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Martin O'Shaughnessy. *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film since 1995*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007. x + 194 pp. Filmography, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. £40.00 UK (hb). ISBN 978-1-84545-322-0.

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The persistence of what one might call a “political” or committed cinema has been one of the more striking aspects of French cinema. Such a cinema has, typically, coincided with intense politico-historical shifts, more or less at thirty-year intervals. During the 1930s, that cinema was typified by the work of the communist-leaning Jean Renoir and the anarchist-leaning Jean Vigo, and can be seen as resistance to the rise of fascism. During the 1970s, in the wake of the events of May 1968 and the rise of radical leftism, such a cinema was exemplified on the one hand by the deeply paranoid cinema of Constantin Costa-Gavras and Yves Boisset, who adapted the American and Italian political thriller to the French context, and on the other, by the work of Jean-Luc Godard with the Dziga-Vertov group.^[1] Since 1995, there has been a third moment for political cinema, quite different from the previous two: this cinema is less clearly a reaction to a specific set of circumstances; it is exemplified by a broader range of filmmakers; and as a result, it is more diffuse in style. Developing his previous work on aspects of political cinema, Martin O'Shaughnessy focuses on this most recent group of films.^[2]

The diffuse nature of this cinema poses a particular problem of selection and organisation; it also poses analytical problems. As O'Shaughnessy points out, the films associated with 1968 fed off a very specific type of radical politics in ways that the post-1995 films cannot, given that they come in the wake of the collapse of grand narratives. These post-1995 films must position themselves “between the politics that was and an emergent new politics” (p. 2). Relying on the work of Jacques Rancière, who argues that radicalism must involve de-identifying with oppressed and alienated subjectivities, O'Shaughnessy suggests that a committed cinema should register—but at the same time resist—the defeat of working people who have been silenced and isolated by the rise of global neo-liberalism.^[3] He argues persuasively against critics of these films, who judge them harshly by the measure of previous versions of committed cinema, notably that of the post-1968 period.

A key argument he uses is provided by Patricia Osganian who shows how the gap between the individual and society has led to a cinema that is the exact opposite of Renoir's celebration of the social; it is rather a deconstruction of the social—a cinema of fragmentation. ^[4] Much of O'Shaughnessy's exploration of these films is articulated around what he calls, most productively, an aesthetics of the fragment. His argument maintains a productive tension between, on the one hand, a shattered and fragmented working class that nonetheless demonstrates, on the other hand, how the films articulate resistance, however fragmentary. He constructs a theoretical narrative whose ethos is what we could call critical utopianism, organized around four broad types of film: those that make sense of marginalization by connecting it to processes occurring at the center; films that construct desiring subjectivities struggling against marginalization and alienation; films that have recourse to melodrama to articulate struggle; and, finally, films whose emphasis is on contested spaces, articulating either directly or indirectly the tension between the local and the global.

He begins the core of the volume by comparing and contrasting a couple of films from the heady days of the 1970s—*Coup pour coup* (Marin Karmitz, 1972) and *Tout va bien* (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972)—with some contemporary films by Hervé Le Roux (*Reprise*, 1996) and the Dardenne brothers, to show how these earlier films were able to rely on a “totalizing socio-political dramaturgy” (p. 36) unavailable to films in the 1990s. Beginning then with a statement of defeat, he shows how contemporary films have attempted to reconstruct resistance in a variety of ways. Chapter four, aptly titled “class in pieces,” considers a range of films by Robert Guédiguian (*A la vie, à la mort!*, 1995; *Marius et Jeannette*, 1997; *A l’attaque!*, 2000; *La Ville est tranquille*, 2000), and selected films from a number of other directors: *Selon Matthieu* (Xavier Beauvois, 2000), *Fred* (Pierre Jolivet, 1997), *Une minute de silence* (Florent-Emilio Siri, 1998). O’Shaughnessy takes a different view for these films from *Cahiers du cinéma* critics who have tended to treat them with hostility. These films may be occasionally nostalgic, as in the case of Guédiguian, or frankly defeatist. But O’Shaughnessy prefers to see in them elements of resistance, particularly when they reinvest working-class spaces, such as *Marius et Jeannette*’s abandoned factory. He shows another version of alienated space in his next group of films in this chapter, the much-discussed *films de banlieue*, typified for many by *La Haine* (Matthieu Kassovitz, 1995), on which he spends some time before turning to *État des lieux* (Jean-François Richet, 1995) and to the less-discussed *Wesh wesh, qu’est-ce qui se passe?* (Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, 2002). [5] As he rightly points out, this group of films suggests that rebellion against the state has shifted to a youth underclass.

Chapter five focuses on films that mobilize a more radical politics. O’Shaughnessy identifies films in which unfettered violence is an expression of the class war. They are exemplified here by Claude Chabrol’s *La Cérémonie* (1995), in which Sandrine Bonnaire plays a character who slaughters her bourgeois employers, and Manuel Poirier’s *Marion* (1997), in which a more subtle antagonism is developed between the bourgeois employer and her maid. O’Shaughnessy then turns to films that foreground alienated and individualized labour: Erick Zonca’s early films, especially the acclaimed *La Vie rêvée des anges* (1998), and two films by Lætitia Masson (*En avoir (ou pas)*, 1995, and *A vendre*, 1997), all three of which explore the world of young women.[6] A third set of films show how the old language of the class struggle can still be used to combat oppression and to give back a voice to the alienated and oppressed: *Une part du ciel* (Bénédicte Liénard, 2002), and *Ressources humaines* (Laurent Cantet, 2000). Cantet’s somewhat better-known *L’Emploi du temps* (2001), on which O’Shaughnessy quite rightly lingers, given its complexity, serves as an example of films that explore the alienation not of the working class, but of their managers, in this case a man who loses his job and proceeds to fabricate an employment as a consultant with the UN.

The films explored up to this point of the volume to some extent all pick up the pieces of the class struggle and try to reconfigure them in a meaningful, if fragmentary discourse. Chapter six is the dark heart of the volume. It returns to films already explored to address the key issue of the aesthetics of the fragment. As O’Shaughnessy puts it: “Where fragmentation is complete...there can be no recourse to even the remnants of an elaborated politics. The films have to find ways to make political sense from within the fragment itself” (p. 100), while avoiding depoliticizing clichés. Appealing in large part to broad issues of embodiment, he is able to show how the characters in some of these films resist simply by their presence as irritants, by their performative “is-ness.” This is particularly true of the two young women of *La Vie rêvée des anges*, to which O’Shaughnessy returns, homing in on gesture, the contact between bodies, what he calls “the friction of interactions” (p. 108).[8] It is even truer of the Dardenne brothers’ *Rosetta* (1999); in a context of deprivation, destitution, and despair, the obstinate and mute resistance of the eponymous protagonist is haunting, but the film does not succumb to voyeurism and objectification. O’Shaughnessy, like many critics, is less keen on the work of Bertrand Tavernier (in this case the semi-documentary, but rather do-good *Ça commence aujourd’hui*, 1999), and Bruno Dumont, to whom he turns next, both of whom treat their characters more like objects of study. Dumont in particular naturalizes the suffering of his characters in *La Vie de Jésus* (1997) and *L’Humanité* (1999); an almost spiritual compassion for them tends, in O’Shaughnessy’s view, to depoliticize them, even if they,

like the characters in the Dardenne brothers' films, are alienated, without a voice, and lost in spaces without collective or institutional support structures.

The remaining chapters adopt a more synoptic view. Chapter seven is provocatively entitled "melodramatic politics," and builds on the sense of embodied resistance explored in chapter six. Relying on Peter Brooks's classic work, O'Shaughnessy shows how melodrama, which might seem divorced from the exigencies of a social-realist cinema, allows both emotional engagement with on-screen characters and, more importantly, allows an "eloquent silence" to emerge.[9] He returns to many of the films already explored to highlight melodramatic moments, such as climactic collisions between ruled and ruling classes; these often lead to "moments of ethical transparency" that "compensate for the loss of a collective value system and an elaborated political language that might once have served to make sense of social interaction" (p. 141). Related to this are moments of "political theatre" (p. 145) in the films, where the characters vehemently denounce their oppression. He then turns to what might at first seem like unpromising material for a political cinema, narratives focusing on individuals and families--the stuff of melodrama; because it is domestic and individual, this kind of melodramatic narrative, it could be argued, obscures broader social frameworks, and rejects the careful analysis of oppression by appealing to the emotions. In line with his criticism of *Cahiers du cinéma* positions, O'Shaughnessy, following Will Higbee, is anxious to show the radical potential of these narratives.[10] Families threatened in a number of ways by destitution or illness can be used to expose the closing off of the future, the undermining of "traditional" working-class masculinities, as well as to articulate, in a more utopian way, different sexualities. Similarly, narratives focused unremittingly on individuals can, O'Shaughnessy argues, be seen as productive, because they often make it clear that individualism is a dead end. He sees such films as "useful vehicles for figuring the destructive impact of triumphant neo-liberalism" (p. 157), mainly because the characters resist oppression through obstinate and mute embodiment, or through articulate and passionate vociferations.

The final chapter is a fascinating discussion of space, teasing out the tension and, frequently, the gulf between the local and the global. The challenge is to show how films rooted in the spaces left by local communities can nonetheless articulate a critique of globalization. O'Shaughnessy picks out fleeting moments in a range of films to make us aware of dislocated and contested spatialities: among them there is the hippopotamus "made in China" in *Retiens la nuit* (Dominique Cabrera, 1998), or the changing of the advertisement's strapline in *La Haine* from "*le monde est à vous*" to "*le monde est à nous*."

This volume is a major statement on contemporary politically committed cinema. Its strength is that it proposes a careful mapping of the field, teasing out different shades of commitment within the films themselves, and showing the richness of contemporary French cinema in its social-realist mode. There is also a clear political agenda: O'Shaughnessy interrogates the nostrum that contemporary cinema is not--and cannot ever be--political, by showing us how the films are necessarily differently political from those of the 1930s and the 1970s. Their dystopian feel, their sense of loss and destitution, the vacuum at their heart, propel us, suggests O'Shaughnessy, to find political solutions. In this sense he offers a crucial discussion of their melodramatic and potentially regressive moments: melodrama in these films is political urgency rushing to fill a vacuum, a necessary raging against the dying of the light, sparks flying off mute and angry bodies. While he is very aware that the films respond to this urgency in variable and sometimes not very effective ways, nonetheless, he sets a clear benchmark for them, and for us, when he says that "it is according to their capacity to fissure the real, to figure agency, to inscribe struggle, to recreate possibility and to rebuild systemic critique that we should judge the films" (p. 181).

NOTES

[1] See Phil Powrie, "French Neo-Noir to Hyper-Noir," in Andrew Spicer ed., *European Film Noir: Transgression, Dissonance and Hybridity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 55-83, esp. pp. 56-61.

[2] See Martin O'Shaughnessy, "The Return of the Social in Contemporary French Cinema," *Modern and Contemporary France* 11 (2003): 189-203; "Suffering in Silence: Bodily Politics in Post-1995 French Cinema," *French Cultural Studies* 15 (2004): 219-233; "Eloquent Fragments: French Fiction Film and Globalization," *French Politics, Culture and Society* 23 (2005): 75-88; "Reprise et les nouvelles formes du cinéma politique," in Graeme Hayes and Martin O'Shaughnessy eds., *Cinéma et engagement* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), pp. 83-98.

[3] In particular Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente: politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).

[4] Patricia Osganian, "D'Amérique rapports de classe à Rosetta: sortie du naturalisme et subjectivisation du réel," *Mouvements* 27-28 (2003): 51-57.

[5] *La Haine* is probably the most discussed of these films. See among others: Myrto Konstantarakos, "Which Mapping of the City? *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995) and the *Cinéma de Banlieue*," in Phil Powrie ed., *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.160-71; Carrie Tarr, "Ethnicity and Identity in the *Cinéma de Banlieue*," in Phil Powrie ed., *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.172-84; Jill Forbes, "*La Haine*," in Jill Forbes and Sarah Street eds., *European Cinema: An Introduction*, (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), pp.170-80; Ginette Vincendeau, "Designs on the *Banlieue*: Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995)," in Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau eds., *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 310-27; Dominique Bluher, "Hip-Hop Cinema in France," *Camera Obscura* 16 (2001): 77-96; Erin Schroeder, "A Multicultural Conversation: *La Haine*, *Raï*, and *Menace II Society*," *Camera Obscura* 16 (2001):143-79; Will Higbee, "Screening the 'Other' Paris: Cinematic Representations of the Disadvantaged Urban Periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T va crack-er*," *Modern and Contemporary France* 9 (2001): 197-208; Ginette Vincendeau, *La Haine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005).

[6] See Laura Rascaroli, "The Place of the Heart: Scaling Spaces in Robert Guédiguian's Cinema," *Studies in French Cinema* 6 (2006): 95-105, for a study of space in Guédiguian.

[7] See Bénédicte Coste, "The Soul of Woman under Liberalism: Lætitia Masson's *À vendre*," *Studies in French Cinema* 5 (2005): 185-194 for a stimulating study of this film.

[8] For further work on marginality in this film, see Joe Hardwick, "Fallen Angels and Flawed Saviours: Marginality and Exclusion in *La Vie de Jésus* and *La Vie rêvée des anges*," *Studies in French Cinema* 7 (2007): 219-30.

[9] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976).

[10] Will Higbee, "Elle est où, ta place?": The Socialist-realist Melodramas of Laurent Cantet: *Ressources humaines* (2000) and *L'Emploi du temps* (2001)," *French Cultural Studies* 15 (2004): 235-50.

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