Virtual militancy: a conversation with Human Resources filmmaker Laurent Cantet

Prairie Miller
5 May 2000

Injecting political truth into on-screen drama, French director Laurent Cantet uses real-life labor conflict and its substance and emotions as the stirring ingredients in *Human Resources*. The story of a son who takes a managerial position after college in a factory where he is hired to effect the layoffs of lifelong workers including his own father, *Human Resources* wrenchingly and insightfully pits family and social loyalties against one another.

The film concludes with a strike action that dramatically consolidates these contending passions with a resolved and revitalized shared consciousness. Cantet spoke with me about his methods and techniques for creating a powerfully renewed worker cinema for the millenium.

Prairie Miller: What was your inspiration for *Human Resources*?

Laurent Cantet: I just tried to remember stories that my friends have told me, whose fathers are workers. So I thought back to their lives when I wrote the film.

PM: Why did you want *Human Resources* to take place mostly inside a factory?

LC: I wanted to film in a factory because you almost never see factories in a movie. I think nobody wants to see that part of society, because the life of people in the factories is so hard that I think nobody wants to know that.

PM: But don't audiences go to see movies about tragedy?

LC: Yes, but work is not a tragedy. It is tiring and boring. But I think for the past five years in France, people are returning to an involvement in social issues. So French movies are reflecting that tendency. I'm not sure this is just happening in France, but social issues are becoming very important in France right now.

PM: Why do you feel there is a renewed social conscious evolving?

LC: I think society is changing, and people are now understanding that something is going wrong. It's because unemployment has been increasing, and a lot of people felt threatened. So they began to share their problems and anxieties with one another.

PM: Where did your own reverence for workers originate?

LC: My grandfather was a baker who worked with his hands, and had a reverence for work. The old factory worker in my movie who is laid off could have reminded me of my grandfather; his connection to his work was so similar. And I believe that reverence for work was transmitted to me, as I am now transmitting it to my own children.

PM: Why did you choose nonprofessionals as actors for your movie, and did they have similar experiences in their own lives to those of the strikers in *Human Resources*?

LC: All of the actors except the main character Frank are nonprofessional. And I found them on the unemployment lines. Yes, most of them have the lives of the characters they are playing. Danielle Melador, who plays the strike leader, is a real trade unionist. Jean-Claude Vallod, who plays the old metal factory worker, has been a factory worker since he was 14, doing the very same job we see him performing in the movie.

But I love the way nonprofessional actors perform. Maybe it's not as smooth as the professionals, but I feel it's more authentic. And with an actor like Vallod, his body is speaking as much as what I wrote for him. It's in the way he stands in front of his machine, that's something that nobody could actually simulate, I think.

PM: Did these workers have any advice or input into the story?

LC: Some of them were really involved in what the

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movie has to say. The trade unionist, for example, considered that what she did in the film is just a continuation of her political activity. And when *Human Resources* was released in France, Danielle went to many of the theaters to discuss the movie with audiences because she wanted to carry out her activism through the film.

And at first I wasn't sure of what I was writing, because I couldn't truly know about life in a factory. I needed these workers to advise me, and they would tell me when I could go further in what I was saying.

Sometimes there were situations that might be perceived as caricatures. For instance, there is one scene where the old factory worker is humiliated in front of his son by the boss. I thought I might be making Vallod's character into too much of a caricature. But they told me, no, you can go there; and in fact that humiliation could be much worse in real life.

PM: So in a sense some of these workers were co-directors?

LC: Right. They helped me a lot.

PM: What is Danielle doing since the movie?

LC: In fact, she is unemployed. But she is the leader of an unemployed committee. Danielle was fired from her factory when she was 52 years old, and couldn't find any work since then.

PM: In *Human Resources*, Danielle is denounced by the bosses as a communist. Was that just name calling, or is she actually a communist?

LC: Danielle is in a trade union that is linked to the French Communist Party. It is a workers' federation that is very close to the Communist Party.

PM: What is the significance of the title *Human Resources*?

LC: There are two reasons for my choice of the title. The first reason is that we use this expression "human resources" without even thinking about what we are saying. It's just an administrative expression. In fact, it's quite cynical because you are talking about human beings in the same inanimate way you would talk about money or energy.

The second point is that all my characters at the beginning are identified only in a social context, as factory workers. And then the story gives them a chance to reveal what is beneath those social labels, what is more human. So perhaps it is ultimately the resources of humanity itself.

By the end of the film, people can hardly speak. They're just speechless. One woman, her eyes red from crying, said, “Your film is awful.” I was stunned, but then she continued: “The film was too awful, it looked just like my life. But please, thank you for making the film.” So it's painful for people to see *Human Resources*, but they thank me for having made it.

PM: What do you hope *Human Resources* will say to audiences?

LC: The film asks a lot of questions about the place of any one of us in society and the world. And also what it means to find or not find our place. And the second point is the price of commitment.

PM: We never see movies treat the issue of class in the US. Talk about how you focus on class in *Human Resources*.

LC: I think that they would like to have us believe politically and in factories that class issues don't exist anymore. But after spending a few months in the factories speaking with workers and bosses, it is obvious that class divisions are still very much alive.

When I was visiting different factories to choose one in which to make this movie, I heard so many things. The power relationships haven't changed at all. Those class relationships can still explain the world.

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