

## INTRODUCTION



At the beginning of Haitian film-maker Raoul Peck's French-funded and tellingly entitled documentary *Le Profit et rien d'autre (Profit and Nothing But)* (2000), a whispering voice tells us that capital has won.<sup>1</sup> Capital seems to have won a definitive victory leaving no room either for radical political opposition or for a political cinema as earlier generations would have understood it. Were this the case, there would be nothing for an oppositional cinema to do but fall silent or engage in a critique that, condemned never to open onto a politics, would ultimately be sterile. Yet has capital simply won? The last ten years or so have seen the revival of political opposition in France. It began with the mass public sector revolt of late 1995 against the weakening of the social security regime, a revolt that, although it failed to spread to a cowed private sector, attracted enormous public support and forced a government retreat. It came resoundingly to the surface again with the triumph in 2005 of the 'No' vote in the referendum on the European constitution, a result which, while it dismayed mainstream parties rallied to the neo-liberal consensus, voiced a determined collective refusal of the European Union's apparently unstoppable neo-liberal drift. It continued in 2006 with the mass student mobilization against the CPE (*Contrat Première Embauche*), a piece of legislation that sought to 'help' young people into work by removing employment rights from them. It has also made itself felt through the considerable strength of the counter-globalization movement, something underlined by the foundation of ATTAC (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide aux Citoyens) in 1998. Further evidence of revolt can be seen in the nationwide explosion of rioting in 2005 that was the latest and most spectacular but far from the only outpouring of anger that France has seen in its *banlieues* or outer-city estates. If, since the co-optation of the leading anti-racist organization, SOS-Racisme, by the Socialist government in the 1980s,

French people with immigrant roots have struggled to have any meaningful political voice, there has been ample evidence of their collective refusal of racialized marginalization and discriminatory policing.

Has this revival of wide-scale opposition found an adequate response in French cinematic production? The response, although not unqualified, is yes. One of the most striking features of both fictional and documentary production in the last decade has been the rebirth of a committed cinema. In documentary, this rebirth is most eloquently expressed in the surge of anti- and counter-globalization films. In the fiction films that are the concern of this volume, it most obviously makes itself felt in a return to the 'real' as expressed in a focus on workplace oppressions, unemployment, social 'exclusion', racism, migration, ethnicity and social class. Despite opinions to the contrary, film-makers' leading role in 1997 in defence of the *sans-papiers*, the people deemed by the then French government not to have the required documentation to be allowed to stay in the country, was not some mere flash in the pan nor a cynical search for publicity.<sup>2</sup> It was part of a broader return to socio-political engagement that inevitably generated comparisons with the previous, post-1968 flowering of political cinema. But just as, operating in the shadow of a massive defeat, a contemporary leftist politics must take new forms, so too must a radical cinema. Post-1968 film was able to feed off and prolong a vibrant radical politics. Contemporary political film is condemned to work in a very different context. It must seek to exist productively somewhere in the difficult space between the politics that was and an emergent new politics. While some have seen in it above all the shadow of a defeat and condemned it for its alleged political inadequacy, it is more interesting and more productive to assess it in terms of the effectiveness of the resistances that it mounts and its capacity to prepare the grounds for an emergent new politics. This is the task that this book sets itself.

The book's structure is as follows. Chapter 1 provides the necessary contextualization for what is to come by underlining the radical newness of both the larger socio-political terrain and the narrower cinematic one. Chapter 2 discusses important responses to the films in journals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Positif* as a way of establishing some of the key debates in relation to which this book will situate itself. Chapter 3 develops the core observation that, given the radically new situation, a committed cinema can no longer take the same forms or be judged by the same criteria as its cinematic predecessors. By exploring contrasts between two legendary pieces of post-1968 cinema, Jean-Luc Godard's and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Tout va bien* (1972) and Marin Karmitz's *Coup pour coup* (1971) on the one hand and Hervé Le Roux's seminal documentary *Reprise* (1995) and the Dardenne brothers' little known early works on the other, it traces the consequences of the disappearance of the old, universalizing leftist dramaturgy of struggle while developing a genealogy for the raw, mute and

corporeal social suffering and struggle that is such a characteristic feature of contemporary production.

Building on this contrastive and genealogical work, the next three chapters explore the two main strands of contemporary engaged cinema. Mapping the considerable body of films that seek to restore currency to a polemical, class-driven framing of the social, chapters 4 and 5 show how, even if an epic dramaturgy of class has been shattered, its dispersed pieces can be put to good use, re-establishing grounds for critique and configuring the socio-political terrain in the kind of antagonistic terms without which an oppositional politics makes no sense. Complementing this discussion, chapter 6 moves on to examine what happens when all access to a totalizing dramaturgy of the social has been lost. It examines a body of films that seek productive ways to occupy the wasteland between the politics that was and the politics yet to come by figuring the fragmentary stories of small groups and marginalized individuals evicted from broader solidarities, stripped of a public voice and subject to the brutal, uncushioned impact of the economy. Merely to occupy this space would of course be politically sterile. The chapter shows that the films' political use-value lies in their capacity to resist the disintegration that they record by restoring a sense of value and ethical agency where none seem to exist while reconnecting the violences of the margins to the systemic. In many ways this chapter is the heart of the book. It develops the notion of an *aesthetic of the fragment*, a term meant to suggest not simply social fragmentation (although that is undeniably important), but rather a sea change in the cinematic face of socio-political struggle represented by the passage from a universalizing, discursively mediated vision to one marked by a newly raw and near mute corporeality. Chapter 7 then shows how the films discussed have a general recourse to melodramatic strategies in order to restore eloquence and significance to struggles seemingly condemned to silence and meaninglessness. Melodrama has often been despised by proponents of a radical political cinema both because of the emotional involvement it generates and because of its tendency to focus on individuals, the interpersonal and the familial instead of the systemic. The chapter argues, however, that it is a key part of the films' effectiveness and notes how, despite the ideological risks involved, a focus on individuals and families allows both for an acerbic critique of individualism and for a dramatization of the monstrosity of the current order. Chapter 8 engages with the films' spatial economy. Consistent with a more general analysis that seeks to understand the films' newness, the chapter underlines the radical novelty of their spatiality, a novelty that cannot be accounted for by any suggestion that they simply reorientate our attention within a familiar national frame. The chapter suggests instead that, given the collapse of a totalizing leftist narrative and the weakening of the nation's symbolic protection, the films are threatened by an inability to locate causes or connect them to consequences. Unless they can find novel

ways to combat this radical spatial dislocation, they are condemned to political impotence. If the macro-spatial level is thus a key dimension of their symbolic geography, the chapter also analyses the work they do at the micro-spatial level both to highlight profoundly unequal mobilities and to show how the capacity of the dominated to refuse immobilization becomes a sign of recalcitrant political agency. Taken together, the different chapters aim to provide an analysis of contemporary committed fiction cinema in France, explaining its context, originality and potential limitations as well as the different strategies it mobilizes to restore a political voice, meaning and visibility to social suffering and struggle.

The book seeks to marry close analysis, contextualization and relevant theoretical understandings. It draws, where relevant, on critical writings that suggest productive ways to approach the films. It draws too on recent sociological writings by leading figures such as Robert Castel, Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux. However, its major debt is perhaps to political philosophers and analysts such as Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, Etienne Balibar, Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, figures who, despite their clear differences, share a refusal to accept the foreclosing of the space of the political and a determination to challenge the apparently consensual triumph of the neo-liberal order. The work of Rancière plays a particularly central role. It reminds us that a true politics is one rooted in radical disagreement over the distribution of social roles and places and the right to public speech. A radical cinema cannot simply seek to represent contemporary reality, to be 'realist', no matter how dark the tones that it employs. It must bring disagreement over the order of things to the surface, defining the dominated not by their subordination but by their capacity to challenge it while pushing its audience back towards a politics. The centrality Rancière accords to the regulation of access to the *logos*, the language of legitimate public deliberation, is particularly productive at a time when those at the bottom are routinely objectified and have lost access to any overarching oppositional language with which to express their situation. In the face of this silencing, the capacity of films to make the voice of the voiceless heard and to constitute them as political agents and not as social objects for our voyeuristic or 'humanitarian' contemplation would seem a central concern of critical analysis. Finally, Rancière's insistence on the necessary *theatricality* of an authentic politics – its capacity to offer an alternative dramaturgy characterized by a reordering of social roles, places and scripts – is useful both for thinking through the consequences of the loss of an established leftist dramaturgy of the social (chapter 3) and for developing an appreciation of films' capacity to improvise an oppositional drama even where no stage seems to exist (chapter 7).

The book is particularly concerned with filmic responses to the contemporary triumph of aggressive, neo-liberal capitalism. It does not seek

to provide a rounded picture of French cinema's interventions in the full range of current struggles. Thus, although the emergence, since the later 1980s, of a *Beur* cinema giving expression to the voices of those of North African origin (Tarr 2005) is something of undoubted interest, there is no attempt to give it a rounded treatment here. Similarly, while the sharp increase in recent years in the number of women directors and their production, at times, of strikingly original work (Tarr and Rollet 2002) underlines the necessity of attention to the gendered dynamics of cinema, this book does not make gender a core concern. Rather, it engages with questions of gender and ethnicity as and where they intersect with its own chosen subject matter. This procedure is not, of course, without potential pitfalls. Hopefully the book retains sufficient awareness of them.

In the choice of films to discuss, a balance is sought between works familiar to viewers and students of French film outside France and those that may be relatively unknown. To simply concentrate on films that have achieved international distribution would be to produce a very partial picture, yet it is important at the same time to connect to that which people know. Thus, a good deal of space is devoted to discussion of Mathieu Kassovitz, Laurent Cantet, the Dardenne brothers, Bruno Dumont, Robert Guédiguian, Bertrand Tavernier and Erick Zonca, all film-makers with a solid international profile. But space is also given to less prominent figures such as Jean-François Richet, Laetitia Masson, Dominique Cabrera, Bénédicte Liénard, Rabah Ameur-Zäimeche, Jean-Marc Moutout, Mehdi Charef, Claire Devers and Manuel Poirier, directors whose work has played a central role in the re-emergence of commitment. Because the book does not seek to be a survey of contemporary directors but is structured by a developing argument about the nature of contemporary committed film, directors and films are not treated as discrete units but are referred to as and when relevant for the needs of the evolving discussion. Although the book does refer to documentary, notably in chapters 3 and 8, its core concern is fiction cinema. The relative neglect of documentary is not meant to imply a dismissal of its impact but reflects a desire to do justice to the importance and the originality of the fiction. Positions developed are hopefully based on rigorous argument and analysis, but there is no pretence at a 'neutral' approach to the films. The aim throughout is to explore and develop their radical potential while maintaining the degree of critical distance necessary to draw out what limitations they may have and to establish robust criteria by which to evaluate their general effectiveness as political cinema.

## Notes

1. The dates given for films when they are first mentioned reflect the year when they acquired an official existence as projects and not the date of their release.

2. While Judith Cahen (1997) suggested that the film-makers' general failure to engage with contemporary issues in their works undermined their commitment to the *sans-papiers*, a sceptical Judith Lazar (2000) attributed their mobilization to self-promotion.