

H-France Review Vol. 17 (March 2017), No. 58

Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Laurent Cantet*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. 208 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £65.00. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-7190-9150-6.

Review by Jessica Livingston, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology.

Laurent Cantet's films have attracted attention for their timely political relevance, most notably when *Entre Les Murs* (*The Class*) won the Palme d'or at Cannes in 2008 and was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. *Entre Les Murs* opened up debates regarding the role of the Republican school in France, and his earlier film *Ressources humaines* (*Human Resources*; 1999) resonated with the public debates on the thirty-five-hour workweek. Many of Cantet's films address the globalized world and its inequities whether situated in the workplace, classroom, or tourist destination, and portray individuals at the margins and the center. While his films have received critical and popular attention in France and globally, little critical scholarship in English exists on his films, so he is a particularly apt choice of director for the fortieth volume in the French Film Director Series from Manchester University Press.

Martin O'Shaughnessy, who has written on both French cinema and political cinema in earlier studies, provides an insightful synthesis of Cantet's films in an accessible study as is a trademark of the French Film Directors series. He balances the task of synthesizing Cantet's varied films into cogent themes while analyzing the films in their specificities. The first chapter, "A Director and His Methods," which O'Shaughnessy calls "a vital prelude" to the other chapters is certainly the heart of the book (p. 2). The book then follows with detailed analyses of Cantet's films. O'Shaughnessy groups Cantet's earliest films together in one chapter, and also combines the films *Ressources humaines* and *L'Emploi du temps* (*Time Out*, 2001), what he coins the "work diptych" in another chapter (p. 58). He devotes entire chapters to Cantet's more recent films *Vers le Sud* (*Heading South*, 2005), *Entre Les Murs* (*The Class*, 2008), and *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (2012) and even includes an afterword on a short film that was part of the compilation film *7 Days in Havana* and his upcoming film *Return to Ithaca*, both set in Cuba.

O'Shaughnessy emphasizes the "double timeliness" of Cantet's films in regards to his subject matter and his method (p. 2); he reads Cantet's films as "open-ended investigations" of the "fault-lines" of our contemporary world (p. 180) and that the open-endedness enables Cantet to include voices, often marginalized, into his films. He identifies several ways that Cantet includes other voices in his film. First he connects Cantet's preferred method of making films--casting amateurs and collaborating with them to improvise and workshop the script for an extended period before shooting--to a post-1968 democratizing of roles, so that those being filmed are treated as having expertise in regards to their social experience and have a say in the filming. In addition, O'Shaughnessy extends this inclusion of other voices to Cantet's choice to adapt novels in *Vers Le Sud* (*Heading South*, 2006), *Entre Le Murs* (2008), and *Foxfire* (2012). These novels allow Cantet to access experiences and perspectives outside his own, and "to the extent that his films are able to open themselves up to other's voices without controlling them," he suggests that Cantet's films are polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense (p. 11). He further connects Cantet's method to his "his methodical but self-effacing story construction" which "both allow other voices to be heard" (p. 13).

In analyzing Cantet's narrative construction, O'Shaughnessy identifies recurring elements throughout the range of Cantet's films. O'Shaughnessy has written previously on the turn to melodrama in French socialist realist film in *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film Since 1995* (2007). Here he connects the turn to melodrama to the silencing of the radical left through the changes wrought by global capital: "There is no longer a powerful radical voice to name wrongs and frame social suffering and struggle. It is within this context that the turn to melodrama to restore a lost socio-political eloquence makes clear sense" (p. 24). The combination of melodrama with social realism allows filmmakers to tell "individual, interpersonal and familial stories to amplify the impact of broader, unspoken social divisions and oppressions"; in Cantet's films, though, the "melodramatic drive to clarity is counterbalanced...with a refusal to provide answers" that leaves the audience questioning (p. 25).

O'Shaughnessy also identifies the use of space as being key to how Cantet's films convey the larger social divisions. Thresholds—doorways, windows—are significant in his films and delineate boundaries and hierarchies. Characters modify their behavior, making visible the power relations and constraints of different spaces: "Movements through space thus underscore broader social inequalities and shifting interpersonal dynamics" (p. 20). The move "away from certainty rather than towards it" is also conveyed through the portrayal of space (p. 19). O'Shaughnessy observes that in several of Cantet's films characters re-enter a space after being away and assume that they know the space and their role within, but that this assumption will unravel. Similarly, the films challenge the audience to rethink their own position.

Perhaps most valuable in both Cantet's films, and in O'Shaughnessy's analysis, is the subject of shame. O'Shaughnessy observes that shame is produced when protagonists realize that others see them differently than they see themselves, and they must rethink themselves and their place in the world; "moments of shame thus bring to the surface the underlying tensions among individuals and groups that run through the films" (pp. 13-14). While Cantet's films are not Brechtian, they do include a level of distancing and reflexivity, particularly in these moments of shame. As O'Shaughnessy explains: "Because they foreground the interchange of looks within their own visual organization, and because they make it difficult to align with one particular look, each look showing up the blind spots of the others, they force us to think hard about what how we should view what is shown.... The films are political in the way they force us to challenge our own position with respect to the situation they help us discover" (p. 27). This analysis could perhaps address how these moments of shame are unsettling for the audience— not just questioning, but provoking a sense of unease with the social order.

O'Shaughnessy also identifies the family romance as another recurrent feature. He says that in these Oedipal dramas, the trauma is not sexual, but social—where something that is hidden is forced into public view, such as the shaming of Franck's father in the factory in *Ressources humaines*. While this is certainly true of Cantet's early shorts, *Tous à la manif* and *Jeux de plage*, as well as *Ressources humaines* and *L'Emploi du temps*, where a father-son relationship is central, O'Shaughnessy's suggestion that it can be applied loosely to his later films seems too focused on establishing consistent themes in Cantet's work. In *Vers Le Sud*, *Entre les murs*, and *Foxfire* not only is a father-son relationship not at the center, but there seems to be an intentional move to include the perspectives of marginalized voices, rather than white French men. In fact, O'Shaughnessy explains Cantet's choice to adapt novels for these films as "a recognition of the limitations of his own position" (p. 11). Addressing this shift in Cantet's work would be more productive than attempting to unify all his films. However, O'Shaughnessy does address the important question of what is at stake in a white Frenchman adapting the writing of a black Haitian and Canadian woman's writing, and how Cantet is able to bring in other voices without subordinating them.

Although O'Shaughnessy states at the beginning of the study that Cantet's egalitarian approach to filmmaking is important because of increasing inequality, he seems to avoid addressing global capital directly, instead referring to the "fault-lines" of this contemporary moment (p. 180). Yet he connects his readings of Cantet's films to broader themes—"contemporary class differences, shifting modes of social organization and the emergence of new forms of oppression" in *Ressources humaines* and *L'Emploi du temps*,

“the profoundly dysfunctional and oppressive relationships embedded in globalized consumption” in *Vers Le Sud*, and “the more general political lessons of the past and the emergent possibilities of the present” in *Foxfire* (p. 180). These readings of the films are valuable, but they point to the centrality of global capital to Cantet’s films. It seems logical to extend this analysis and to connect it to the analysis of how shame operates—Cantet’s films produce moments of discomfort when viewing them and provoke the audience to reflect upon and question their relationship with global capital. The book seems to hint at this conclusion without explicitly stating it. Nevertheless, O’Shaughnessy’s book is nuanced, insightful and an important contribution to the study of contemporary political cinema.

Jessica Livingston
Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology
livingst@rose-hulman.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172