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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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Review: Martin O'Shaughnessy (2007)  
*The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film  
Since 1995*  
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French political cinema has recently undergone something of a renaissance. Since 1995, leading French directors such as Kassovitz, Dumont, Zonca and Cantet have sought to engage with the contemporary reality of their country. The raw and uncompromising realism of their films *La haine* (Kassovitz, 1995), *La vie de Jésus* (Dumont, 1997) and *The Dreamlife of Angels* (*La vie rêvée des anges*, Zonca, 1998) has demonstrated a return of commitment in French national cinema. The political vision of these directors has created an impact unparalleled since the tumultuous days following 1968, which saw the flowering of radical filmmaking of Jean Luc-Godard and the Dziga-Vertov group. Since then, however, political struggle has undergone a dramatic

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transformation. Like its European neighbours, France has since become a global economy: the decline of industrial work, coupled with the burgeoning influx of immigrant labour, have profoundly altered the fabric of French working-class life. It follows, therefore, that the struggle enacted by these new films centres predominantly on the socially excluded, rather than on the mobilisation of the working classes. Both the subject and the representation of this emerging struggle provide the focus of O'Shaughnessy's book, *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film since 1995*, which explores the ways in which these new films stand apart, both thematically and formally, from their 1960s forebears.

The first chapter situates these new political films within their socio-political and historical contexts. O'Shaughnessy briefly traces the reinvention of the French economy since 1968, before examining one of the most crucial consequences that it has brought to bear: the disbandment of the traditional working class. The former collectivist culture of trade unionism, O'Shaughnessy shows, has been replaced with mutual surveillance and job insecurity. Without unionist solidarity, workers are deprived of an oppositional language: resistance has fallen silent. These social changes have been accompanied by the more general demise of a radical leftist, Marxist worldview. Without an overarching narrative through which to express their struggle, the new working classes are no longer able to imagine themselves as active political subjects. Since the mid-1990s, however, France has witnessed a revival of diverse political resistance. Opposition towards globalisation and the privatization of the public sector, as well as campaigns in support of gay rights, environmentalism and illegal immigrants, have demonstrated an increasing public engagement with social issues. Although these diverse mobilisations do not signify a return to a cohesive leftist worldview, they nevertheless signal a radical transformation of France's broader social context. Just as the riots of 1968 generated a climate which was conducive to the production of a committed cinema, so too has the more recent political terrain. However, the convergences of these two cinemas, the author argues, are outweighed by their differences. In control of its own production and distribution, the former cinema was able to create a truly radical cinema in

both form and intent; the current wave, however, is constrained by its dependence on the commercial sector and state support mechanisms.

The critical reactions to these films, both dismissive and supportive, are examined in the following chapter. The critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma* have claimed that post-1995 realist cinema is a pseudo-radical cinema: without the formally innovative, Brechtian strategies of its forebears, these new films are considered to be conservative. O'Shaughnessy argues that the *Cahiers* critics have not taken account of the very different socio-political terrain in which these younger directors are operating. More supportive, however, are critics like Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, who have come to the defence of these directors. Although contemporary social realism lacks an all-embracing politics and a pedagogic function, Jeancolas argues that it instead 'narrows its focus to a small section of the real, a *réel de proximité*' (22). This coincides with Patricia Osganian, who claims that the cinema of the Dardenne brothers, amongst other contemporary directors, is 'an aesthetic of the fragment as opposed to a totalizing, epic aesthetic' (25). This notion of the 'aesthetic of the fragment' is absolutely central to O'Shaughnessy's analysis of the films: not only does it refer to social fragmentation and the lack of collective struggle, but to 'a symbolic lack, a withdrawal of a voice and meaning' (25).

The third chapter traces the undoing of radical leftist cinema by contrasting two classic radical post-1968 films with two of the early films of the current wave of political cinema. In his analysis of Marin Karmitz's *Coup pour coup* (1971) and Jean-Luc Godard's and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Tout va bien* (1972), O'Shaughnessy show how actors are engaged in a decisive class struggle. Of particular importance, he argues, is how the films deal with the corporeal. Although the films frequently seek to represent the bodily suffering of workers, it is ultimately depicted as productive and meaningful, as in each film their revolt against exploitation is won. In contrast, Hervé Le Roux's *Reprise* (1995) and the Dardennes's earlier films, such as *Je pense à vous* (1992) show the traumatic dismantling of class. In the former, capitalist owners have been replaced by faceless, multinational corporations and the *banlieue*, once a traditional site of solidarity, has now become anonymous and fragmented. In the

Dardennes's films, the narratives predominantly centre on individual rather than collective struggles.

While chapter three centres on the demobilisation of the working class, chapters four and five demonstrate how in spite of this defeat, a degree of political resistance can nevertheless be found. This is achieved, he argues, by 'holding on to one piece or another of the shattered dramaturgy of class and putting it to productive use' (56), a dynamic which the author examines across six sub-groups of films. Thus, in the films by Guédiguian, Beauvois, Jolivet and Siri, the abandoned places and the traditions of the working classes are explored and revived. The second group, consisting of the directors Kassovitz, Richet and Ameur-Zaïmeche, explores the marginalisation of youths within the *banlieues* in class-based terms. In the third group, including *La Cérémonie* (Chabrol, 1995) and *Marius et Jeannette* (Poirier, 1997), class struggle is only able to find its expression through violence. The fourth, involving works by Zonca, Devers and Masson, centres on films within the workplace; here, the emphasis is on individual rather than collective resistance. Films by Cantet, Liénard, Charef and Cabrera make up the fifth group, in which we witness a return to traditional collective action in the workplace. The sixth group, which focuses on *Time Out* (*L'emploi du temps*, Cantet, 2001) and *Work Hard Play Hard* (*Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré*, Moutout, 2002) stands out from the others in its focus on the alienation of the powerful rather than the excluded. Although interesting, O'Shaughnessy's analysis in these chapters rarely explores the external realities which these films attempt to expose and resist. His discussion of the *banlieue* films, for instance, might have benefited from a more thorough interrogation of the social context of migration.

Whereas the above films seek to speak out against oppression, the works explored in chapter six show that political resistance is largely silent and futile. These films therefore most exemplify the 'aesthetic of the fragment'. Without recourse to the traditional politics of the previous films, the author argues, 'these films have to find ways to make political sense from within the fragment itself' (100). These films, he claims, signal an *aesthetic shift* which largely centres on corporeality and silence: struggles are articulated through the body rather

than through language. Despite this distinction, O'Shaughnessy somewhat confusingly goes on to provide further discussions of Zonca's and Poirier's films – works that had already served as case studies for the previous chapter. The author argues that this is because this aesthetic of fragmentation in their films was emergent, but not as fully developed as the other films analysed in this chapter. If at this point, the distinctions made between different films begin to appear fuzzy and laboured, they are further obscured by the author's clunky and uneconomical prose:

If the cinema of the fragment is characterized by the absence of an explicit politics and social connectivity and the presence of unmediated, corporeal collisions and raw struggles, the emergent fragment is one where explicit politics is falling silent or becoming disembodied, where individuals and groups are becoming detached and where struggles are becoming raw and corporeal. (99 -100)

Although O'Shaughnessy goes on to provide a nuanced and insightful discussion of movement and the body in Zonca's *La vie rêvée des anges* (1997), his analysis of other films such as Poirier's *Western* (1997) is arguably rather narrative-based and descriptive. This, in particular, appears to be a general shortcoming of the book. While these films are supposed to indicate an aesthetic shift, there is surprisingly little analysis of the aesthetic properties of the films themselves. A more systematic exploration of *mise en scène*, editing and sound would have arguably reinforced the underlying argument of this chapter, and the book as a whole. Moreover, the exploration of corporeality here begins to appear underdeveloped, given that it occupies such a prominent position within this book. O'Shaughnessy's discussion here, for instance, might have been situated within a wider cultural frame. Indeed, since the Industrial Revolution, the body has traditionally been central to the construction of working class identity. What then, for instance, is the cultural meaning of the bodies depicted in these post-industrial films?

In the following chapter, O'Shaughnessy turns his attention to what he considers to be the melodramatic strategies of the current wave of political cinema. Drawing on Peter Brooks, who writes on nineteenth-century fiction, he argues that 'melodramatic gestuality [...] both underlines and compensates for

a lost fullness of meaning, helping once again to make the world eloquent' (133). French social-realist cinema, he argues, has similarly drawn on melodramatic devices in order to restore a lost eloquence to the socio-political world. Following Brooks, he considers the following key melodramatic features across a number of films: moments of confrontation; ethical choices; the turn to individual and family-centred stories; and the corporeal, which as we have seen, has already been covered in previous chapters. Although Brooks's analysis of the emergence of melodrama clearly chimes with the social context of committed cinema, O'Shaughnessy here fails to make a clear enough distinction between literary and cinematic melodrama. Again, the formal aspects of film are bypassed in favour of more general considerations of narrative. As a result, the key aspects of cinematic melodrama, such as a critical use of *mise en scene*, camerawork and, most crucially, music (*melos* drama) do not come under scrutiny.

More convincing is the book's final chapter, which examines the use of the space in the films. Socially committed films, which explore the relationship between geography and social identity, lend themselves particularly well to spatial analysis and O'Shaughnessy provides interesting discussions of films such as *Je pense à vous* (Dardennes, 1992) and *A la vie, à la mort* (Guédiguian, 1994). The author goes on to explore questions such as mobility, the tension between the local and the global, and the spatial dislocation of excluded identities. The author observes the paradox of globalisation, which informs much of his analysis throughout this chapter: on the one hand, it produces an elusive and intangible global movement of capital, while on the other, opposition can only be expressed in local terms.

O'Shaughnessy's book has identified an important trend in French filmmaking, and his thorough analysis of the films successfully reveals their originality. This is a well-researched and scholarly book, and is recommended to those interested in social realist and political cinema. However, there arguably appears to be a lack of material for a book of this length. After a while, much of the analysis on offer here veers towards the onerous and the repetitive, and would have benefited from the support of a more rigorous theoretical and sociohistorical framework. While the first chapter does indeed provide a brief

social context of the films, and the third chapter touches on the writing of Laclau and Mouffe, these are not brought closely to the service of the texts discussed within this book. Both the social and the theoretical, therefore, should have been woven more intimately into the fabric of O'Shaughnessy's analysis. Moreover, as mentioned above, his interpretation of the films might have been illuminated by a more thorough analysis of the films' formal aspects.