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Title	Laurent Cantet, by Martin O'Shaughnessy
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Publication date	2016-06-01
Original Citation	Lee, A. (2016) Laurent Cantet, by Martin O'Shaughnessy. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 11, pp. 127–131. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.11.11
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.11.11
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Download date	2026-11-09 17:31:12
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/6006

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JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

Laurent Cantet. Martin O'Shaughnessy. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015 (194 pages). ISBN: 9780719091506.

A Review by Ally Lee, University of Warwick

Martin O'Shaughnessy's *Laurent Cantet* is the latest edition of—and the author's second contribution to—the Manchester University Press French Film Directors series after the publication in 2000 of his study on the films of Jean Renoir. The series currently features an impressive forty volumes and this assessment of one of France's most important active filmmakers is a welcome addition. Despite Cantet's prominence, he has so far been the subject of relatively little scholarly investigation. Previously, only one monograph-length exploration of the director's oeuvre, Yannick Lebtahi and Isabelle Rousel-Gillet's stimulating and insightful *Pour une méthode d'investigation du cinéma de Laurent Cantet*, had been published. Besides this, James S. Williams's *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* contains a superb chapter on the filmmaker's work, while O'Shaughnessy himself has written about Cantet in previous articles and book sections, primarily in the broader contexts of both the Young French Cinema and 1990s New Realism ("Post-1995"; *The New Face*). This latest study supplements and builds on this existing literature. As the first sustained English-language appraisal of the output of a filmmaker who has elicited global interest, the book provides an original, thoroughgoing consideration of Cantet's working method, incorporating visual analysis and valuable insights into how his films are conceived.

The author covers Cantet's entire directorial output to date. Interestingly, he addresses the filmmaker's lesser-known early shorts—*Tous à la manif* (1994), *Jeux de plage* (1995) and *Les sanguinaires* (1998)—before turning his attention to the filmmaker's more renowned works, from *Human Resources* (*Ressources humaines*, 2000) to *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (*Foxfire: confessions d'un gang de filles,* 2012). Concluding this impeccably complied and incredibly detailed investigation is a consideration of his recent contribution to the portmanteau film *7 Days in Havana* (*7 jours à la Havane,* Benicio del Toro, Gaspar Noé, Elia Suleiman, Julio Medem, Laurent Cantet, Pablo Trapero, and Juan Carlos Tabío, 2012).

As well as allowing its argument to be followed with ease, the book's chronological structure also means its chapters function independently with each dedicated to an examination of a single production or group of films. When they are read in succession, however, one more readily appreciates Cantet's artistic progression over the course of his remarkable career so far. Indeed, O'Shaughnessy effectively demonstrates how the filmmaker's latest work is stylistically and thematically derived from his earlier output. He also succeeds in shining a light on the ways in which Cantet continues to refine his "authorial signature" as he gains international recognition (12).

In line with the director-orientated perspective adopted by the French Film Directors series, the question of what constitutes Cantet's unique approach to filmmaking underpins much of O'Shaughnessy's investigation. He develops a coherent set of both formal and thematic attributes that form indexical links across the director's body of work. Through these, we are invited to acknowledge the specificities of Cantet's cinematic output. According to the author, such characteristics notably include an affective mode of address. This forces audiences to interrogate their own spectatorial positions, as well as to confront

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their personal reactions to what they are viewing. The verbalisation of this notion in *Human Resources*—"elle est où, ta place?" ("where is your place?")—performs a metonymic function, standing in for the filmmaker's "cinema of questioning, not answers", of meditation and not militancy (182). Is Cantet a political director, then? O'Shaughnessy would suggest so. However, this is only the case if the term is understood broadly, denoting not the espousal of a specific doctrine but, instead, a steadfast commitment to revealing the various manifestations of socially embedded power dynamics.

The author's central thesis is that Cantet's importance as a filmmaker "lies in the compelling relevance and intelligence of his output", coupled with "his determination to probe and bring to the surface key social evolutions and fault-lines of our time" (2). O'Shaughnessy further credits the director with significance for "how he makes films (his 'method'), with his egalitarian commitment to allowing different voices to be heard and participate actively in the production of his work" (2). Particularly through his favouring of socially disempowered amateur actors whom the director often casts in roles that mirror their lived experiences, these facets combine and contribute to what the author describes as Cantet's "double-timelessness" (2). Put differently, the import of the director's films lies in how they chart external contemporaneous cultural developments in a way that allows hitherto marginalised voices to be heard.

Cantet's method of ensuring, in O'Shaughnessy words, "self-effacing story construction" (13) by leaving the conception of his films open to "a non-hierarchical interplay of voices" (164) draws on a concern central to the French Film Directors series: the legitimacy of an auteurist approach to cinema. As Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram outline in the editors' foreword, traditionally understood, auteurism connotes "a romantic view of a film as the product of solitary inspiration" (xi). This model is heavily associated with French critical practice and predominately seeks to reveal, Holmes and Ingram further explain, a "set of themes and motifs that correspond to the particular genius of an individual" (xi). Moreover, it is regularly used as a conceptual framework when discussing the work of prominent directors such as Cantet. Yet O'Shaughnessy problematises this notion somewhat. When confronting the question of whether the director is an auteur, he suggests that Cantet indeed is, but only insofar as "one immediately recognises the very specific nature of his authorship" (181). Although O'Shaughnessy delineates a strong thematic consistency throughout the filmmaker's work from which an unmistakable directorial presence emerges, the author also makes it clear that Cantet actively supports a collaborative process of cinematic production. By inviting those around him into a mutual exchange in development of the script, as well as other aspects of his films, O'Shaughnessy argues the director "achieves a real polyphony" and thus eschews conventional interpretations of Cantet the auteur (182).

The author is at his most engaging and persuasive when in conversation with wider theoretical texts. His skilful close analysis of *Time Out* (*L'Emploi du temps*, Laurent Cantet, 2001) stands out as memorable, especially the discussion of the film with reference to the "non-places" of Marc Augé's theory of supermodernity. O'Shaughnessy's notion of Cantet's filmic polyphony is most evident when he explores the director's most revered film: the multiple-award-winning *The Class* (*Entre les murs*, 2008). Drawing on concepts expounded by key thinkers (Bourdieu, Rancière and Bakhtin) in the chapter titled "Between Republican Walls", the author employs social philosophy to deconstruct the role of the film's teacher François Marin (François Bégaudeau). O'Shaughnessy notes that while *The Class* is outwardly Bourdieusian for the way that Marin ostensibly educates his pupils from a position

of superiority, a closer look reveals the film is perhaps more accurately Rancièrian in conception and in outlook. Indeed, *The Class* betrays a fundamental sense of teacher/learner parity, engendering a dialogic interchange between varying subjectivities. Furthermore, in his capacity as director, Cantet retains the potential to mimic the role of Socratic master. For O'Shaughnessy, however, the textual and extratextual composition of the film suggests he is, instead, an incarnation of Rancière's self-emancipatory ignorant schoolteacher.

The Class is especially attentive to the increasingly salient issue of the place of multiculturalism within the ethnic mosaic of contemporary France. The film highlights, as O'Shaughnessy puts it, the "hidden exclusions and cultural assimilationism that lie behind the apparent universalism of French Republicanism" (150). Following in the footsteps of such scholars as Carrie Tarr ("Class Acts"; *Recasting Difference*), the author foregrounds a consideration of Republican education as it relates both to the ideology's principle of equality and the contemporary realities of multiracial France. As such, he offers a fresher perspective on a debate that tends to focus on the emblem of failed postcolonial integration: the *banlieue*, or urban periphery, which can be characterised by a lack of social mobility. O'Shaughnessy does so with astuteness and sensitivity, using *The Class* as a platform from which to engage with wider social matters that are so frequently clouded by the inflammatory, ethnicised tendencies of new reportage. Ultimately these only further exacerbate the already clearly mounting racial tensions within France at present.

The publication offers a wide-ranging and scrupulous evaluation of the filmic, the social and the political contexts in which Cantet operates. It conveys with an acute awareness how he has become one of France's most exciting working directors. Indexed, complete with thirteen illustrations, a detailed filmography and suggestions for further reading, O'Shaughnessy's *Laurent Cantet* will provide a rich trove of information for all those with an interest in contemporary France, and its cinematic output specifically. It should also appeal to those concerned with questions of power relations, political address and sociocultural equality more generally. Staying true to the series editors' intention "to contribute to the promotion of the formal and informal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them" (x), the author's blend of scholarship and accessibility is fitting for a broad audience. Amplifying the sociological implications of Cantet's cinema, O'Shaughnessy's compelling appraisal also stimulates careful introspection, undoubtedly prompting those who read it to ponder "elle est où, ma place?"

French cinema since the 1990s represents one of the most distinctive periods in the industry's prestigious history. Lately we have witnessed not only the enduring strength of the country's arthouse cinema, but also the proliferation of genre filmmaking resulting from processes of globalisation. On the one hand, besides Cantet, celebrated contemporary directors working within an artistic tradition, such as Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont and Abdellatif Kechiche, continue to enjoy much acclaim. On the other, French filmmakers, particularly women, have begun to explore previously uncharted territories. This has notably given rise to a naturalised version of romantic comedy, a popular mode typically associated with Hollywood. Although it was not marketed as such, *Amélie* (*Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) is the most well-known French iteration of this form, which also includes *Jet Lag* (*Décalage horaire*, Danièle Thompson, 2002).

As the editors of the authoritative *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema* accurately suggest, while the nation's recent output "has been well served by those who have written on it, scholarship has only begun to scratch the surface" (Fox et al. 3).

O'Shaughnessy's book, then, provides a much-anticipated study of the work of a director who stands out as an example of the French film industry's current vitality, proving there is a canon beyond the reified figures of the New Wave. The French Film Directors series now contains a small handful of authorial studies focused on working directors. One hopes that we will see another similarly erudite assessment of an equally impressive active talent before too long.

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Suggested Citation

Lee, Ally. "*Laurent Cantet* by Martin O'Shaughnessy." Book Review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 11 (Summer 2016): 127–31. Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

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