

The Class—inside a Parisian working class school

Richard Phillips
17 February 2009

The Class, written and directed by Laurent Cantet, is set in a tough multi-racial Parisian junior high school and loosely based on *Entre les Murs* (Between the Walls), a popular autobiography by former teacher Francois Begaudeau.

Cantet avoids the usual cinematic clichés about dedicated teachers being able to inspire working class students to overcome harsh social circumstances and takes a methodical and naturalistic approach. The director told one interviewer that he wanted to create a teacher that was "not heroic but someone who made plenty of mistakes".

Instead of using professional actors, Cantet cast Francois Begaudeau as the movie's principal character and uses teachers and a mix of Turkish, Chinese, Moroccan, African and French working class students from a school in Paris's socially-deprived 20th arrondissement.

Acting workshops were held throughout 2006 and the production, which shot 150 hours of footage, involved three hi-definition cameras—one trained exclusively on the teacher and the other two on the students—and lots of improvisation. The footage was then edited down to a two-hour feature. This gives *The Class* the tempo and feel of an intimate observational-style documentary.

"The film is just trying to show how complex the school system is, with all the contradiction that you have," Cantet told one newspaper. "It is a place that integrates a lot of children. At the same time, it excludes a lot of them too."

The Class opens with teachers discussing their respective classes and what strategies they should adopt to integrate and assist the most troublesome students—conversations that no doubt resonate with teachers all around the world. One or two of the teachers are jaded and pessimistic but the approach taken by Francois is optimistic, intelligent, flexible and inclusive.

Francois teaches French grammar and autobiographical literature but encounters resistance. He attempts to overcome

this, encouraging his students to present their own personal profiles, voice their opinions and explore the social implications—good and bad—of their views. At first this approach surprises the students who have not been treated this way by teachers and are acutely conscious of anti-immigrant sentiment and their status in contemporary France.

While Francois achieves initial success with some students, his control of the classroom becomes increasingly tenuous. Two defiant girls—Esmeralda and Khoumba—and Souleymane, a 14-year-old boy originally from Mali, constantly try to undermine Francois's authority.

Khoumba refuses to read aloud in the class and later writes to Francois declaring that she will not speak in class or to him for the rest of the year. Esmeralda, one of the two student representatives on the school's evaluation body, claims that she has learnt nothing all year and later tells Francois she is "living proof" that his efforts have failed.

Classroom tensions rise to breaking point and the increasingly frustrated Francois insults Esmeralda and another student girl. The girls are outraged and Souleymane storms out of the class, accidentally injuring another student.

This sets in train a disciplinary process and includes a heart-wrenching hearing attended by Souleymane and his mother. She does not understand French and the boy has to translate his mother's appeals that he not be expelled. This is probably *The Class*'s most affecting scenes and provides an indication of the boy's family and its social circumstances.

Cantet, who has written and directed three features in the past decade—*Human Resources* (1999), *Time Out* (2001) and *Heading South* (2005)—is well-regarded by a number of film critics for his "social realist" and minimalist style. *The Class* won the Palme d'Or prize at last year's Cannes film festival, the first French film to win the award in 21 years, and has been nominated for a Best Foreign Language Oscar at this year's Academy Awards.

The Class is a technically interesting work and, in contrast to most contemporary movies, treats its teenage cast with intelligence and respect. There is much attention to detail and the drama, such as it is, develops organically, slowly building around Francois's relationship with his students.

Despite its realistic presentation of the inner-city Parisian school, however, there is much that is missing and strangely unmoving about Cantet's film.

The difficulties of teachers and students are obviously a product of their social circumstances but this is largely taken for granted. Apart from a couple of brief appearances by parents of the students and some indication of their problems—one immigrant parent faces deportation—the movie generally excludes external social factors.

Cantet's cameras never leave the school perimeter and most of the action occurs inside the classroom. This tends to individualise the issues concerned, and prevents any substantial character development.

This is the most apparent with Francois, although it also applies to all the film's protagonists. Francois is obviously an intelligent and dedicated teacher, but he is given no personal history or existence outside the school and therefore lacks inner depth. Likewise the student characters are never fully developed.

In one classroom exchange, Esmerelda tells Francois that she has read her sister's copy of Plato's *The Republic* and provides a brief overview of the work. For someone who has shown no previous interest in the class, her sudden interest in scholastic matters is unconvincing and jars. Cantet, moreover, doesn't give the audience anything about her social background, her family or why her sister might be reading *The Republic*. Her comments are made just after she has told Francois that she has learnt nothing in his class.

Some audiences could also read *The Class*, which concludes rather pessimistically, as confirmation of claims by various right-wing commentators that contemporary education has "failed" because of "liberal" teaching methods. At one point in the movie an angry and frustrated teacher launches into a staff room rant that the students are ignorant and unteachable. While Francois disagrees, neither he nor any other teacher publicly challenges this.

One film writer has compared *The Class* with *It All Starts Today*, Bertrand Tavernier's drama about a pre-school in France's industrial north, and claims that the two movies complement one another by exploring different stages in the contemporary education of French children. This is only

partially true.

While the children in *It All Starts Today* are of pre-school age and have no real dialogue in the film, Tavernier's drama powerfully demonstrates that the problems facing these children and their families are the product of endemic poverty and unemployment.

Daniel, the pre-school principal in that movie, like Francois in *The Class*, makes all sorts of mistakes but he is a complex character and the audience is shown this through his own family, his parents, the township, etc. Tavernier's movie is underpinned by an understanding that these are political issues and cannot be resolved without jobs, increased spending on education, health and other basic social necessities.

There is too little of this outlook or understanding animating *The Class*. In fact, Cantet never attempts to go beyond surface appearances, which gives the movie a detached dispassionate tone, a bit like a cinematic-sociological investigation. One could easily imagine it being shown to French teacher-trainees or education department bureaucrats to debate.

Working class students are constantly told by official society that their future will be determined not by their social position but individual resolve. *The Class* never challenges this outlook and leaves the issue of individual responsibility an "open issue".

Are Francois and his students collectively or individually responsible for the problems at the school or is it a social question? No real answer is provided. In a world where governments are slashing education spending, and working class and immigrant youth face either unemployment or low-paid casual jobs and endemic poverty, this is not a small omission.

Making a realistic, socio-documentary style movie with amateur actors and a heavily improvised script is no doubt an interesting exercise but if it is limited to the immediate facts while omitting the history and social origins of these "facts" then its capacity for making any valuable insights is significantly limited.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact