

Post-1995 French cinema: return of the social, return of the political?

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The most striking tendency in French cinema from the mid-1990s onwards was the return of the social, a return which signalled the re-emergence of an overtly committed cinema. Despite its ambiguities, the mobilisation of the cinéastes in defence of the sans-papiers in 1997 was clearly part of this repoliticisation. From the leading role the filmmakers temporarily assumed through their spontaneous launch of a petition and through their place just behind the sans-papiers themselves on the Paris demonstration, one might be tempted to conclude that the world of cinema was playing a leading role in the rebirth of large-scale political protest.¹ However, a more measured evaluation of a broader context would suggest the conclusion that it was the mass mobilisations of 1995 which signalled a change of the socio-political climate in France, and which created the conditions for the rebirth of a committed cinema and for subsequent mobilisations such as that around the sans-papiers.

The 1995 revolt itself contained clear echoes of 1968, not least by its size. Like the celebrated événements, it was driven essentially by the base, escaping attempts to control it from above; furthermore, it did not lack a utopian dimension (as evidenced by its slogan 'Tous ensemble!' challenging the individualism of an apparently triumphant neo-liberalism). It is thus tempting to make links between post-1995 cinema and radical post-1968 film. However, the 1995 mobilisation, essentially a defensive reflex, was not 1968, and the type of cinema that it helped to generate would be very different, requiring a different approach and framework of interpretation in order to pin down its specificity. It is this specificity that this article will attempt to trace, asking more particularly if, from a political point of view, this

cinema has anything to say. It turns first to two ‘emblematic’ documentaries to indicate some key features of contemporary cinematic commitment. It then considers a number of key positions in what is a burgeoning critical literature, commenting on certain feature-films located on the fault-lines of continuing debates.

Picking through the rubble: emblematic documentaries

A key part of the return of the social in French film has been the renaissance of the documentary, a phenomenon which is clearly symptomatic of a desire to engage with the real and which finds a clear echo in the documentary drive of the strand of fiction cinema that concerns us here. Two documentaries neatly frame the contemporary period: these are Hervé le Roux’s haunting Reprise (on the editing table in late 1995 and released in 1997) and Agnès Varda’s marvellous Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse (2000).² Together they help us to map out why older forms of political cinema are no longer possible and what cinematic commitment might mean now.

Reprise returned to a legendary piece of 1968 cinéma direct, the Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder. Made by students from the IDHEC, the earlier film had captured (as if by miracle) the precise moment when the workers at the Wonder battery factory at St. Ouen had gone back to work as the events of May wound down. As if by miracle too, it had also caught the scripted debate between the key players of the period—the CGT, the CFDT, the PCF and the gauchistes—as they rehearsed what seemed the clear choice facing the Left at the time: reform, or a radicalisation of the struggle. Finally—and this is and was a key part of its appeal—it had recorded the (beautiful) face and voice of one anonymous woman worker revolted by a return to work with so little gained and with so little changed. The film began as an attempt to trace this woman, to offer a reprise (a second showing but also, perhaps, a new beginning) to the voice of refusal. Le Roux and his team found and interviewed all

the key players present on that day, asking each to review the original film and give their account of the events surrounding it.³ As they did so, and to the director's own surprise, a broader picture emerged, that of the modern history of the banlieue ouvrière, of the working class and of the political and union actors who had framed its struggles, bringing them to national visibility and giving them meaning and direction by articulating them with a broader political project. While the factory had been a place of exploitation, often feudal relationships and desperately grimy conditions, the work, the sociabilities and struggles associated with it, and the broader frame of the banlieue had provided clear class-based identities and oppositions and a spatial context within which they could be played out. The drama had a cast and a stage with all the major actors within striking distance.

But Le Roux's film does not stop at 1968. It asks its witnesses to trace their trajectory since. What emerges is a story of a collective loss that is simultaneously the dissolution of what made the story of the banlieue ouvrière possible in the first place. Each actor has gone her or his own way. The factory itself has been closed, while the company, initially bought by Bernard Tapie, has subsequently been sold to a multinational concern. Even the temporalities that underlay events and behaviours has been destroyed. The gradualism of reform, revolution as present imperative and long-term horizon, and the apparent permanence of working-class statuses and identities have all been consigned to the past. What remains are fragmented and dispersed memories inscribed in bodily gestures and intermingled with and refracted by personal stories. The original 1968 film, memorably described as the scène primitive of committed cinema by Daney and Le Péron,⁴ is no longer possible. Even if they had not anticipated their astonishing encapsulation of the événements, those who had filmed it, knew where and whom they had to film in order to capture the struggle and to intervene in it. In contrast, Le Roux's film has painstakingly traced

the dissolution of the narrative elements (the spaces, actors, projects, oppositions and temporalities) of one avatar of engaged cinema centred on the workplace and the organised working class.

Yet the key figure—the woman herself—remained unfound. So, while those who had given revolt a frame, kept firmly in the past by their present selves, had become phantoms on a film that recorded that which was dead, the revolt itself, unscripted and thus undated, was astonishingly alive. It had lost its space (the banlieue ouvrière), whilst its enemy, still identifiable and locatable in the Tapie era, was faceless and out of reach. Set free from its previous narrative frame and the voices that had accompanied it, it was now both raw and immediate, the voice of pure pre-political refusal, kept alive not least by the contemporary return of all that the working class had seemed to be leaving behind. The woman's cry, 'c'est dégueulasse', repeatedly heard on Le Roux's Reprise, still lingers in our ears, reminding us that the unacceptable is still with us, now without a progressive political project to domesticate it (by naming it, by connecting it to other contemporary struggles and by promising it justice in the future). This combination of raw, unscripted revolt and pressing, undomesticated injustice that we find in Le Roux's film is a strong pointer to how committed films of the current period will be radically different from what has gone before.

Initially planned in 1986, when Le Roux was disturbed to see a new generation of students with no 'mémoire militante', the film was on the editing table in December 1995, as revolt renewed itself, giving the lie, as the director notes, to those ex-militants who felt that resistance belonged to the past. In the aftermath of 1995 it is no doubt tempting to read it through the frame of revolutionary romanticism, seeing the woman as an incarnation of the people, a character who cannot be found, precisely because the people themselves are waiting to be brought

back into existence by the event (in Badiou's sense of the word) that will see them reborn as political actors while simultaneously providing the overarching political oppositions that will give their struggle meaning and direction.⁵ Just such a reading is provided by François Ramone in Cahiers du Cinéma's 1968 retrospective. Ramone insists on the ontological difference of the voice of refusal:

Tout autour ... du connu, du représenté (le cégétiste, l'étudiant maoïste, le cadre paternaliste, l'ouvrière docile), tout cela occupé à effacer 68 ... et au milieu, campé dans la rupture, un point d'absolue présence, c'est-à-dire d'absence absolue à soi-même. Non pas le peuple qui, préexistant, en vient à dire non, mais le peuple venu à l'existence dans l'actualité pure de ce non. Lorsque trente ans après, Le Roux montre le film aux ouvriers d'alors, aucun d'entre eux ne parvient à identifier l'insurgée. Et pour cause: elle est l'anonyme, l'innommable, corps évoluant à ce moment-là dans un espace en absolue discontinuité avec l'alentour.⁶

But such a reading, while holding the space of the unitary people and the global transformatory project 'open', in the way described by Deleuze, as a kind of structuring absence, will not help us deal with films which trace and bring to visibility the multiple, fragmentary revolts of the present.⁷ Ramone ultimately helps the voice of popular revolt break free from the dying traces of accompanying discourses only to tie it down in his own way by banishing it from the present.⁸ But if there is one thing that can constantly be found in post-1995 French cinema it is revolt, disparate and localised (even individualised), but revolt nonetheless. Saïd's graffiti on the CRS van at the start of La Haine (Kassovitz, 1995), the defiant middle finger raised behind the boss's back early in Ressources humaines (Cantet, 2000), and Rosetta's homicidal refusal of exclusion in the eponymous film (Dardenne brothers, 1999), all these diverse gestures of radical, pre-political refusal suggest a cinema that is far from

quiescent. But as we shall see later, Ramone is intolerant of any representation of popular resistances in the present, both because they are inevitably compromised politically (being partial and local and lacking a utopian project), and because they give an immobilising solidity to a people who should be absent.

Varda's Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse, a road movie driven by an initial refusal but with no destination, can perhaps show us a way to think through the challenge of dealing with diverse, minor resistances. Despite its lightness of touch and resolute good humour, Varda's film also has revolt at its core, in its case refusal of the exclusions and waste associated with the systems of production and consumption of a triumphant capitalist order. It begins by looking at how a massified system of producing and distributing potatoes mass-produces waste, even as people struggle to feed themselves and their family. Potatoes that are too big, too small or simply the wrong shape are discarded with no attempt to redistribute them to those outside the circles of consumption. The discarding of that which does not fit becomes a metaphor for the exclusions of the socio-economic system, its indifference to non-productive 'misfits' and its incapacity to produce solidarities. Varda's filmmaking, opposing its inclusive, humanist ethics to the system's materialist indifference, gives each individual equal respect and attention, allowing each to express their own personal story, as they comment (in their own way) on systemic absurdity while revealing personal stories and attitudes that have no immediate value for her study of glanage. As she tracks lorries laden with consumer goods round France's major highways, she also circulates on the nation's minor roads, taking the time and space to gather up different forms of localised resistance, non-conformism and struggle.

These include artists who work with recycled goods, 'crusties' who overturn supermarket bins, marginals who recycle and redistribute, comfortable individuals

who refuse to accept waste, an ex-teacher who lives off market scraps and who teaches immigrants French for free every evening.

Varda's outsiders are a motley crew. While their practices produce relationships to people and things that are different from those generated by the system, their tremendous socio-economic diversity means that they have no shared identity and project. Capitalism's ever-expanding reach ties them together negatively, but if there is a thread that ties them together and raises them to the universal positively, it is the language of humanitarianism and of rights. Beginning by mentioning the restos du cœur and ending by evoking voluntary activity with immigrants, the film has a clear affinity with humanitarian commitment, the sense that, in some way, we are all bound together. It also touches on the law at several junctures, showing how ancient statutes protect the rights of gleaners, how property left in the street belongs to no-one and can be reused, but also how the law protects the rights of private property that are at the heart of the capitalist system. But humanitarian action only compensates for the system's harshness while the law, although according rights to each individual, is obviously in the service of the status quo. Although the film lacks a clear and overarching political discourse, what it shows seems to cry out for one, as Varda herself acknowledges when she says, 'le débat qui englobe l'économie, l'agriculture, la distribution émane de ses images simples, mais c'est à d'autres de le tenir.'⁹ Such a discourse will clearly be elusive. If the goods circulating on the autoroutes figure the ubiquity and dominance of capital, the local nature of each form of glanage shows the fragmentation and isolation of alternative practices. The film is poised between tracking the system and the exploration of local struggles, between keeping marginal spaces open and drawing on the margins to produce a more general systemic challenge and between the need for radical change and the defensive mobilisation of the law or humanitarianism.

Defying totalisation due to the irreducible diversity of the practices shown, it nonetheless implicitly suggests, through its focus on creative bricolage and through its own loose but not chaotic connectedness, that some assemblage of minor alternatives could produce a more substantial oppositional project.

Reprise and Les Glaneurs can together tell us much about the terrain and vectors of contemporary oppositional cinema. While one looks back to the dissolution of the totalising framework of a class-based struggle and the demobilisation of the discourses that helped sustain it, the other looks forward towards an as yet unformulated politics that could tie together diverse, local resistances. What unites them is a refusal of the unacceptable that is no longer mediated by radical universalising discourses. Looking back to what was, looking around in what is for what could be, they oppose the utopia of capitalist globalisation without proposing a counter utopia. Oppositionality is not all that they share. Because neither has an overarching project, they both refrain from a fixed and totalising interpretation of the pieces that they assemble as they attempt to comprehend the past or map the present.¹⁰ Rather than predigesting the real that they encounter, they invite us to decipher it, pushing us towards two compelling questions. How can we make sense of what we see? How can we bear it?

Critical understandings

Although large-scale studies of the return of the social in French cinema are still lacking, there have been a number of important articles that have begun to map out the terrain. These articles have tended to converge on certain key issues, issues that I will sketch out and connect to the discussion of Reprise and Les Glaneurs.

A number of critics discuss what one might call a new realism. Although they use different terminology, their understandings of what this new realism might

involve do converge around some notion of a fragmented, disruptive and undigested real. Toubiana, in Cahiers du cinéma, talks about a cinema that shows ‘bouts de réalité’, and which explores flux and encounter on the social terrain without mobilising a mediating political discourse.¹¹ The filmmaker Claire Simon suggests something similar when she says, ‘Du film militant on est passé à “Qu’est-ce qui se passe ici, en bas de chez moi”?’¹² Jeancolas, in an important piece in Positif, talks of a ‘réel de proximité’, one involving intense exploration of a limited social terrain but without access to a stabilising, bigger social picture. Politics is no longer the already known that one puts into the film with pedagogic intent. Politics, raw and immediate, is what emerges from the irruption into the film of the real and thus of the other, of a conflictual present and of social structures.¹³ In a later piece, Jeancolas again suggests that the specificity of contemporary political cinema lies in an encounter with the real, and with the ‘rapport de forces au sein d’une société donnée’, that may harden into an ideological stance.¹⁴ Prédal’s reference to ‘films crûs, souvent tournés au premier degré’ suggests a similar vision of an openness to the real that is unmediated and violent. Beugnet notes that a shared feature of the films she studies is their refusal to present a real that is coherent and immediately comprehensible. The rawness of this real is reflected stylistically by less polished cinematography and a turn towards non-star and amateur actors within the context of relatively low-budget filmmaking.¹⁵

Making comments that are undeveloped but deeply suggestive, and drawing on Lacan, Serge le Péron distinguishes between reality and the real. Reality is that which we already know, a stabilised, normative and totalising social order (akin to the Lacanian symbolic). The real is that which is normally unseen but which hurts (the hidden power dynamics of relationships). Cinema’s role is to bring this uncomfortable and disruptive real to visibility.¹⁶ Although the other critics

considered did not turn to Lacan, there are convergences between their conceptualisation of a raw, disturbing encounter with the violences of the real and that suggested by Le Péron. There are also clear convergences with our discussion of Reprise. As that film showed, when the actors and discourses that tie together and frame individual revolts or injustices fall silent, we are left with the unmediated, disturbing real of the here and now.

The new realism (an inevitably reductive term) is associated by analysts with definite modes, themes and locations. Frank Garbaz has suggested what has become an influential tripartite typology of films. His first category is that of the films-constat. This group, following in the footsteps of the revived documentary film of the 1990s, observes the harshness of our time by focusing on issues such as unemployment and insecurity, or the search for a place in society (e.g. Laetitia Masson's En avoir ou pas (1995) and Pascale Ferran's L'Age des possibles (1996)). A second group is made up of the films signaux d'alarme which show the potentially explosive consequences of the dissolution of the 'social link' (e.g. Pierre Jolivet's Fred (1997) and Dumont's La Vie de Jésus (1997)). A third category is composed of the films de la solidarité, films which still bear witness to social problems but which also explore local spaces and small groups to rediscover 'les règles élémentaires de la solidarité'. Guédiguian and Poirier are the two key figures quoted here. While these categories undoubtedly have their problems, not least because some films such as La Vie rêvée des anges (Zonca, 1997) can easily be made to fit all three, they do chime well with the notion of a raw, pre-political realism by suggesting a cinema that is drawn urgently to the real and which scouts around amongst the wreckage not for a ready-made politics, but for the elementary solidarities and instinctive refusals that are the preconditions for a renewal of the political.

Martine Beugnet suggests that a concern with social and cultural exclusion is a central feature on the cinematic trend under consideration. This concern with exclusion means that groups and issues that had been consigned to invisibility are given screen space taking the cinema into the banlieue, into neglected popular areas and into a distinctly non-touristic province (be it the industrial north, Poirier's Brittany, Guédiguian's Marseille, or a distinctly unpastoral rural), while foregrounding (un)employment, social precariousness and poverty. At the same time, close attention to social dynamics mean that the marginalised are not exoticised but are connected to social dysfunctions in a way that can push us towards a political rather than a voyeuristic relation to the image.

But Beugnet's mobilisation of the homogenising term of exclusion tends to underestimate the degree to which the old work- and class-centred unitary social question (for which Reprise was a swansong) has shattered into diverse social questions, partly due to the contemporary victory of capitalism and the splitting-off of the assorted sans, marginaux, précaires and exclus from the remainder of a more traditionally conceived working class, and partly due to the post-1968 addition of race, gender and sexuality to the list of oppressions and exclusions. If post-1995 French cinema has been characterised by the return of the social, the diversity of its scenarios suggests that le social itself is split across multiple fault lines. This fragmentation of the social question should clearly make us scrutinise our understanding of commitment. While connection of some struggles to a broader critique of the economic system would seem essential to their politicisation, other struggles (over minority recognition) clearly cannot be centred on or subordinated to the economic.

This would seem to be the message of a film like Drôle de Félix (Martineau and Ducastel, 2000). Félix is the HIV-positive, gay, non-white and unemployed hero

of this highly original comedy. Refusing to be defined by any of his minority or victim statuses, he sets off across France, initially hoping to find his father, but soon abandoning this move towards the past to establish a succession of alternative and transient 'family' relationships with people met en route. Each arrangement is satisfying, but each refuses the fixed, institutionalised hierarchies of patriarchal heteronormativity. Significantly, as the film begins, Félix, shows no interest in joining ex-workmates on a picket line and indeed, having been a steward on a ferry, he ends the film as a holiday passenger on another vessel, a trajectory that seems a deliberate thumbing of the nose at any politics that affirms the primacy of class and the economy. His quarrel is with the FN and the significant threat he faces is from racist murderers. Those who apply and defend rigid, exclusionary identities are clearly the chief obstacle to the fluid attachments and identifications that his episodic story embodies. Ducastel and Martineau are clearly committed filmmakers, but their almost casual nod towards the economic seems to suggest the irreducible diversity of political struggles rather than a serious attempt to connect them.

If the range of socially engaged films that France has produced since 1995 is testimony to the force of the return of the social question, the diversity of themes, stories and issues is clear evidence of its fragmentation. This (irreducible?) diversity is perhaps encapsulated in the contrast between a film like Drôle de Félix and the highly acclaimed Ressources humaines. The latter moves its main character from a situation of apparent post-class fluidity and consensus to a position of class struggle and political polarisation as embodied in the CGT-led closing strike. While one film looks forwards and fights rigidity and fixity, the other moves back into fixed, defensive positions and identities. Two very different kinds of political struggle produce two very different sets of narrative dynamics. More generally, one might suggest, at the risk of adding one more typology to a growing list, that socially

engaged French cinema divides between narratives of exclusion and explosion (of which La Haine might be the ideal type), narratives of return (which reaffirm the centrality of class and labour and reconnect with past struggles—Poirier's Marion or Ressources humaines—), and narratives of mobility wherein characters break out of fixed identities (Drôle de Félix, but also Dridi's Bye-Bye (1995)). It is as if core elements of a class-centred narrative (insurrectional violence, political mobilisation and social reinvention) had come asunder. The social question may indeed have returned to the cinema but it is not the same question and it cannot be put in the same way.

Critics of the new realism

Criticism of the cinema under study cluster predictably around two tightly linked failings: its alleged political conservatism and lack of creativity. Two of the most trenchant analyses appeared in the special number of Cahiers du cinéma that marked the thirtieth anniversary of 1968. Ranging back over French film history to the 1930s, François Ramone contrasts a regressive representational cinema that has imprisoned the people in what is, making them solid (Gabin-like) and thus pinning them down, with a truly radical cinema that, refusing the reproduction of the real, opens a space for reinvention and for the possible. Current French social cinema belongs to the former category. Apparently rectifying the absence of the excluded from the screen, it locks them into subordinate identities and thus confirms the permanence of injustice. Ramone cites Vive la République (Rochant, 1997) as a case in point. Starting out from the promising premise of a group of the unemployed who have decided to reinvent the political (positing themselves as a new universal), the film lapses into a logic of communitarian quotas by including an Arab, a homosexual, an ex-communist woman, thus locking each into an identity. The defensive anti-

fascism that prevails in society more generally becomes a substitute for an authentic radical project. Guédiguian's tremendously successful Marius et Jeannette follows the same regressive pattern by locating political struggle in the past and contenting itself with restoring community in a present which is figured by an everyday real (réel-vécu) that excludes the political. The fundamental conservatism of current French cinema is underlined by the absence of a Michel Poiccard (A bout de souffle, Godard, 1959), a character who, precisely because he has no ontological thickness, opens up a space for the kind of reinvention of self that is a condition of political transformation.¹⁷ Preferring the concrete to the possible and the real to the invention of new forms, French film leaves no fictional space for the explosion of the 1968-style transformative event into the already known.

Writing in the same number of Cahiers, Emmanuel Burdeau is equally harsh. His starting point is the difficulty French cinema has in articulating fiction and the political with the latter always being the victim of the former. Politics is alternatively absorbed by the fiction, a simple background to it, or that which happened before the fiction. Thus En avoir ou pas and Marius et Jeannette both gratify their audiences by allowing clichéd romance to swallow initially political situations (unemployment, work-related conflict). La Haine is credited with creating a new genre and thus with making the banlieue safely watchable. Banlieue films now engage each other in intra-generic dialogue instead of opening out onto awkward and disruptive political questions. If the film de banlieue and the film social are inheritors of the much despised fiction de gauche of the seventies, there are, however, current films such as Chabrol's La Cérémonie (1995) and Poirier's Marion (1997) that have a genuinely political impact. In both cases this is because social conflict drives the narrative rather than being absorbed by the fiction. Instead of comforting us with le social, that is with a sense of connectedness, of forming a social whole, these films return us to

the political by revolving around movement, disruption and disconnection. More generally, Burdeau finds comfort in the return of the psychological film because of the internal mobility and complexity (as opposed to conservative self-identity) that it gives to characters. In so doing, he clearly comes close to Ramone's expressed preference for a cinema of unstable possibilities over one locked into the real.

Political philosopher Jacques Rancière expressed positions somewhat similar to Ramone's in a piece in Cahiers, entitled 'Il est arrivé quelque chose au réel'.¹⁸

Rancière, like Ramone, speaks of the difficulty French film has in articulating the political and the fictional. Because French film deals overwhelmingly with petites fictions, with stories that lack the fusion of individual and collective destinies characteristic of the epic, it is always obliged to reconnect the fictional drama of individuals to the political. As it does this, it seeks to build verisimilitude in two ways, each equally problematic. Its political dimension feeds off what we feel we already know and generates an inert real of recognition. It is then left to its fictional element to bring the narrative to life by providing an unpredictability which generate a second real, le réel de la surprise. Political stereotype thus combines with fictional cliché in a sterile formula that we can no longer swallow. Dominique Cabrera's fictionalised account of the December 1995 strike wave, Nadia et les hippopotames (2000), is Rancière's core example of this. The film, in his account, contrasts the fixed familiarity (réel de la reconnaissance) of the strikers who defend, dinosaur-like, their acquis, with the pseudo-spontaneous life (réel de la surprise) of the fictional Nadia (single-mother-Courage and RM-iste). Such clichéd films are no longer watchable, not least because we have now become accustomed to a very different kind of film that Rancière terms the fiction politique du réel. Because it is broadly documentary in its mode, this latter kind of filmmaking—Godard's Histoire(s) du

cinéma, Lanzmann's Shoah, Marker's Level Five—has no need to produce effets du réel, but can problematise and challenge what we think that we already know.

A more wide-ranging broadside was launched against the contemporary rebelliousness of French cinema by Philippe Muray in Le Débat.¹⁹ Muray argues that French film is now dominated by pseudo-oppositional films that in centring the marginal or violating taboos are simply repeating the liberal political-correctness and institutionalised rebelliousness that has become the norm of French society. Muray comments, 'ils ne mettent en scène que des révoltes déjà conseillées. il est certes impossible de se rebeller dans et contre l'univers tel qu'il se montre, puisque celui-ci contient justement, et au premier rang de ses impératifs, l'obligation de se rebeller; mais eux (les cinéastes) font semblant de ne même pas savoir que c'est impossible; et c'est là que commence la honte'.²⁰ He draws on La Vie rêvée des anges (1998) to illustrate this point, suggesting that, while an artist like Flaubert was able to distance himself from his heroine's revolt as well as from what she revolted against, Zonca fails to establish a critical margin between himself and the programmed revolt of Marie, one of his two heroines. Muray, I believe, gets this film wrong, failing to see that Marie self-destructs because, like the heroine of the Dardenne brothers' astonishing Rosetta, she has internalised the system's core norm of competitive individualism, not its ideological mask of pseudo-rebellion. She embraces convention only to be rejected by it, becoming, through her failure and isolation, the inevitable negative accompaniment of competitive individualism. The real rebel in Zonca's film is Isa. Appearing to have learnt docility, she splits herself between reality and her dreams and thus absents herself from her humiliated social being. Like Rosetta, the film turns the conservative discourse of exclusion on its head. Rather than suggesting that the excluded are on the outside because they are insufficiently like insiders, it shows that, faced with structural exclusion, the outsiders

can only survive by rejecting the system's 'reality principle'. *La Vie rêvée* is oppositional without being propositional, but the struggles of its characters highlight both the system's inherent violence and the existence of behaviours that escape its logic.

Rancière, Ramone and Burdeau clearly come from the radical Left. Muray's stance seems driven by an all-embracing and thus ultimately apolitical artistic iconoclasm. Interestingly, however, all four coincide in seeing the current return of social realism in French cinema as politically and artistically conservative. Their judgements seem fundamentally irreconcilable with the more positive positions indicated above. Martine Beugnet perhaps provides a bridge by suggesting that the new tendency finds itself on a knife-edge between the deeply clichéd and the genuinely challenging. She notes the temptation of miserabilism, sentimentalism and manicheism, and comments, 'la nouvelle tendance ... n'a véritablement valeur d'alternative que lorsqu'elle est fondée sur une approche thématique, narrative et esthétique qui rend compte d'une réelle mise en question des systèmes de représentation établis, et ne se contente pas de réactiver les conventions du cinéma dit réaliste ou du mélodrame social.'²¹

Ambiguous politics

Beugnet's perceptive comments still seem to suggest that one can distinguish between the genuinely progressive film and the one that is wedded to cliché. I am not so sure. I would suggest that current French cinematic production is fundamentally ambiguous due to the lack of an overarching oppositional project that would provide us a clear gauge against which to judge the progressive credentials of films. This is surely the lesson of *Reprise*. Not only did it show that the old certainties about where revolt was to be found, who its actors were and what choices faced us have all been lost. It

also showed the detachment of revolt from those (political and union actors) who articulated it. Revolt had become both raw and dispersed. If the emblematic mode of appearance of the political had been collective and mediated (with each local resistance always already being interpreted by a universalising discourse), cinematic resistance now is often immediate, localised and individualised and as such intrinsically ambiguous. The revolts charted hover between the post-political, the pre-political, the sub-political and the apolitical. It is almost certainly a grave mistake to judge them using the categories we might have applied to post-1968 cinema when it seemed relatively easy to distinguish between a genuinely radical cinema (one that simultaneously questioned film form, the cinematic institution and the politico-economic status quo), a militant cinema instrumentalised by oppositional groups and a reformist but essentially conventional cinema (as typified by the fiction de gauche). Rancière's 'il est arrivé quelque chose au réel' needs to be thought alongside another statement: 'il est arrivé quelque chose à la politique.'

At this point I will turn to Nadia et les Hippopotames, the film that Rancière used to centre his argument that a certain fusion of the fictional and the real were no longer possible, and suggest how one might find traces of renewal in it, alongside the deeply hackneyed. Through its bringing together of trade unionists and the Mother Courage figure, the film, as Rancière noted, fuses two distinct modes of appearance of the real, the réel de la reconnaissance and the réel de la surprise. While broadly accepting this analysis, I would like to suggest that these 'réels' might be configured differently. While the activists embody a 'real' which is mediated by a politics which is collective, discursive and institutionalised, Nadia is a character whose relationship to the real is urgent, physical and unmediated due to her lack of a politics, her isolation and the precariousness of her existence. Initially and unsurprisingly, she and the strikers cannot understand each other. They speak two different languages

and belong to two different stories, two different 'realisms'.²² It is only when the van that carries them breaks down that they come together fully. In the face of bare physical necessity, notably the need to keep warm, a double transformation occurs. The disembodied 'Tous ensemble!' of the strikers takes flesh and becomes rooted in the group's immediate experience while Nadia's raw individual needs are raised to the political and to the collective. In its own way and albeit clumsily, the film is carrying out the kind of translation from sectional needs to a more broadly shared collective demand that is essential for the positing of a counter-hegemonic politics. Rather than starting from a politics or a party, it knows that it must first bring together its forces and seek a common ground among divergent individual claims. It is building from the ground up. Its decor of nighttime and cold punctuated by the warmth of groups and camp-fires is a reduction of politics to an elemental minimum that can serve as a common ground, as well as a recognition that, with the current return of mass vulnerability, the desolation that many face is simultaneously political and physical.

Revolving around contrived encounters and events, Nadia is an out-and-out melodrama and thus of a scorned, 'unrealistic' and apparently hackneyed genre. But perhaps melodrama has also shifted in meaning. If we accept the broad argument that the relative withdrawal of oppositional politics and the fragmentation of old class-based solidarities has meant that isolated individuals must confront unmediated social and economic forces, it could be that melodrama can have a genuine purchase on the social. It may indeed be a privileged way to engage with the uncushioned collision of the violences of the system with individualised resistances and refusals. It is hardly a coincidence that a whole cluster of recent films—including Dever's La Voleuse de Saint-Lubin (1998), Guédiguian's La Ville est tranquille (2001), Tavernier's Ça commence aujourd'hui (1999), Masson's En avoir ou pas—associate highly melodramatic plot lines with the signalled withdrawal of class solidarities and

political mediation.²³ Theorists of political cinema traditionally mistrust films that call for a strong emotional response. But as I suggested in my analysis of Reprise, when mediating political discourses fall away, we are left with emotional (melodramatic) responses, that are not in themselves political, but which can drive us back towards a politics. Rather than seeing Nadia as merely clichéd, we might see it as a film which begins to bring back together the individual, gut refusal and reflexive politics which Reprise (and the melodramas listed above) had shown coming asunder.

In her own comments about the film, Cabrera shows that she is very conscious of the limits of its politics. She notes:

Ce qui m'a traversé l'esprit quand j'ai commencé à travailler sur le scénario, c'est la vieille phrase de Mai 68: 'On a raison de se révolter.' Je voulais que ça communique le sentiment qu'on a raison de se révolter. Parce que je trouve que même les films dits 'de gauche', parfois malgré eux, inconsciemment, transmettent le sentiment que, de toute façon, l'ordre social est immuable et que, si on l'attaque, il va arriver les pires horreurs; que finalement, on échoue, et que cela ne vaut pas la peine. Il y a plein de films comme ça. Je tenais à exprimer un autre sentiment que celui-là: dire que la révolte peut être légitime, et qu'elle peut changer quelque chose ... on essaie de voir ce qui reste, avec quoi on peut penser et avec qui on peut agir.²⁴

Cabrera's remarks are deeply suggestive of the current horizon of a political cinema which, driven by initial pre-political refusal, is forced to assemble what it can from the rubble of the present, in a way that is implicitly theorised in Varda's Les Glaneurs. By placing a disordered collection of alternative practices alongside the violence and exclusions of the system, this film challenged us to think the renewal of the political with the resources currently available (rather than falling back on the

political purity of the grandiose refusal). Political glanage / bricolage does not necessarily produce polished end-products. Caught between the satisfying fullness of the established political project and the equally satisfying emptiness of the project and the people yet to come (à la Badiou), its virtue lies in its disruptiveness and not in its completeness. Holding onto political dreams that seem well past their sell-by-date (Guédiguian), mobilising the hackneyed resources of melodrama, highlighting the violences and exclusions of the system as well as areas of the social that defy its grasp, clinging onto fragile possibilities and alliances, it disrupts neo-liberalism's utopian and totalising claims. And it is thus in terms of its messy disruptiveness and creative recycling that it needs to be judged.

Une bobine d'avance?

The political and the social are not what they were, as was noted in a recent number of Vacarme, tellingly entitled 'De la Révolution à la Résistance'. Taking stock of the current position of the Left, its author, Michel Feher, notes certain key changes. First, that conservatism has changed sides, so that the Left, with often backward-looking or nostalgic battle cries, takes on a defensive or a critical (rather than a propositional) posture. Second, that its interventions, lacking an overarching, long-term utopian project, are often urgent, immediate and specific. Third, that the very lack of a sharply defined utopia opens up space for the federation of diverse oppositions (an articulation which is nonetheless problematic, given the difficulty of including gay and feminist struggles without subordinating them to a class-centred logic). Feher considers the Left's current role to be a tactical response to a specific context, but he notes that it cannot, in the longer term avoid pinning down who is to provide its base, who is the enemy and what its long-term project is to be.²⁵

In his article, 'Une bobine d'avance', Jean-Pierre Jeancolas had suggested that the cinéastes had moved ahead of politics (an advance that was signalled by their leading role in the mobilisation around the sans-papiers but also through their ability to derive). Would it be better to see cinema more modestly as an intimate part of an ambivalent social stirring, not so much en avance as dans le bain? Because of the lack of an overarching project, the demobilisation of political forces that used to structure and lead commitment, and the current dynamism of a diverse and non-hierarchical social movement, space has opened up for multiple localised resistances and for the intervention of a range of social actors, amongst which one can number filmmakers. Because oppositional discourses are currently inchoate and emergent, filmmakers can be seen to be participating in their enunciation. Feher's comments about a Left whose interventions are often urgent, immediate and specific, and which produces counter-knowledges rather than a utopian project, has a clear resonance with features that critics have associated with current French cinema (a critical, urgent realism that plunges into local situations). The Left's tactical and defensive adoption of the mantle of conservatism and retreat into opposition without a project also resonates with a cinema that draws on what is at hand to resist the utopian and totalising drive of neo-liberalism. Finally, cinema's foregrounding of the diversity of the social and the difficulty of articulating different struggles parallels the social movement's own diversity and divisions. Perhaps not in advance, film is decidedly of its time. What is untimely is to seek to judge it without recognising that the political and the social are not what they were and a committed cinema cannot take the same form.

Notes and references

¹ For an account of the sans-papiers' mobilisation as well as for an informed overview of the return of realism in contemporary French film, see Phil Powrie's introduction to French Cinema in the 1990s, Continuity and Difference (Oxford University Press, 1999).

² The date given for each film is the French release date.

³ For Le Roux's own account of the film's genesis, see the interview by Vincent Rémy in Télérama, no. 2463 (26 mars 1997).

⁴ Writing in Cahiers du cinéma in 1981, Daney and Le Peron comment: 'Ce petit film, c'est la scène primitive du cinéma militant. La Sortie des usines Lumière à l'envers. C'est un moment miraculeux dans l'histoire du cinéma direct. La révolte spontanée, à fleur de peau, c'est ce que le cinéma militant s'acharnera à refaire, à mimer, à retrouver. En vain.' Quoted on the website for Reprise at www.artmag.com/autresnouvelles/reprise/reprise5.html

⁵ Badiou defines the event in terms of radical discontinuity as a moment of all-embracing yet unforeseeable political transformation that creates its own truths, defines its own actors and leaves no space on the margins for non-participants. For example, he speaks thus of 1968: 'la période 68 a eu réellement fonction d'événement, c'est-à-dire de quelque chose qui vient en surnombre, hors de tout calcul: qui déplace les lieux et les gens: qui propose une nouvelle situation de la pensée'; Badiou, 'Penser le surgissement de l'événement', Cahiers du cinéma, numéro hors série 68 (mai 1998), p. 10.

⁶ RAMONE, F., '...et le peuple aura été', Cahiers du cinéma, numéro hors série 68, p. 25.

⁷ Deleuze writes, for example, 'Resnais, les Straub, sont sans doute les plus grands cinéastes politiques d'Occident, dans le cinéma moderne. Mais bizarrement, ce n'est pas par la présence du peuple, c'est au contraire parce qu'ils savent montrer comment le peuple, c'est ce qui manque ...'. Cinéma 2: L'Image temps, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1985, p. 281.

⁸ My comments on Ramone feed off criticism of Badiou by Daniel Bensaïd and others. Bensaïd notes that Badiou's conceptualisation of the transformatory event as radical discontinuity makes it impossible to connect history and the event or to conceive of a politics in the present other than one which is radically compromised by its engagement in an inevitably subaltern politics; see Bensaïd, D., Résistances (Fayard, 2001), pp. 143-70).

⁹ VARDA, A., Les Inrockuptibles (4 juillet 2000), p. 2.

¹⁰ On the avoidance of totalisation in Les Glaneurs, see the excellent treatment by ROSELLO, M., 'Agnès Varda's Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse. Portrait of the artist as an old lady', Studies in French Cinema, 1:1, pp. 29-36.

¹¹ TOUBIANA, S., 'Retour du politique (suite)', Cahiers du Cinéma, 511 (mars 1997), pp. 28-9.

¹² Claire Simon in conversation with Serge le Péron et al., 'La nouvelle donne des années 90', in E. BRETON et al., Nous avons tant à voir ensemble. Cinémas et mouvement social (VO éditions, 2000), p. 144.

¹³ 'Une bobine d'avance: du cinéma et de la politique en février 1997', Positif, 434 (avril 1997), pp. 56-8.

¹⁴ JEANCOLAS, J.-P., 'Requalifier le politique', Positif, 455 (Janvier 1999), pp. 46-8.

¹⁵ BEUGNET, M., 'Le souci de l'autre: réalisme poétique et critique sociale dans le cinéma français contemporain', Iris, 29 (printemps 2000), pp. 53-6.

¹⁶ LE PERON, 'La nouvelle donne', pp. 144-5.

¹⁷ This counter-intuitive preference for the distinctly apolitical Michel Poiccard suggests how easily an all-or-nothing approach to the political can come down on the side of nothing, and how a politics of form (one that, in the absence of concrete progressive content, keeps the space of the political open) can easily be mistaken for a purely formal politics.

¹⁸ Cahiers du cinéma, 545 (avril 2000), pp. 62-4.

¹⁹ MURAY, P., Le Débat, no. 110 (mai-août 2000), pp. 122-35.

²⁰ MURAY, Le Débat, p. 125.

²¹ BEUGNET, Iris, p. 63.

²² This difference is also expressed at the level of the cast and script. While Nadia is played by a well-known actress, Ariane Ascaride, the strikers are largely played by real railway workers. The script, a blend of document and fiction, comes from a collaboration between Cabrera and a sociologist, Philippe Corcuff, who had extensively documented the 1995 strikes; but it also makes room for the improvisations of the workers themselves.

²³ The derisory singing of the Internationale and the abortive and briefly seen strike of La Ville est tranquille are telling examples of the way that the films cited signal the withdrawal of the political.

²⁴ Dominique Cabrera, interview with Françoise Audé et Yann Tobin, in Positif, 470 (avril 2000), pp. 35-6.

²⁵ FEHER, M., 'De la Révolution à la Résistance. Grandeur et servitude du discours anti-libéral', Vacarme, 17 (septembre 2001), consulted at <http://www.vacarme.eu.org>.