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## ***Être et parler: Being and speaking French in Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Esquive* (2004) and Laurent Cantet's *Entre les murs* (2008)***

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### **Abstract**

*French film-makers have long recognized the primordial importance to the nation's 'imagined community' of the centralized public school system, which, since the early days of the Third Republic, has been viewed as a bulwark of Republican values. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which two recent films, Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Esquive/The Dodge* (2004) and Laurent Cantet's *Entre les murs/The Class* (2008), interrogate the role French schools play in shaping national identity. Both films focus on language as a marker of difference as well as a point of tension, performance and potential subversion, by exploring the respective contrast between the aggressive street French of the respective films' adolescent protagonists with the stultifying bureaucratic discourse of the inflexible educational system (in *Entre les murs*) and Marivaux's elegant eighteenth century French (in *L'Esquive*). Accorded significant media attention for their portrayal of the experiences of school-aged youth, both films have thus contributed to the ongoing national debate about what it means 'to speak, and to be, French' (Doran 2007: 498).*

### **Keywords**

Kechiche  
Cantet  
language  
education  
national identity  
*Entre les murs*  
*L'Esquive*

Michael Haneke's 2005 film, *Caché/Hidden*, which painfully probes repressed French national guilt over the country's colonial history, ends with a lengthy shot of the exterior of a Parisian *lycée*. This long shot of the steps filmed with a static camera, where we are unable to hear the conversations of the students, captures an unexplained, but potentially unsettling, exchange between young men. This scene brings into the present the troubled past of their fathers, which has been the focus of the film, and which is closely tied to the tortured events of Franco-Algerian relations, and particularly the events of October 1961 when French police massacred Algerians protesting about the war in Paris. Thus, the scene extends the film's central concern from the repression of individual traumatic memory to collective amnesia. Setting this highly charged final scene on the steps of a school underscores the importance to the French 'imagined community' of its educational institutions, which since the early days of the Third Republic have been viewed as a bulwark of French national identity. If, on first reading, *Caché* appears to explore the failure of one man to come to terms with his own personal blind spot where France's historical 'Others' are concerned, its conclusion serves as a pointed

1. For a more complete summary of French films focusing on education, see Vincendeau 2009.
2. This and all subsequent translations from the French are mine.

reminder of the extent to which French schools have been complicit in transposing that individual failure of vision onto a national stage.

The final scene in Haneke's film can be viewed as a passing allusion to a long tradition of French films in which the portrayal of school offers a testing ground for assessing the far-reaching pressures brought to bear on the social fabric of the country by allegiance to certain bedrock principles defining Frenchness. For example, Jean Vigo's controversial 1933 film, *Zéro de conduite/Zero for Conduct*, proposed all-out rebellion against an authoritarian educational bureaucracy through the outrageously humorous antics of the students at an oppressive boarding school. Censured by the authorities for its anarchist leanings, the film was banned in France until 1945. More than 25 years later, François Truffaut, continuing in the iconoclastic vein the New Wave film-makers inherited from Vigo, took aim at the stifling atmosphere of a prototypical Parisian *collège*. In *Les 400 Coups/The 400 Blows* (1959), the French language becomes a tool of punishment, as Antoine Doinel is forced to atone for his unacceptable behaviour by confronting the daunting intricacies of French verbs. More recently, Nicolas Philibert's documentary set in a one-room school in the Auvergne, *Être et avoir/To Be and To Have* (2002) can be interpreted as a nostalgic homage to Republican values, a gentle affirmation of the 'assimilationist' model, with a barely perceptible nod to twenty-first century demographics.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I propose to discuss the ways in which two recent films, *L'Esquive/The Dodge* (Kechiche, 2003) and *Entre les murs/The Class* (Cantet, 2008), bear evidence of the significant shifts in the understanding of the role French schools play in shaping national identity. As perhaps the leading critic of the educational establishment in France, the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu saw schools as institutions that rationalized social inequalities. Based on a deep distrust of Jacobin ideology, that both sustains and promotes class distinctions, Bourdieu's assessment concludes that 'the discourse of equal opportunity is a mystification; the real goal of the schools is to legitimize the privilege of birth by transforming it into academic excellence' (Derouet 1998: 51).<sup>2</sup> In differing ways, the two films I have chosen to discuss engage directly with Bourdieu's judgment, taking on the flaws of the Republican model of education as they are magnified in two public school settings (a Parisian *banlieue* in *L'Esquive* and the city's twentieth *arrondissement* in *Entre les murs*) that, it seems safe to assume, were never imagined by the nineteenth-century founders of public education in France.

Kechiche's film explores the interplay between what Serge Kaganski has referred to as two 'incongruous territories': the high culture that is a central building block in the foundational myth of France's homogeneous roots and the decidedly more pluralistic popular culture that has found expression primarily (although not exclusively) in the *banlieues* of France's major cities (Kaganski 2004). Shot on location in the Franc-Moisin housing projects, *L'Esquive* traces the efforts of a group of ethnically diverse, economically disadvantaged students to stage the well-known Marivaux play, *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (*The Game of Love and Chance*). The play's plot is predicated, as is so often the case, in seventeenth and eighteenth-century comedy, on a quid pro quo; resisting their parents' efforts to marry them off, sight unseen, to each other, a young upper-class man and

Jacques Chanéla présente

Osman Elkharraz • Sara Forestier • Sabrina Ouazani • Nanou Benahmou  
Hafet Ben-Ahmed • Aurélie Ganito • Carole Franck • Hajar Hamlili



# L'esquive

un film de Abdellatif Kechiche



Figure 1: The poster for L'Esquive.

woman (Dorante and Silvia) independently convince their servants (valet and chambermaid respectively) to exchange places with them, so each can observe the intended in action before agreeing to the matrimonial bonds. The attraction between false servants and false masters is immediate, but complicated by concerns for class barriers that are perceived to be insurmountable. After much playful *marivaudage* (or romantic banter), love conquers all and the 'natural order of things' is preserved, as masters and servants sort themselves out.

In *L'Esquive*, the narrative focus shifts back and forth from the play within the film, through scenes in which the adolescents rehearse in and outside of the classroom, to their various interactions, as they engage in their own courtship rituals, and talk incessantly to and about each other, continually jockeying for position in a youth culture clearly dominated by their very striking sociolect. The initial link between the Marivaux play and the rest of the film is established early on: the maid, played by Lydia (Sara Forestier), impersonating her mistress, dodges the advances of the valet, played by Rachid (Rachid Hami), who is standing in for his master; just as Lydia sidesteps the clumsy advances of Krime (Osman Elkharraz), a disturbingly uncommunicative youth, who, for his part, seems to be dodging everything (his former girlfriend, his father in prison, his friend's attempt to set straight his love life). But it is during a rehearsal held in school that another relevant connection emerges. When Lydia complains that Frida (Sabrina Ouazani), who is playing Silvia, comes across as much too haughty in her impersonation of the chamber maid, the teacher explains that, in fact, Frida has it right, interrupting the rehearsal to give a short lesson on social class:

We are completely imprisoned by our social condition: when we've been rich for twenty years or poor for twenty years, we can always dress up in rags if we're rich or in designer clothes if we're poor, but we can never get rid of our language, our way of talking or carrying ourselves, which gives away where we come from. So even though [the play] is called *The Game of Love and Chance*, it shows us that nothing is left to chance: the rich fall in love with the rich in the play and the poor fall in love with the poor. They recognize each other despite their disguises and they fall in love within their own social class.

(Translation of the film's dialogue)

It is against this backdrop of a rigid view of social hierarchy (albeit a pre-revolutionary one) that the film's ambiguous message is projected. If we follow the trajectory of the taciturn Krime, who bribes his way into the role of Arlequin in order to try to win Lydia's affections, but finally drops out of the play (because, one might say, he cannot get 'out of' character), we may conclude that the teacher's view prevails. Since, as Bourdieu would argue, the system is tilted in favour of the privileged, someone like Krime is destined to fail. Summarizing Bourdieu's position, educational scholar Jean-Yves Rochex concludes:

Social inequalities are tied to differences in 'cultural and economic capital' transmitted by the family, but they are also linked to whether or not one

possesses the 'pre-knowledge' useful for succeeding in school. Despite the claim that schools are accessible to everyone, the material taught, the study methods, the way orientation [tracking] works, seem to legitimize the culture of the favored social classes.

(Rochex 2009)

According to this assessment, Krimo (and others like him) would have difficulty succeeding. This is because, as second-generation North African with an absent father in prison, a clearly overworked mother and little in the way of educational encouragement at home, he is so locked into his stereotypical marginalized position that he does not have access to the cultural capital needed to make the grade. His culturally and economically impoverished upbringing cuts him off from the knowledge and experience taken for granted by the favoured classes and the system designed to ensure their advancement. I would like to argue, however, that while the message of the Marivaux play may be that one cannot transcend one's social condition, the film undermines this interpretation in large part through the linguistic interplay that, at times, rivals the somewhat minimal story line for dominance.

During much of the film, the adolescents communicate with one another in an aggressive discourse that mixes *verlan*, a French version of back-slang, with borrowings from languages other than French (Arabic, Wolof, English), a generous sprinkling of profanity, and staged brinksmanship. While mainstream French audiences may at times have difficulty deciphering this distinctive language, sociolinguists are coming to acknowledge the functional role it plays in lending the legitimacy all but denied by the ethnic cleansing of uncompromising universalism to an increasingly multicultural environment. According to linguist Meredith Doran, the alternative French spoken by a population that is both physically and socially excluded from the dominant society allows for an expression of an alternative identity. Summarizing the results of an ethnographic study she carried out in a Parisian suburban community, she concludes that the youth language is:

A product of the particular spaces and populations of *la banlieue*, marked by marginalization, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and persistently negative dominant representations, ... a set of linguistic practices that differ from Standard French in ways that have symbolic value and identity stakes for their users; ... and a strategic and functional tool used to construct an alternative social universe ... in which youths can define themselves in their own terms, along a more *métisse* and hybrid identity continuum that rejects the fixed categories of 'French' vs. 'immigrant' that continue to dominate in mainstream journalistic and political discourse.

(Doran 2007: 498)

Involving lexical and semantic innovation, the appropriation of discriminatory terms circulating in the larger society, and the open recognition of multiethnic belonging, these linguistic practices are strategically deployed to carve out a shared space in what has been otherwise labelled the non-place of the *banlieue*. Doran's empirical research leads her to the

conclusion that these young people consciously rely upon their common language to help them negotiate their identity on terms other than those prescribed by the 'traditional Republican conception of what it means to speak, and to be, French' (Doran 2007: 498).

Kechiche's film is structured to underscore the contrast (and in some unexpected ways, the similarities) between what Vinay Swamy refers to as Marivaux's 'hyper-legitimized French', which, as he notes, was criticized in its time for its departure from accepted eighteenth century norms, and the raw, irrepressible street idiom that also strays dramatically from standard French (Swamy 2007: 60). Carrie Tarr extends these insights by noting other common points shared by Marivaux's language and that of the adolescents: 'both are performative and theatrical, and, crucially, both demonstrate that there is a difference between what is said and what is meant' (Tarr 2007: 136).

Drawing no doubt on his early training in the theatre, Kechiche orchestrates his sequences so that many of those tracing the interactions between the adolescents carry the same weight of performance as the rehearsals of the Marivaux play. In one exemplary scene, as the students prepare for rehearsal at an outdoor amphitheatre, a heated exchange between Frida and Lydia takes centre stage. Kechiche constructs this sequence using tight two-shots that alternate with reverse shots of the other adolescents observing the altercation as a prelude to the actual rehearsal, which he then films using a similar shot selection. By establishing visual continuity between the two segments, the film invites the spectator to view the daily give-and-take of these young people as performance.

With remarkable versatility, these social actors reveal through their interpretations of multiple roles that they can take a lesson from theatre which, to quote Kechiche, 'initiates the possibility of play' (Lalanne 2004: 3). In addition, their linguistic acrobatics prove that they can shift with ease from the ritualistic *tchatte* that secures for them a niche in their adolescent subculture, to standard French in conversation with their teacher or parents of friends, to the elegant, if idiosyncratic, language of the Marivaux play. The students' successful code switching from eighteenth-century *marivaudage* to mainstream twenty-first century French to adolescent back-slang, serves to belie the inevitable link between Frenchness, social class, and verbal expression inscribed in the French national consciousness, at least since the creation of the French Academy in 1635. While acknowledging that the mechanisms called into play to determine social class and gender identity are not fully commensurate, I would like to suggest that borrowing a page from Judith Butler's analysis of gender subversion may be helpful in understanding the import of the fluid passage among linguistic registers so effectively carried out by at least some of the young people in *L'Esquive*. According to Butler, understanding gender as a performance can destabilize essentialist assumptions, for if 'gender reality is created through sustained social performances', 'strategies of subversive repetition of signifying practices can challenge the foundations of that reality' (Butler 1990: 141).

In a similar way, through subversive repetition (or *répétitions*, that is to say rehearsals) of the Marivaux play, the cast of unlikely characters glides smoothly from the rarified linguistic expression of eighteenth-century high

culture to their graphically gritty slang, thus calling into question the historically sacrosanct place accorded to the French language in the construction of national identity. Furthermore, what might seem to be the rigid determinism of Bourdieu's analysis is undermined by another level of performance, located at the intersection of fiction and real life. For, according to Kechiche, the adolescent actors in the film were selected following a call for auditions that was widely circulated in the Paris region, by means of signs posted in the streets, and ads placed on the radio and in newspapers (Porton 2005: 48). As a result, the adolescent cast is made up of non-professionals, who nevertheless, as Kechiche is quick to explain,

don't resemble their characters, and are not playing themselves. The actor who played Krimo, for example, is not the timid boy you see in the film. He's very comfortable in his own skin. And the girl who plays Lydia is not an aggressive person. She's very gentle.

(Porton 2005: 47)

Such multiple layers of performance introduce play into the fixed categories of identity that, as Doran has suggested, have dominated political and journalistic discourse in France. For example, Osman Elkharraz, the self-assured boy from the projects who memorized stylized script written to imitate a contemporary sociolect, convincingly interprets the role of the sullen, introverted adolescent.

*Entre les murs* – based on the 2006 novel by François Bégaudeau – also focuses on the challenges of France's ethnically diverse communities, tracking a year in the life of a French class in a Parisian *collège* located in the city's twentieth *arrondissement*. Unlike *L'Esquive*, which takes as its backdrop the bleak suburban space of the housing projects and includes numerous exterior shots of students rehearsing in the outdoor amphitheatre, Cantet relies for the most part on extreme close-ups shot within the claustrophobic space of the school. With a minimal plot line tracing the growing tensions between the teacher François Marin (played by Bégaudeau), and his alternatively disengaged and defiant students, the film concentrates on capturing the volatile dynamics of the classroom. By using three cameras (one focused on the teacher, the second on the particular student or students responding – or not – to his pedagogical jabs, and the third roaming the tight space to give a feel for the overall atmosphere), Cantet creates a sense of spontaneity that imparts to the film the aura of documentary.

Dominated by often intensely charged verbal jousts, the film, like *L'Esquive*, places language at its very core. Not only do certain lessons deal directly with the French language (including an amusing skirmish in which the imperfect subjunctive does not emerge unscathed), so too, the two most significant plot-movers involve conflicts brought to a head by language. Irked by the immature behaviour of the two student representatives on the class council, Marin impetuously refers to them as *pétasses*,<sup>3</sup> a remark which leads to near open rebellion in the classroom. Seizing upon an outlet for his growing rebelliousness, another student, Souleymane, defends the two girls and is finally thrown out of the class when he defiantly refers to Marin with the familiar pronoun 'tu'. In both cases, our

3. In the film's subtitles, *pétasse* is translated as 'skank'. Numerous conversations with colleagues, and an extended exchange on the online discussion site *Francofil*, have led me to believe that the exact definition of the term is elusive. While some suggest that 'bimbo' might be an accurate translation of the term, others find the English word 'slut' more appropriate. At any rate, it seems clear that opinions vary on the sexual connotation of the word.



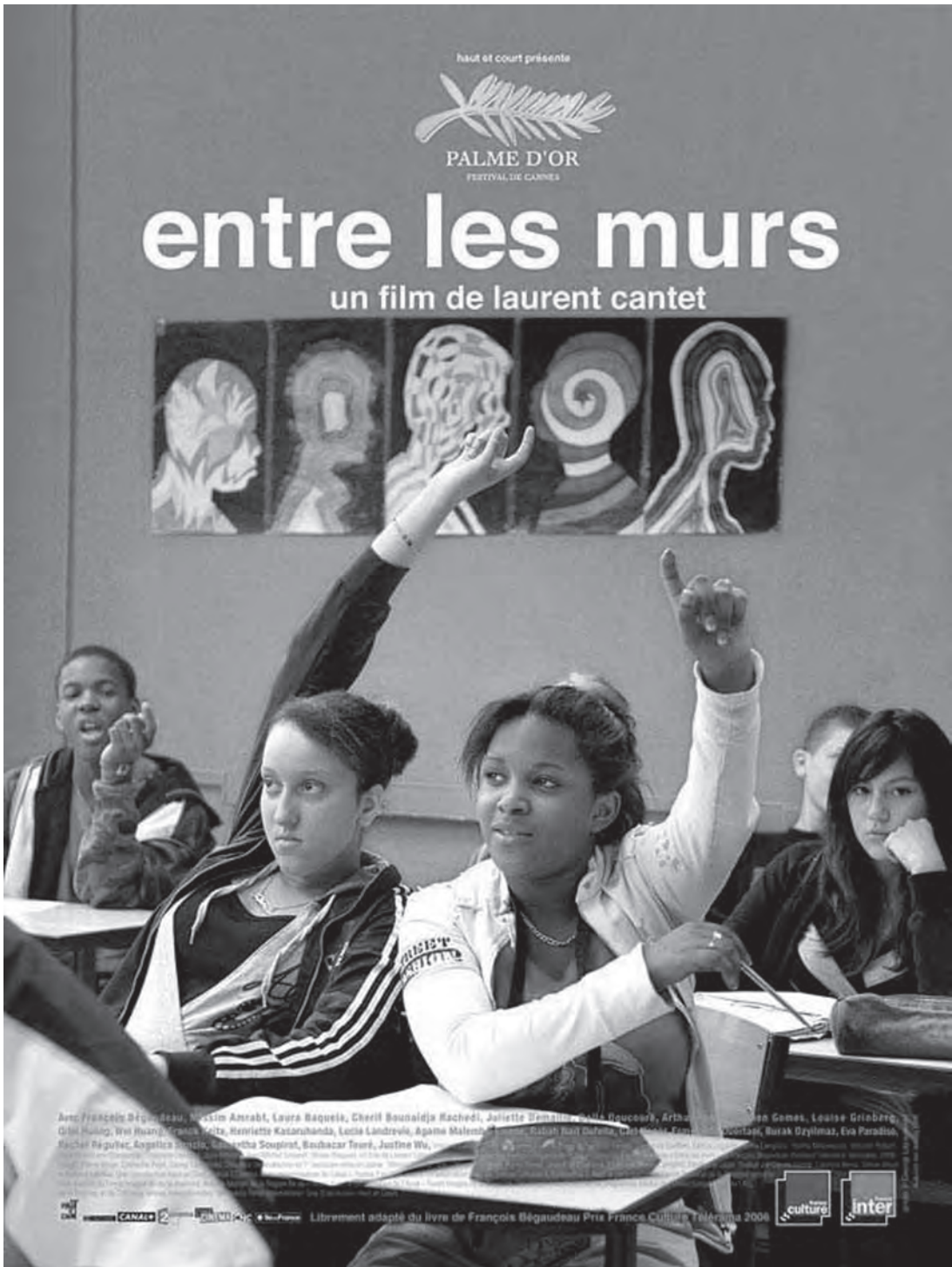


Figure 2: The poster for *Entre les murs*.

attention is drawn to language less as a tool of communication and more as a social marker: one which is loaded with emotional and cultural baggage that extends far beyond the lexical content of the words, sends warning shots across intergenerational and class battle lines.

Assessing the linguistic minefield Marin unwittingly steps into when he calls the girls *pétasses*, Guy Spielmann notes:

An individual with a certain background (age, sex, social status, etc.) incorrectly believes that he can use a certain term that he has heard used by another individual with a different background. When he does, a disruption is created. Thus a teenage girl can call herself *pétasse* (in some circumstances), or call another teenage girl *pétasse*, with a very different effect – pragmatically speaking – than a teenage boy, or an adult man ... using that same term. To an extent, this is also an instance of a very frequent sociolinguistic phenomenon whereby a group will borrow a derogatory term and use it for self-description, although the term remains an insult when used by outsiders to the group. A ... good example in France is *racaille* [scum], an old term famously revived by then-interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy, then adopted by the very group of people it was meant to stigmatize (who even ‘verlanized’ it into *caillera*).

(Spielmann 2009)

In this instance, Marin transgresses from his social position as insider (middle-class, adult, educated, richly endowed in cultural capital) into the unfamiliar territory of those who are clearly in the position of outsider (youth, racial or ethnic minority, socially and economically marginalized), and their reaction shows that he is on shaky ground. By calling him out, the girls are affirming the legitimacy of the connotations they ascribe to the word *on their turf*, thus asserting their claim to an alternative meaning. If in the classroom Marin has the power (and his teaching style dramatically illustrates language as power) to reproach them for choosing an inappropriate register or for indulging in non-standard usage, they hold firm against his incursions into their lexical space, signaling that they will not cede ground to him on their own linguistic terrain. When Marin tries to back-pedal by explaining that he did not accuse the girls of being *pétasses*, but was simply characterizing their behaviour, his effort to get the upper hand is launched through the control of language. Their refusal to accept his linguistic hairsplitting signals their implicit understanding of the power games at stake in this confrontation.

Given the inequalities inherent in the system, it should not be a surprise that the consequences of Souleymane’s transgression are considerably more serious. He is brought up before the disciplinary council. He is eventually expelled for his insolent and disruptive behaviour, to be sure, but, more pointedly, for his use of the familiar form of address, which is clearly understood, among the teaching staff and administration, as an assault on the inviolable rules girding the French educational bureaucracy. While stopping well short of promoting strict egalitarianism as an effective means of dealing with 14-year-olds in a school setting, the film does imply that the outdated institutionally mandated approach to Souleymane’s case in the film is a symptom of the inherent weaknesses of the French educational establishment.

In fact, the scene representing Souleymane's disciplinary hearing, set in a conference room that is just one among many of the film's numerous confined spaces, links the shortcomings of the educational bureaucracy to a different, but not unrelated, failure of language. As the teacher and administrators, seated around a large table, lay out the case against Souleymane, they come to realize that his Malian mother, who has accompanied him to the hearing, does not speak French. Constrained by an inflexible procedure that is incapable of responding to such a linguistic impasse, they are finally put in the awkward position of asking her son to act as translator. Visibly reduced to a game of charades in which none of the players has the means to interpret the other's linguistic and cultural gestures, the hearing ends with the decision to expel Souleymane from the school. The ludicrously oversized transparent plastic box passed mechanically around the table to collect the teachers' secret ballots, itself an ironic symbol of a failed democratic process, serves as a stinging commentary on the bureaucratic impotence that leads to what all involved recognize as a foregone conclusion.

Providing a counterpoint to the classroom scenes, this and other footage devoted to discussions among the teachers invites inevitable comparison between the two competing linguistic registers and socio-cultural environments. If the aggressive street French of the students strikes an abrasive chord, ominously portending what is widely accepted as the national threat of *fracture sociale* (social breakdown), so the stultifying bureaucratic discourse that seems to lock the teachers into circular ritualistic exchanges is no more reassuring.

The disconnection between the teachers' debates concerning, for example, a suggested point system for discipline, based on the way driving infractions are recorded, or evaluation guidelines that reveal a systemic distrust of positive reinforcement, and the profound disaffection they confront daily, is stunningly apparent. In a humorous parody of tracking systems that 'orient' students based on judgments about their potential to succeed, a student tells Marin, during a parent-teacher conference, that his mother hopes he can continue his schooling at the prestigious Lycée Henri IV, because she is convinced that the teachers at his current school are 'no good' (*nuls*). Unfazed by Marin's raised eyebrow, the mother offers a none too reassuring correction of this blanket condemnation: 'I didn't say no good, I said average'. The scene turns the tables on Marin and his fellow teachers who, like generations of teachers before them, have banded about the very same terms, as they make profoundly significant decisions about their students' futures. These bankrupt discourses, and the policies to which they inevitably give rise, reify the inequalities that, according to Bourdieu, are structurally rooted in the system, starkly illuminating its failure to respond to dangerous fault-lines in the Republican model of education, and by implication, citizenship.

If the unproductive confrontation between outmoded official discourses (of the classroom, the teacher's room, the educational bureaucracy, the political class) and the linguistic responses they provoke dominate the story line of *Entre les murs*, the film does pick up where *L'Esquive* left off in complicating the static images of France's increasingly multiethnic, racially diverse population: images that have been reinforced by the media

over the last twenty years. While the film's title refers, on one level, to its setting in the enclosed space of the school, it also invites an alternative interpretation. According to *Le Trésor de la langue française*, the expression, translated from the Latin *intra-muros*, is most frequently used to refer to the space inside the city (walls) (*Le Trésor de la langue française* 2009).<sup>4</sup> Thus, from the beginning, the film challenges the conventional understanding that the space of the city is the privileged domain of the majority population. In many ways a distinct departure from the model of the *banlieue* film, in which social malaise is viewed in large part as a consequence of exile from the urban centre to a cultural wasteland,<sup>5</sup> *Entre les murs* makes it clear that the challenge to the demographic status quo is being launched from within the country's historical centre.

Furthermore, by means of its innovative cinematographic strategies, *Entre les murs* strives to unsettle received notions about social dynamics in a bulwark of French national identity: the Republican school. For example, Cantet has explained that one of his central goals in replacing the conventional shot/reverse shot structure with the more fluid point of view offered by the use of three cameras was to put the teacher and students on an equal footing (Mangeot 2009). While I am not convinced that Cantet's camerawork in these scenes fully upends the inherent power imbalances between students and teacher, I do agree that this technique destabilizes the spectator, whose position in relation to the action is continually off-balance.<sup>6</sup> By replacing a predictable shot selection that alternates between two distinctly opposing perspectives with considerably less controlling longer takes recorded by three separate cameras, he has succeeded in releasing the viewer from any fixed point of view.

Following in the wake of Kechiche's film, Cantet's reliance upon a cast made up principally of non-professional actors drawn from a local *collège* (Françoise Dolto in the twentieth *arrondissement*) cannot, strictly speaking, be considered an innovation. But, the delicate balance among layers of performance that results from the action being situated almost exclusively within the walls of the school introduces a new dimension. In an interview, Bégaudeau has underscored the intricate dynamics at work:

[The French director Maurice] Pialat would say, we always forget that people are 'acting animals'. ... This is particularly true of the teens in the film, and maybe of their entire generation. Schools hone this skill, because they constantly provoke role-playing, dissimulation, cheating.

(Mangeot 2009)

According to Cantet, through participation in the regular workshops that preceded the filming, both students and teachers felt compelled to take a distanced look at their own contributions as performers reproducing and thus legitimizing the institutional practices of the educational establishment. For spectators aware of the status of the cast, such self-reflection seems woven into the fabric of a film conceived of by its director as an 'echo chamber' of the larger society, where 'questions of equality and inequality of access to power and work, of cultural and social inclusion and exclusion are very concretely played out' (Mangeot 2009).

4. In Classical times, the Latin word *muros* referred to building walls, whereas *moenia* signified the walls surrounding a city. This apparent semantic glide is ironically an early example of the sorts of historical changes in language evidenced in the films under discussion here. I am grateful to Jackson Bryce for alerting me to this interesting etymological note.
5. See Tarr 2005 for a full discussion of the identifying characteristics of *banlieue* films. To my mind, neither one of these movies qualifies as a *banlieue* film.
6. Vincendeau (2009) also disputes this interpretation of the camera's neutrality in *Entre les murs* in her cogent critique of the *Cahiers du cinéma* review of the film, 'A égalité' (Renzi 2008).

7. In addition to the reviews referenced here, see for example: Kaganski 2004; Lefort and Péron 2004; Barlet 2008; Libiot 2008; Thabourey 2008.

I would like to conclude by briefly considering the broader social implications of the reception of these films. Both achieved a certain degree of critical acclaim, with *L'Esquive* winning four major Césars, and *Entre les murs* garnering the coveted Palme d'or at the 2008 Cannes film festival. These awards reflected the judgment of the critical establishment in France, which responded warmly with positive reviews appearing in most of the country's major print and online publications.<sup>7</sup> But the lively exchanges provoked by both in the wider public arena make it clear that the interest in the films extends beyond their artistic merit, rekindling a nationwide debate on the hot-button issues they raise.

By way of example, let us briefly consider the case of *Entre les murs*. The former leader of the rightwing National Front party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, has recognized the danger from within that the film poses to those who regard multiculturalism as a threat to French national identity. When asked in an interview for his reaction to its success at the Cannes festival, he first dismissed the competition as being ideologically leftwing, but then conceded sarcastically that 'the film does have the merit of showing us what the composition of these Parisian *collèges* really is' (Anon 2008b). Le Pen's voice joins a number of others outside of the cinema community who have all criticized the film.

Observers on the Right, such as the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut and current Minister of Education Xavier Darcos, seized the opportunity to denounce the film. Finkielkraut, who in May 2008 locked horns with Bégaudeau in a heated televised debate over the degradation of French culture, complained in an article in *Le Monde* that the film launched an attack against linguistic propriety: 'civilization doesn't require that language be efficient or direct, in order to allow everyone to say without thinking what he has on his mind or in his gut', but rather, 'that language be scrupulous, precise, nuanced, and courteous' (Finkielkraut 2008).

For his part, Darcos found fault with Marin's failed pedagogy: 'he establishes a relationship with the students that is too emotional, he tolerates comments that put him on an equal footing with them, engages in a seductive process, and backs off from authority...' (Anon 2008a). In a similar vein, education professor Philippe Meurieu lamented the lack of pedagogical structure and loss of guidelines in Marin's classroom, signaling the increasing social breakdown at work in contemporary French schools (Meurieu 2008). But, in an impassioned response to Meurieu's commentary, Linda Nezri, an administrator at the Université de Provence, viewed the contradictions in Marin's approach as an almost inevitable response to the national identity crisis lurking behind his dealings with colleagues, students, and their parents. In a sense then Nezri is agreeing with Meurieu's assessment, but disputing his conclusions when she cautions that to ask whether the film offers a faithful representation of proper classroom pedagogy is to pose the wrong question, for:

What's essential in the film is that 'entre les murs' and on the screen, the *métissage* of our society is taking place. In the film, we are witnessing this *métissage* in action. French society of tomorrow ... must be forged with

French actors, but of different origins, cultures, and languages, themselves uncertain of where they belong, living in a sort of ontological state of flux.

(Nezri 2008, original emphasis)

Nezri sees the challenge *Entre les murs* poses as one that calls for nothing short of a sweeping reassessment of how the nation defines itself. Her position in the ongoing debate underscores that in this classic tug of war between tradition and change, Republican values and the challenges of twenty-first century social realities, both *Entre les murs* and *L'Esquive* are clearly playing an important role in provoking a national reconsideration of, to quote Doran again, 'what it means to speak, and to be, French'.<sup>8</sup>

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