.

These conditions form the backdrop to Guédiguian's *La ville est tranquille* (The Town is Quiet), a delicately interwoven story from the Marseilles' l'Estaque district. The film opens with a 360-degree pan over l'Estaque with a Bach piano piece played in the background by a young boy from Georgia who, we later learn, is busking to buy a grand piano. The scene is very picturesque and serene but when one begins probing—as the film does—the reality is quite different and far from tranquil.

Michèle (Ariane Ascaride), the film's chief protagonist, is a nightshift fishmonger who is supporting her unemployed and barely visible husband, a drug-addicted daughter and a baby grandchild. Other characters include: Paul (Jean-Pierre Darroussin), a redundant waterfront worker, who spent his payout on a new car and a taxi license; Abderamane (Alexandre Ogou), who has just been released from prison and wants more out of life; Viviane (Christine Brücher), a music teacher whose marriage is breaking down; and Gérard (Gérard

Meylan), a bar-owner and part-time assassin.

Michèle's daughter, Fiona (Julie-Marie Parmentier), is unable to give up her heroin addiction and returns to prostitution to finance her habit. As her drug dependency grows, her ability to function declines and Michèle decides to buy her daughter's drugs and save her from withdrawal pain and the degradation of prostitution. She procures Fiona's drugs through Gérard, an old boyfriend, but her limited savings soon run out and Michèle decides to prostitute herself to raise money.

This brings her into contact with Paul, the taxi driver and former waterfront worker. Paul is a living historical complexity. The son of former partisans and communist militants, he leads a purposeless existence, unable to develop any meaningful relationships. A regular patron of local prostitutes, he meets Michèle and, noting her inexperience, takes pity, drives her home and gives her the money she needs that day. A few days later he returns to Michèle's apartment to buy some sex. A relationship develops between the two that is, at least on Paul's behalf, something more than that between a hooker and her client but less than a friendship.

Ultimately, Michèle is overcome by the demands of her daughter, granddaughter and her fish-market job, with tragic results: in an act of total desperation, she kills her daughter by deliberately administering her a drug overdose.

Running parallel is the story of Abderamane—a black youth living in the adjoining multistory apartment block—and Viviane, who gave him singing lessons in jail. These classes gave him a sense of purpose and the incentive to break from his previous existence as a petty thief.

Viviane's marriage to her architect husband is disintegrating with communication or love having evaporated between the couple. Her husband is ingratiating himself with rightwing local councilors profiting from gentrification of the former industrial centre and is using his job to proposition attractive women. Viviane and Abderamane gradually begin to develop a loving relationship. This is suddenly cut short when Abderamane is murdered in a senseless attack by a fascist group that includes Michèle's husband.

The film, which contains several other painful moments, concludes with the delivery of a grand piano to the tenement block of the young Georgian student. Unmindful that the deliverymen are National Front recruits, the Georgian student begins playing. The beauty of the music draws the mainly immigrant residents from a multitude of countries out of their tenements to listen.

Guédiguian categorises his films into those he calls “tales”, which show life as it *could* be, and those he calls “reports”, which show life as *it is*, in all of its tragedy. His approach, as he once explained, is to go beyond realism and “amplify” or “exaggerate” reality. While *La ville est tranquille* clearly belongs in the latter category, some of its heart-breaking events fail to flow organically from the story itself. There is, at times, an over-abundance of tragedy, as if audiences have to be convinced that life is difficult for workers in Marseilles.

A recurring theme of Guédiguian’s recent work is the rise of xenophobia and the National Front (NF). A member of the PCF until the early 1980s, the director is both concerned and confounded by the transformation of a town where, as he explained in one interview, “everyone was a communist” when he was growing up, to a place with a relatively large NF following.

While Guédiguian should be commended for sincerely exploring this and other serious social problems, his films have their limitations and tend to show *what* is happening, not *why* it happens. For example, *La ville est tranquille* convincingly contrasts the vibrancy of friends and lovers irrespective of race, to the sheer waste of humanity as racism cuts it short. It also successfully dramatises a National Front public meeting where a well-dressed smarmy frontman tells his audience that it is not that the fascists *don’t like* foreigners, they just like French people *better*. While this shows how the organisation markets its racist ideology, there is little to indicate why the people, such as Michèle’s husband in the film, have turned up to the meeting in the first place.

Previous generations of workers had a sense of purpose or perspective that society could be changed for the better. Guédiguian is obviously aware of this; in fact, he alludes to it in his portrayal of the relationship between Paul and his parents.

Paul’s parents are retired. His father, a former partisan, is so disgusted by the opportunism and corruption of the socialist politicians and the general state of political life that he has decided never to vote again.

Paul has been exposed to socialist rhetoric throughout his life and when he meets Michèle he tries to cheer her up by singing *The International* in a number of different languages. But he is also part of the generation that experienced the 1968 general strike and, after witnessing numerous betrayals of the working class in subsequent years, has concluded that a socialist perspective is totally unrealistic.

In one of the film’s opening scenes Paul listens to union officials claiming they will defend all waterfront jobs. But having heard these empty phrases many times before he decides to accept a redundancy and get what he can for himself. His life is lonely and dysfunctional. Unable to form any lasting personal relationships, he uses whores and surrounds himself with pornographic photographs and pinups.

Pointing to the social roots of the tragedy afflicting his characters in *La ville est tranquille* Guédiguian has commented: “Most of these characters, no matter what their milieu, have no real concept of the world. They go step by step, struggling, without thinking of the big picture. They have lost their sense of direction and their beliefs. But how can one live without some plan, some sort of hope for the future?”

This crucial question, however, could be posed to Guédiguian himself. His last three films—*La ville est tranquille*, *A la place du coeur* and *Marius et Jeannette*—contrast characters that bemoan the betrayal of their socialist or humanist ideals, generally the older generation who lived through World War II, and those who look on the former with a type of tolerance one reserves for the irretrievably

naïve. But Guédiguian fails to explore or examine the dynamic transition between these two outlooks, which are related to the political experiences of the French working class and the role of the PCF in the post-war period.

Over the past 70 years the PCF, using a mixture of nationalism and left rhetoric, has been the most consistent prop of French capitalism. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the PCF had the support of millions of workers and could have seized political power and established a workers’ state. But the organisation, which had been transformed into a mouthpiece of the Soviet bureaucracy after years of political purges throughout the late 1920s and 30s, opposed the revolutionary mobilisation of the French working class. In line with agreements between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt, the PCF participated in De Gaulle’s initial post-war government, disarmed the partisan movement and helped the French bourgeoisie implement a new constitution and restore its control over colonies in Africa and South East Asia.

During the 1950s and early 60s the PCF promoted national economic regulation and reform as an alternative to supposedly unachievable socialist aims and played the key role in breaking up the revolutionary general strike of workers and students in 1968. Thirteen years later in 1981, the PCF supported the election of right wing Socialist Party (SP) leader François Mitterrand as president and helped dismantle postwar social gains won by the working class.

These betrayals and the “France first” nationalism of the PCF have had a cumulative disorienting effect on French workers and provided the basis for the growth of the fascist National Front. Feeding on the alienation created by years of PCF betrayals and advancing its own version of “France first”, the NF has been able to secure a base amongst sections of the middle classes and more backward layers of workers.

While Guédiguian is clearly concerned, his work is not animated by any serious critique of the PCF, the organisation he was a member of for more than a decade and which helped prepared these conditions.

Commenting on his initial ideas for the film Guédiguian said: “When one looks at Marseilles from Notre Dame de la garde, one gets the impression of an elongated city, stretched out as if to rest from the day’s fatigue.... I always thought that this serenity was nothing but a façade, but that bad things were swarming, dangerous scary things that could at any time set fire to this town ... I take note. I have nothing to propose and I obviously have no solution. I can do nothing but analyse these things with my life, hoping that this will refer people to their own lives, so they can talk, talk to each other, talk about it...”

But surely it is not enough to declare “I have nothing to propose”. A filmmaker is not simply holding a mirror to society but recreates that society, whether in a realistic, exaggerated or symbolic form in order to deepen our understanding of it. This presupposes the artist’s own viewpoint. In telling the tale his outlook is revealed not only by what is included but by what is excluded as well. While *La ville est tranquille* has some strong moments its weaknesses are related to Guédiguian’s avoidance of the historical and political issues that have shaped his characters and their actions.



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