FRAMING EXCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF SPACE IN LAURENT CANTET’S ENTRE LES MURS

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Abstract

This article examines the spatial representation of cultural mixité in the latest film by Laurent Cantet. It takes the form of a close reading of Entre les murs (2008), which, while illustrating well the failings of French education and specifically its republican ideals of assimilation, appears also to endorse the benign authoritarianism of the one teacher featured and to frame the pupils themselves as the source of the problem. Taking into account Bourdieu’s argument that the French education system always serves to reproduce social inequality and hierarchization, I propose that Cantet’s concrete staging of the educational process has, in fact, a precise political aim: to reconfigure republican space by constructing a new spatial dynamics capable of freeing both cinematic space from its ideological frame and individual movement from symbolic violence. Through analysis of Cantet’s complex framing strategies in three key sequences, I argue that the film renders powerfully present those who are habitually cast to the margins or excluded. By reconceiving the cinematic frame as a mobile and receptive vehicle for embracing the language of mixité, Entre les murs reveals itself ultimately as a constructive work of social mourning that reformulates in clear ethical terms the current dilemma of intégration versus communautarisme.

Can the representation of cultural mixité help us to reconceive social space? More specifically — and bearing in mind the traditional French figure of the teacher who exerts authority in the name of the Republic, which allows no space for the signs of difference — can a film about a contemporary French secondary school point the way to a more democratic environment where pupils have the opportunity to play an equal and integral part in the pedagogical process? These are some of the important questions posed by Laurent Cantet’s fourth feature, Entre les murs, winner of the Palme d’Or at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, which offers an utterly compelling and convincing account of the inner-city, multi-ethnic French classroom. Based on novelist François Bégaudeau’s 2006 book of the same name about his own adventures as a schoolteacher,1 Entre les murs presents a year in the working life of a quatrième class in a collège de ZEP in north-eastern Paris. Credited as co-scriptwriter alongside Cantet and his regular collaborator Robin Campillo, Bégaudeau himself plays François Marin, a thirty-something teacher of French about to begin his fourth year at the school. The result of extensive months of rehearsal in workshops personally conducted

1 François Bégaudeau, Entre les murs (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

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by Cantet in which locally drawn pupils and teachers were encouraged to contribute their own experiences, the film has the look of cinéma-vérité documentary realism even though it is firmly anchored in the fictional realm. Bégaudeau's text was already a novel relayed in the first person, not a memoir, and the use of wide-screen Cinemascope (Cantet's first experiment in this area), together with the lack of any guiding voice-over, contributes to the film's stylization. We never leave the school grounds once inside them, and only occasionally does the camera stray from the highly circumscribed space of a small classroom. No sky or horizon is visible beyond the windows composed of multiple panels separated by bars through which the outside appears always a uniform and undifferentiated grey. These are enclosed images in the most literal sense, and the virtual symmetry of time and place exacerbates the feeling of a huis clos announced by the very title, Entre les murs, with its connotations of a prison or fortress.

In fact, the first very brief shots of the film take place before we even set foot inside the school and are highly instructive, not for what they reveal of the action to come, but rather for what they imply will not happen. A man's face (Marin) is photographed in medium close-up as he looks off-screen to the right and collects his thoughts while sitting in a café. He is pictured behind the just discernible profile of a male figure standing at the bar in the immediate foreground who glances down obliquely in Marin’s direction in the middle-ground. Other figures circulating outside are visible in the blurred background. After a few seconds Marin exits and walks towards the school to begin his first day back at work after the summer break. The structure here, of the watcher being watched, might suggest some erotic attraction or voyeuristic gaze, yet this possibility is withdrawn as soon as it is offered, as if to demonstrate that both intimate private stories and artful cinematography and mise-en-scène (the mystery of depth of field, the suggestive gesturing towards a vague or inaccessible hors-champ) will barely feature in this film. Instead, the sequence establishes a formal dialectics of viewing and spatial relations: between clarity and vagueness, subject and object, distance and proximity, closed and open frame, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, line and angle. How does this theoretical preamble and obvious structural framing device feed into the themes and narrative of Entre les murs?

Cantet defines school in his notes to the film in characteristically sociological terms, writing of a ‘sounding board’ or microcosm in which the conflicts of society as a whole play out. The particular type of multicultural school presented constitutes, according to Cantet, one of the last places in France where there is a genuine and dynamic social mix, and his primary aim is to show in concrete terms how it works as a socializing institution and framework for learning not just academic subjects but also how to live with others, understand difference, and construct identities. Accordingly, at the beginning we are led by Marin through a series of doors, passages, stairs, corridors, and classrooms being prepared by the cleaners, a journey that demands an appreciation of space both as a literal form of enclosure and, on a metaphorical level, as a
negotiation of limits and borders. What makes the film so fascinating is that
the classroom reveals instead the fractures and contradictions of the Republic,
in particular regarding its universalizing, nationalist ambitions of integration
and demand for ideological consensus when faced with the specificities of its new
immigrant populations. Important social issues such as the inequality of back-
ground and opportunity are posed by students who challenge the very idea of
a social norm by virtue of their family circumstances. Wei, for example, is a
reclusive yet gifted son of Chinese immigrants who is threatened with deporta-
tion owing to French immigration policies, while the rebellious Malian boy,
Souleymane, like all Cantet’s male protagonists (Franck in Ressources humaines
(1999), Vincent in L’Emploi du temps (2001)), finds it increasingly hard to dis-
cover his niche. Hypersensitive and seemingly indifferent to any attempts to
improve his behaviour, he appears lost between two cultures. More even than
in Abdellatif Kechiche’s L’Esquive (2004), where adolescents in a cité mount a
school production of Marivaux, language is the major battleground here, pro-
voking a war of attrition between the standard French spoken by the teachers
and the tchatche de banlieue rooted in argot and verlan practised by the pupils.
Although the class perseveres with Anne Frank’s Diary of a Young Girl, it com-
plains when forced to complete grammar exercises that always rely on ‘babou’
(honky) names like Jean but never Assı ata or Rachid. Similarly, the children
question the practical usefulness of learning the imperfect subjunctive, for
them an irrelevance which they link derisorily to the ’jambon-beurre’, or Français
de souche. The endless verbal jousting, games of bluff, and provocation are pre-
missed on who has the last word. Marin handles well an initial showdown with
Souleymane when the latter asks him insolently whether he is gay, but another
teacher, who flees enraged back to the staff room, gives vent to the same kind
of offensive language his students employ (’Qu’ils restent dans leur merde!’),
indicating that the parallel worlds of the classroom and staff room are not
always that far removed.

Entre les murs eventually assumes the form of a tragedy with, first, Marin’s
‘fall’ in the recreation ground, where he descends to confront two female pupils
Esmeralda and Louise for having ‘betrayed’ him, and, second, his own ‘sacrifice’
of Souleymane during the boy’s disciplinary hearing by the school board for
having stormed out of Marin’s class in a fit of violent temper and accused all
teachers of trying to take revenge on him, in the process accidentally hitting
another student, Khoumba, in the face with his bag. We witness the apparent
powerlessness of the school authorities to stop Souleymane’s exclusion by secret
ballot. This individual tragedy merely confirms the failings of the French edu-
cation system and its ideals of assimilation evident throughout the film. For the
school’s rituals of transparency and participation are revealed as at best a
charade (the anomaly, for instance, of having a student sit in on a meeting as
student rep where her own progress is being discussed by teachers who are con-
cerned only with filling in boxes on forms), and at worst a web of hypocrisy and
manipulation based ultimately on the politics of exclusion and the lack of any
real understanding of cultural difference. Marin had earlier relayed to his fellow teachers what he learned from Khoumba, namely that the policy of relocation to another school would not work in the case of Souleymane, whose father would almost certainly send him back to Mali. There is no room for context or flexibility in the system, however. The teachers may initially tie themselves in embarrassing knots over what limits or sanctions to apply when dealing with Souleymane, yet they all agree that no allowance can be made: he is a misfit and ‘agent perturbateur’ who has no place in the school (we learn, in fact, that almost every disciplinary hearing results in a verdict of expulsion).

Much of the criticism of *Entre les murs*, both positive and negative, has focused less on its stark portrait of social reality than on the omnipresent figure of Marin himself, whose unflagging, engaging style betrays an immature and impulsive streak and, at times, plain insensitivity. Neither a die-hard traditionalist nor a new wave multiculturalist, Marin lies somewhere in-between, endorsing some elements of cultural pluralism when the situation demands but always maintaining the validity of the key rationalist republican concepts such as equality and excellence. The self-portrait project he assigns his students is conceived, for instance, more in terms of greater self-knowledge than an opportunity for engagement with cultural and ethnic diversity. Marin seems unwittingly to expose what is most troubling about school systems, namely the inherent trust in adults to behave as such. Using and abusing irony in his classroom dialogues to cultivate the art of nuance, he seems never really to believe in the virtues of the transmission of knowledge. Manifestly demoralized and often cynical, he nevertheless prides himself on appearing more liberal than his colleagues, who are depicted variously as conflicted, petty, and self-absorbed, and to whom he can appear equally arrogant, as when he disdainfully shrugs off the advances made by a new teacher to collaborate. The pupils are, of course, wise to Marin’s playful, bristling neo-Socratic approach and the power dynamics of the system he represents. They reasonably question why they should have to reveal their ‘trucs intimes’ in an assignment when he is not particularly interested anyway and never responds in kind. If they ever do come to the front of the class, it is one at a time only, and at Marin’s express command, as part of a lesson to improve their rhetorical skills, for he demands a meticulous respect of spatial boundaries just as he does of grammatical correctness. In the case of Khoumba, Marin seems unable to grasp why she might balk at reading yet again in class, apparently blind to the unequal situation the two find themselves in where discipline always operates as a means of power. Her subsequent letter to Marin entitled ‘Le Respect’, read out in the film’s only instance of voice-over and in which she admits her insolence, insists quite rightly that the respect he demands be mutual and, further, that it is inappropriate and wrong that he, with impunity, call her ‘hysterical’. We are reminded here of Bourdieu’s argument that the French education system always serves to reproduce social inequality and hierarchization, in the same way that Jacobin ideology can actually justify the system while appearing to
challenge it.\(^2\) The press-book for *Entre les murs* deliberately invokes Bourdieusian terminology, claiming that a school is fundamentally discriminatory and unequal because it fabricates production; and the specific link between class and structural inequality is incisively made when Marin expresses both surprise and discomfort on hearing that Khoumba and another student regularly travel four stops on the metro to shop at the Galeries Lafayette in central Paris — as if the heart of the capital should normally be off-limits to those considered on the margins.

While *Entre les murs* certainly avoids some of the pitfalls of the original book, which cited official discourse at length and without comment, including the Principal’s encomium to the inherent goodness of the system,\(^3\) it would seem ultimately to have failed to provide a proper framework for challenging out-moded universal republican ideals and the muddled direction and blind spots of the education system. The film’s oddly melodramatic leanings culminate in Esmeralda’s last-minute and quite unexpected colloquial tribute to Plato’s *Republic*, the one book (of all books) which she admits to having picked up and read, though crucially not for school. As the film critic Richard Porton elegantly puts it: ‘slapped on the wrist for mild political incorrectness, the hapless teacher is re-coronated as an antic philosopher king and avatar of Socratic dialogue’.\(^4\) The values of the Republic are thus symbolically upheld and even Khoumba is redeemed, ready in the final lesson to show what she too has learned during the course of the year. The film thus ends up, in effect, mystifying the educational process by asserting that classrooms in trouble can always be ‘transformed by the empathetic, if ultimately condescending, intervention of a heroic teacher’.\(^5\) Indeed, the film, arguably, positions and frames the children themselves as the permanent source of the problem while endorsing Marin’s benign authoritarianism and tired pedagogical methods. It might even be said this could not be otherwise in view of Cantet’s mutually admiring relationship with Bégaudeau, who, in his other guise as film critic, has been particularly complimentary of Cantet’s work.\(^6\)

What is left out of Porton’s and other critics’ accounts of *Entre les murs*, however, is a close attention to the film’s formal aspects and in particular its

\(^2\) See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La Reproduction: éléments d’une théorie du système d’enseignement* (Paris: Minuit, 1970), and the later *La Mise au monde*, ed. by Bourdieu (Paris: Seuil, 1993), which, in the brilliantly concise chapter ‘Les Exclus de l’intérieur’ (pp. 913–23), shows how the education system conspires to retain those whom it effectively excludes by relegating them to more or less devalorized courses of study. Bourdieu writes (with Patrick Champagne): ‘ce système d’enseignement largement ouvert à tous et pourtant strictement réservé à quelques-uns réussit le tour de force de réunir les apparences de la “décentralisation” et la réalité de la reproduction qui s’accomplit à un degré supérieur de dissimulation, donc avec un effet accru de légitimation’ (p. 921).

\(^3\) Bégaudeau, *Entre les murs*, p. 244.


\(^5\) Ibid., para. 6.

extensive probing of cinematic space. I wish to argue, in fact, that another arc is in progress in the film that subtends the major narrative themes and develops the spatial issues raised by the opening sequence. Although it does not diminish the problems caused by the lack of an explicit and fully coherent political critique, it allows for a far more positive and accurate reading of the film. For Cantet is attempting here nothing less than to reconfigure republican space by constructing a new spatial dynamics capable of freeing cinematic space from its ideological frame. At the root of this project lies his very method of filming. 

Three high-definition DVD cameras, for the most part hand-held and positioned on the same side of the classroom as in a televised football match, capture the action with fly-on-the-wall lensing. One camera stays on the teacher, another on the pupil speaking, and a third on the pupil about to speak or act. Denied the basic means of character identification such as shot/counter-shot or establishing long-shot, and undisturbed by any background music or non-diegetic sound, we are consistently placed on a close, flat axis with the action as if caught within it. Cinemascope itself reduces the depth of field and height of images, thereby magnifying the sense of claustrophobia in the class. It also increases the possibilities of intensive framing, for example focusing on the position of one character while others remain blurred. Much of the formal tension of the film derives precisely from Cantet’s deep ambivalence about framing owing to its ideological implications. Since spatial relations are always power relations for this director, every camera frame in his work becomes a potential site of struggle and resistance according to how it is established and sustained. 

In *Entre les murs* point of view is almost totally absent, and any complete framing of the classroom is rendered impossible for the practical reasons given. The film thus unfolds as a permanent interrogation and critique of the cinematic frame. Already in *Vers le sud*, Cantet’s stark portrayal of the world of sex tourism in Haiti during the late 1970s, much of the dramatic tension revolved around who inhabits the frame: if all the white female tourists are provided with a monologue to camera in their own paid-for space, the Haitian factotum Albert is accorded only a voice-over as he continues working, while the native male gigolos enjoy no individual screenspace or voice-over whatsoever. In *Entre les murs*, whenever the frame is directly invoked it is to emphasize the bureaucratic and institutional process itself, as, for example, when Marin is pictured writing his accident report from behind a window, the frame of which is reinforced by the static cinematic frame. Any delaying or blocking of the action by conventional framing, angle, or other ‘vertical’ effects of composition such as depth of field signifies an imposition of power relations and a threat to the vital process of cultural *mixité*.

We might link Cantet’s conception of framing as an index and vehicle of exclusion with Judith Butler’s ‘frame theory’ of social and political power. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), Butler makes the simple but crucial point that the prevailing Western ‘frames of recognition’ aim to contain, convey, and determine what is seen, with the result that ‘certain lives are perceived as
lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such. The American orchestration of the war in Iraq, Butler states, relied on a notion of whose lives count (and are therefore grievable when they die) and whose lives do not register as having value (that is, those who are culturally different from or ‘other’ to ‘us’). Yet precisely because normative frames of representation can circulate only by virtue of their reproducibility, which thus introduces a structural risk for the identity of the frame itself (reproducibility, Butler correctly argues, ‘entails a constant breaking from context, a constant delimitation of new context, which means the “frame” does not quite contain what it conveys, but breaks apart every time it seeks to give definitive organization to its content’), they can also, ‘depending on the specific mode of circulation, call certain fields of normativity into question’. Hence the urgent political and theoretical challenge. The context and stakes of Cantet’s and Butler’s work are, of course, very different, yet Cantet’s commitment to reversing cultural norms of thought and perception is no less vigorous or far-reaching. His determinedly lateral concrete thinking about the educational process has a clear ethical and political aim: to counter the fixed, republican frame of nationalist pedagogy and so, in Bourdieu-like terms, create the possibility for bodily movement and displacement free from symbolic violence and the ‘misères de position’ it causes in contemporary society. To ‘work’ the cinematic frame is thus, for Cantet, to work the very seams and fault lines of the Republic. His absolute faith in the integrity of his young subjects in Entre les murs and the energy of their shared multicultural space is such that, in an inversion of standard symbolic encodings of shot, it is paradoxically when the image is ‘full’ and ‘closed’ in visual terms (that is, taken over completely by classroom activity) that it is at its most inclusive and ‘open’ in the metaphorical and ethical sense.

A central feature of Entre les murs, and much overlooked in discussions of the film, is that it is punctuated by eight very short and discrete ‘outside’ sequences in the school that are neither of the classroom nor of the staff room. The function of these exterior shots is very different from those, say, of Être et avoir (2002), Nicolas Philibert’s affectionate and nostalgic fly-on-the-wall documentary study of a small, single-class school in the Auvergne, where the bridging sequences and establishing shots of the natural countryside through the seasons wrap the long, composed takes of school life within the eternal, utopian landscape of the Republic. Indeed, taken together, the outside shots of Entre les murs function more as a critical and conceptual frame for viewing the classroom action through the prism of difference and alterity. For in this further figuration of frame, the exterior images are almost all static, high-angle, surveillance-style.

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8 Ibid., p. 10. Butler takes as a prime example the notorious digital images from Abu Ghraib that were circulated globally across the Internet and provoked ‘a widespread visceral turn against the war’ (p. 11).
9 Ibid., p. 24.
10 See La Misère du monde, ed. by Bourdieu, p. 16 and passim.
11 Être et avoir comes complete with an interview with the dedicated teacher and old-fashioned disciplinarian, Georges Lopez, in which he talks explicitly about his Spanish and republican origins.
long-shots that cover the camera frame with a collision of different physical levels and planes (the school’s inner courtyard, walkways, steps, passages, and so on). If we turn to the second outside shot, it offers the blocked, partial view of a gym lesson in the playground clearly taken from the classroom overlooking it. The image immediately following indicates that it is a subjective shot from Marin’s point of view, in line with our initial perception that just as only he enjoys spatial authority and autonomy in the classroom, so only he has the right to point of view outside it. Yet the film quickly works to dispel this expectation in favour of a more objective and complete investigation of the system itself. The following three outside sequences are composed of unanchored shots of the playground, all from a distance and slight high-angle, and which establish a series of important themes: the status of the image (a dispute between Souleymane and a couple of girls over his right to take photographs), racial difference (a football game that leads to a confrontation between African and West African boys), and conflict between staff and pupils over territory (the scene watched by students from the classroom, a virtual upper balcony, when Marin ushers Souleymane to the Principal for using the tu rather than vous form and during which Souleymane lingers defiantly on the steps to tie his shoe-laces). Another, more neutral exterior sequence comprises three long-shot views of the courtyard being steadily filled up by students led out in file by their teachers in a progressive closing-up of the frame.

I should like now to examine in close detail three consecutive outside sequences in Entre les murs that constitute in their own right a mini-drama of focus, angle, and point of view, and problematize most dramatically the cinematic frame. First, the moment when Marin enters the students’ territory; second, Souleymane’s disciplinary hearing that leads to his expulsion; and third, the final sequence of the staff–student football game in the playground that loops back one last time to the classroom. My aim in analysing Cantet’s framing strategies is to determine how far the film is able to dislodge the ideological frame, and ultimately how successful it is in liberating filmic space and thus the possibility for free movement within the system.

deframing

The sequence begins with the supervisor, Julie, confronting Marin on a set of stairs overlooking the playground below. She asks if it is true he had called Esmeralda and Louise ‘pétasses’, to which he sheepishly replies yes. This contradicts his earlier claim that he merely said they were ‘behaving like pétasses’, that is, adopting ‘une attitude de pétasse’, on account of revealing his ‘confidential’ opinion of Souleymane as ‘scolairement limité’, proffered during an end-of-year staff meeting about pupil evaluations at which they were both present as class reps. For Marin it was just an innocent rebuke; for them it was a particularly abusive term denoting ‘slut’. Leaving Julie, Marin heads downstairs and we catch him next as he comes into frame to meet the smiling Esmeralda and Louise on their own level in the playground mêlée. Crucially, however, the frame is not fixed
but hand-held and constantly shifting, as if responding spontaneously to the physical movements of the pupils. In this move from the vertical to the broadly lateral and horizontal, we are placed on a direct par with the students. There is no static frame or use of shot/counter-shot formation to freeze the multiperspectival, circular flow, which is accentuated by fluid editing and marries what Cantet calls the pupils’ impassioned ‘rhetorique en boucle’, or purposeful lack of rational argument. Marin demands to know why the girls ‘betrayed’ him by revealing the sensitive contents of the meeting, to which they immediately retort that if teachers can formally complain, so can pupils. The encounter quickly degenerates into an ugly face-off when they raise the issue of Souleymane, something which Marin had wished to keep separate yet which they (and we) know is simply not possible: Souleymane’s act of violent insubordination occurred just moments after Marin’s explosive use of the term ‘pétasse’. They hold him personally responsible for provoking Souleymane, and Esmeralda, employing the final insult delivered by Souleymane when storming out of Marin’s class, lashes out: ‘Vous dites pétasse, on dit enculé [...] c’est la même.’

The camera frame has swelled with other students closing in around Marin and engulfing him. His verbal rhetorical tricks and sophistry are turned on their head, almost literally, and he starts fatally to lose his temper, just as Souleymane had done with him. He makes things worse by throwing professional caution to the wind and declaring presumptuously that the new student Carl is now calmer for having been relocated to a new school, hence living proof of the higher wisdom of the system. ‘Vous m’avez adouci?’, Carl snarls back sarcastically, adding, ‘[l]es profs qui excluent les élèves, ce sont les enculés pour moi’. All the while Marin, who had escaped disciplinary action by simply agreeing to write in his official report that he had lost his temper and used abusive language, lays claim to the spurious superiority on which the entire educational system is based: ‘Moi, je suis prof, je peux dire des choses que les élèves ne peuvent pas dire.’ He is, of course, proving something else here with his actions: that in a particular context and set of circumstances, a teacher can regress to the state of an unruly child. Khoumba instructs him in the real rules of the game: ‘On sait que tout est déjà calculé.’ This disturbing episode of raw aggression ends with a panicked François scurrying nervously out of frame, to be picked up in a reverse-field shot when Khoumba follows him back inside the building and explains matter-of-factly what will happen to Souleymane if he is expelled. In this stunning reversal of teacher–pupil relations, Marin has learned in just a couple of minutes a vital lesson about the politics of education and the complex reality of the often precarious lives of the inner-city children whom he prefers to regard merely as anonymous empty vessels for indoctrinating with the lessons of the Republic. He has been spectacularly ‘out-classed’, or, better still, out-framed, by the indiscriminate mass he is entrusted to shape into responsible citizens of

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12 Commentary by Cantet and Bégaudeau featured on the DVD of The Class (Artificial Eye, 2009).
en-framing

The cinematic frame assumes a more theatrical and directly political dimension during the bureaucratic ritual of the disciplinary hearing. First the teachers, then the parent and student reps, and finally Souleymane and his mother move slowly and silently into a fixed open frame, filling up the conference room like actors walking from the wings on to the stage. As they occupy the allocated sides of the assembled square of tables, we are entitled to ask if this is finally democracy in action. The fact that we are positioned first at a side angle to, then from behind, Souleymane and his mother indicates a certain solidarity with the accused, especially when we glimpse from behind Souleymane’s left shoulder the profile of Marin looking obliquely towards him. But Cantet then stages a reversal of what one might normally expect of a visual symbolization of inclusion and exclusion. From the moment the backs of the heads of Fred and Marin are conveyed in slightly blurred focus and positioned at the sides of a wide frame that captures Souleymane and his mother at its centre, frontally and in sharp focus, we know instinctively that he is being singled out as different and ‘other’ and thus doomed to be expelled. And so it proves. The two parent reps argue persuasively that the entire incident needs to be re-examined: Souleymane was, after all, trying to defend the honour of the two girls described by Marin as ‘pétasses’, and, moreover, it is abnormal that Marin should be present as both witness and concerned party. Their views are politely ignored by the Principal, who a little earlier during the assessment meeting had also disregarded Esmeralda’s observation that Souleymane had actually increased his grade average by 0.5. As the teachers try to inflate their discourse with hyperrational, bureaucratic turns of phrase, Souleymane is forced into the uncomfortable position of having to translate into French the deliberations for his mother, who cannot properly speak or understand French, there being no interpreter available. On one level this offers a neat inversion of the power relations at play, yet Souleymane visibly suffers when he has to translate his mother’s opinion that, despite appearances, he is a good boy who does his homework and looks after his family.

With Marin saying nothing in Souleymane’s defence, his betrayal of the boy is now complete. Previously, during the self-portrait project, Marin had insisted with cavalier nonchalance on displaying to the entire class Souleymane’s highly personal and discreet digital photograph of his mother in which she gestures her obvious disapproval at being photographed. The photograph thus already constituted a brave personal transgression, all the more so since the figure of the mother has an untouchable status in African society, something to which Marin appears completely oblivious (rather superciliously, he proclaims Souleymane’s work a ‘chef-d’œuvre’). His subsequent dismissal of Souleymane’s academic potential merely compounded his betrayal of the boy’s trust in his teacher’s
discretion. Since Souleymane refuses to add anything in his defence, a secret vote is immediately arranged. In a perfect matching of form and content, the fixed frame performs again as a symbolic sign of the intransigence of republican thinking and ideology. As the votes are cast dehumanizingly by anonymous hands into a transparent ballot box that is meant to represent, synecdochically and symbolically, the transparency of the system in general, outside the room mother and son avoid each other’s gaze, looking off-screen to the left as if into a void or well of republican shame. As soon as the inevitable verdict of definitive expulsion is announced, Souleymane and his mother leave the school in a deafening silence, walking together in bleak long-shot up the outside steps (an obvious metaphor of their permanent struggle as immigrants) and across the deserted concrete walkway. In this most simple and quietly damning of frames, we now find ourselves fully implicated as viewer. It is not only that the idealized space of the classroom as embodiment of, and instruction in, republican values has been emphatically negated; our effective collusion as silent witnesses with the framing mechanisms of the system has also been laid bare.

**re-framing**

The final outside sequence of the film closes the structural frame opened up by the first shot in the café. Marin joins other staff and pupils in a cramped game of football in the playground during what must now be understood in context as a display of staff–student reconciliation. The players are first filmed anonymously at ground level, as if to emphasize a renewed desire for egality and undifferentiation, a fast panning shot across the delimited space providing a rush of genuine, documentary-style action. Yet, after what we have just experienced, this cannot easily be viewed as an innocent game capable of transcending the divisions and inequalities of school life in the name of a putative republican harmony. It is, in fact, a pure fiction of integration, an illusory happy end, and one already undercut by the immediately preceding scene in the classroom when a student who has barely spoken until now, Henriette, approaches Marin at the end of the final class and declares forlornly that she has learned nothing whatsoever and does not wish to continue to the next, preordained stage of her education (vocational school). This devastating statement, which throws into doubt the proud confidence of republican principles and aspirations, sounds a concluding note of ambivalence and deflation. The sense of failure is underscored by the two last, desolate shots of the film: brief, anonymous, still-frame views of the deserted classroom strewn with the chaos of untidy chairs and tables, the first of the front half with the blackboard now erased of writing, the second of the back, and both at an oblique and slight high angle that reconsigns the outside to a blank, almost abstract distance behind the closed windows. By insisting so decisively on the stasis of this sealed-off interior and the absence of what was once there (the class in its original tempestuous form prior to Souleymane’s expulsion), the film seems to end in a state of irremediable loss: that of the promise of a new form of spatial relations and identity based on
genuine inclusion and a more honest and respectful dialogue between staff and pupils. It would appear, in short, to signify the failure of Cantet’s project to make space perform in new ways, for the reinvocation of the frame — open and empty in the sense of lacking any detail, action, or character to engage our interest — has been finally revealed as just that: devoid of hope and exclusionary.

Such a graphic final statement of failure has perplexed and troubled some commentators of the film, who regard it as a fatalistic admission of the inexorable decline and mess of French education. Yet this is only half the story, for, as Noël Burch reminds us, it is precisely when we are confronted with an empty frame that we begin to consider seriously what is happening outside it, that is, the space of the hors-champ. The only action at this point is relayed on the soundtrack, which permeates the still-frame with the shouts and cheers of the pupils in full voice at the football match. This might appear merely to underline formal division, that is to say, the discrepancy between a mute image and off-screen sound. Yet in this first and only productive instance of hors-champ in the entire film, the image works laterally with natural, diegetic sound (as opposed to vertically with overdubbed sound) to reveal something new: an unguessed combination of heterogeneous sound and image that precedes any act of montage and replays the process of saturating the frame that defines the film, in this case solely by means of the spontaneous and irrepresible, albeit indecipherable, voices of multicultural France that carry over into the closing credits sequence and drown out any authorized speech from the teachers. With this paradoxical voiding of the classroom that celebrates the potential of free sound and renders strategically present those who are habitually cast to the margins and remain excluded, Cantet achieves a highly symbolic reformulation of inside and outside, clarity and vagueness, that transports the idea of space to a new conceptual level. Space is now to be understood not simply as what one perceives within the frame, or even outside it, but also what actively crosses through it and transforms it: the shared world of language. In a brilliant aesthetic refusal of closure, the ending of the film demands that we return immediately to the start to listen again to the language of mixité, but this time more acutely, imaginatively, and profoundly.

Entre les murs has thus resolved itself in formal terms by reconceiving the cinematic frame as a pre-eminently mobile and receptive vehicle for social and cultural inclusion. Such a bold, symbolic recasting of the space/frame relation bears out what the psychoanalyst Darian Leader has observed in his recent consideration of the frame motif in the context of Freud’s theory of mourning, namely that the work of mourning needs to mobilize the symbolic dimension and create a frame for absence — one that by drawing attention to the conditioned, ‘artificial’ nature of what is perceived can help to mark out a space for

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13 See, for example, Marie-Pascale Mignon-Chatras, ‘Entre les murs de Laurent Cantet: la fatalité de l’échec?’, Esprit (November 2008), 216–18 (p. 218).

inscribing and symbolizing loss. In other words, a representation of the lost object must be represented as nothing more than — but also nothing less than — a representation.\footnote{See Darian Leader, \textit{The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression} (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 101–08. Leader draws directly on Freud’s \textit{Mourning and Melancholia} (1917).} To view \textit{Entre les murs}, in the final analysis, as a constructive work of social mourning is, of course, far from saying that Cantet has created a more democratic artistic space sufficient to overcome the social tensions and inequality so powerfully relayed in the film. In fact, the pure potential of undifferentiated sounds remains only an abstract promise. For how is one to disentangle and hear equally all the voices and cultures of this new, rich multilanguage? Which is to say, if one could simply start all over again, how is one to honour cultural diversity without causing separation, division, and exclusion? We are reconfronted with the crisis of differentiation in the Republic and, specifically, the dilemma of \textit{intégration} versus \textit{communautarisme}, the latter heralding for some ethical solidarity, for others ethnic separatism. In lieu of any easy answers the film reveals with impressive clarity and urgency the stakes of the problem and underlines the social risks of inertia and complacency. The political challenge remains to address the damage and trauma of institutionalized alienation and exclusion by moving definitively beyond the strict frame of republican universalism that still governs French thinking about education, despite regular attempts at reform. This is not a revolutionary message, of course. The continuous innovation and reinvention of social forms and models like education means that one still has to work with, and through, the system. Yet by attacking the logic of the frame so unequivocally by means of a resolutely ethical approach to cinematic form, Cantet has taken a significant step to recharging and radically redefining our field of critical vision.