A Violent Peace: Robert Guédiguian’s La Ville est tranquille

Reviewed by Mike Wayne

Robert Guédiguian’s latest film, La Ville est tranquille, marks a significant maturing of the Marseilles-based filmmaker’s political vision. Two of his previous films, Marius et Jeannette (1997) and À la place du coeur (1997), are essentially love stories, each exploring the difficulty of relations between a couple living at the bottom end of an unequal and divided society. In both films, the vernacular dialogue acknowledges the politics of poverty. ‘If I ever need money, I’ll nick it like the bourgeoisie always do’, says a character in À la place du coeur. The dramatic action however remains largely at the level of personal difficulties, although in À la place du coeur there is some engagement with institutional racism when Bébé (Alexandre Ogou), an 18 year-old black man, is imprisoned after being wrongfully accused by a racist cop of raping a Bosnian women. However, the romantic tone of the previous films is rather more muted in La Ville est tranquille, a film whose central couple are not really in love so much as thrown together by desperate circumstances. More significantly, the film tries to wrap around this couple a far more detailed network of the social conflicts of Marseilles than Guédiguian had hitherto attempted. It seems fair, then, to judge the film in terms of its ambition to map within the ‘intensive totality’ of the film’s world the ‘extensive totality’ of contemporary Marseilles.1 Before doing that, however, it makes sense to contextualise La Ville est tranquille, for the maturing of Guédiguian’s political vision does not take place in a cinematic or social vacuum.

French cinema’s left turn

Since the mid-1990s, French cinema has undergone what can only be described as a ‘left turn’. This has fundamentally changed the trajectory of French cinema, prising it away from its embrace of the postmodern cynicism and indifference that characterised it for much of the 1980s. During this period, French cinema was obsessed with the image of and for itself – ‘All is style, be it retro-nostalgic or hi-tech’.2 But, from

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1 Lukács 1978, p. 38.
2 Hayward 1993, p. 284.
La Haine (Mathieu Kassovitz 1994) onwards, French cinema found a new social purpose and critical engagement with the problems, fractures and inequalities of society. While mainstream film criticism treats films as discrete entities cut off from broader social currents, it is evident that the left turn which has reinvigorated French cinema comes out of the dramatic new political conjuncture of the mid-1990s.

The French political scene shifted decisively in 1995, opening up a space for left cultural politics. Since 1983, when François Mitterrand dropped one-nation Keynesian policies after an assault on the French currency by the money markets, neoliberalism has increasingly shaped the agenda for French political life, albeit less decisively than in the UK. However, in 1995, Prime Minister Alain Juppé planned to slash social entitlement and welfare budgets. This was to be the ‘Thatcherisation’ of France, but instead the plan provoked large-scale militant public-sector worker strikes that ended Juppé’s career and eviscerated the Chirac presidency. At the Gare du Nord station, graffiti on the walls declared: ‘No, the Commune is not dead!’ Numerous banners evoked May 68 and the surrealist/situationist politics (‘Through Strikes You Can Dream’) of an active, spontaneous agent for social change.³

In 1997, the huge conservative majority of the RPR was swept from office and the Socialist Party, in coalition with the Greens and Communist Party, were returned on a left platform for progressive social change. The political Right has, six years later, yet to recover from this popular revolt. In March 2001, the Left won control of Paris for the first time since the 1871 Commune when a Socialist Mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, was elected. This change in the political coloration of the elected state functionaries was symptomatic of a deeper, more profound, intellectual and cultural sea change. Viviane Forrester’s attack on neoliberal policies, The Economic Horror, became a best-seller in France, as did Pierre Bourdieu’s The Weight of the World, which charted the experiences of people living at the sharp end of an unequal and divided society. Bourdieu has indeed become highly prominent in his interventions, which seek to overturn the ‘inculcation’ of the neoliberal agenda that large numbers of the intelligentsia have internalised and accepted as inevitable.

Significantly, Bourdieu situates the struggles in France as part of a Europe-wide ‘rotating struggle’ which has awoken to the dangers neoliberalism poses continent-wide to hard-won social gains.⁴ Indeed, the European and American bourgeoisie view the resistance of organised labour in France as a key obstacle to the global neoliberal project. Thus, Alan Greenspan, head of the American Federal Bank, has openly called for French unions to be broken in order to rescue the euro from the doldrums of the currency markets. Bourdieu, meanwhile, identified the postmodern ‘condemnation of

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³ Wolfreys 1999, p. 35.