

***Entre les murs*: Transcript**

Have you ever been inside a French school? If classroom walls could talk, what stories would they tell?

Entre les murs, a 2008 film directed by Laurent Cantet, gives us some answers. It follows a 4e class (equivalent to Year 9 in the UK) at a tough secondary school (*collège*) in Paris over one academic year, and focuses on their relationship with their French teacher, Monsieur Marin. Apart from the very first scene, where we see M. Marin arriving for the new school year, all the action takes place inside the school, and mostly in just one classroom.

The film is adapted from a novel, also called *Entre les murs*, by François Bégaudeau. The title literally means “between the walls”, although when the film was released in the UK and America, its English title was *The Class*. It won the top prize at the 2008 Cannes film festival, the Palme d’Or (the first French film to do so since 1987). It was also nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2009.

My name is Christina Les, and I’m a PhD student in Modern Languages at Bangor University. I’m going to talk you through some of the themes in the film, focusing on relationships.

Inside a Real French School

One of the most interesting things about *Entre les murs* is that it is realistic. The novel which inspired it is based on the author’s own experience as a French teacher. In fact, the author himself, François Bégaudeau, even plays M. Marin in the film. All the other teachers and pupils in the cast are real-life teachers and pupils at Collège Françoise

Dolto in Paris, where everything was filmed, and most of the pupils use their real names. Classroom scenes are mostly improvised – the pupils were given a scenario and asked to respond to it without a script. Sometimes, because it focuses on just one place and one group of people, and doesn't have some of the things you'd usually find in a film, like a soundtrack, *Entre les murs* often feels more like a documentary than a feature film.

Another interesting aspect of the film, from a non-French point of view, is that it gives us a snapshot of a different school system. Have a think about this as you watch it. What does the school look like? What happens in class: how do pupils interact with their teachers and each other, and what kind of things do they do/learn? How are pupils disciplined if they do something wrong? What do we find out about school life outside the classroom? If you have ever been on, or will be going on, a French exchange, you can compare this with what you see or have seen for yourself.

Conflict and Relationships

I'm now going to talk through some of the different relationships in the film, thinking about why certain groups might clash with each other.

These are not the only examples: I've chosen the ones which stand out for me. Feel free to add your own to the list, and don't be afraid to disagree with me!

Generational Conflict: Pupils vs. Parents

First of all, there are relationships between generations, such as pupils and their parents. We only meet a handful of parents in the film (most of whom are the real-life parents of the pupils) so we do not get to know them as well as we know many of the

students. However, we also hear from the pupils' conversations how some of them feel about their parents, even if we do not see them together (Souleymane and his dad, for example). What effect does this have on the story and the way we react to the characters? Is the parents' presence less powerful just because we don't see as much of them?

As you can see, parent representatives and student representatives also go to lots of school meetings, such as the *conseil de classe*. What do you think about this process? How would you feel if you, or your parents, were asked to get involved?

Cultural conflict

Cultural relationships are really important in *Entre les murs*. Sometimes there is conflict between mainstream and minority culture. Rabah, for example, introduces us to the term jambon-beurre – in his words, people who smell of cheese – to describe white, middle class French people. He is describing going to a party where he was the only non-white person, and being treated like an alien (*un extraterrestre*).

However, we could also say that, in the classroom, mainstream culture is in the minority: M. Marin's white, middle-class views are often ridiculed or drowned out by the African and Arab students, many of whom do not define themselves as French, and cannot relate to the language or cultural references he uses. Can you think of some examples?

M. Marin cannot always relate to the students' culture either. For example, when the class discusses the idea of shame (*honte*), some of the students have very particular ideas which he struggles to understand. Boubacar, for example, will not eat in front of an older woman he respects, such as his friend Rabah's mum – he says, 'J'ai honte de

manger devant elle, parce que je la respecte.’ Wei, on the other hand, thinks that young people today have no shame – ‘Les jeunes de cette époque, ils ont pas honte.’ – and in fact *he* is ashamed *for them*. Why do you think Boubacar and Wei have formed these opinions? Why might M. Marin not be able to understand them?

We also see cultural clashes between the students themselves. When the subject of football comes up, in the form of the Africa Cup of Nations (*La Coupe d’Afrique des Nations* in French) things get heated between the countries which have qualified, such as Morocco (represented by Nassim) and those which haven’t such as Mali (represented, for example, by Souleymane). While Nassim feels prouder than ever to be Moroccan, because he’ll get to see his country compete, the others lose interest in their ‘African’ identity because their countries are not involved.

All these cultural clashes show us that, for some of the students, their non-French identity is more important to them than being French. Why do you think this is? Think first about the specific characters, then more generally. How do you describe your nationality, and how does this compare to the way your classmates describe theirs?

Realism vs. Reality

The final relationship I’m going to mention very briefly is the one between what is realistic, and what is actually real. In *Entre les murs*, we know that the pupils and teachers are also pupils and teachers in real life, which makes the film more realistic and (perhaps) believable. But just because we see the characters in a realistic situation on screen, does this mean that we are also seeing what they are really like as people off the screen? Think about why this may or may not be the case – what might influence the way the cast members present themselves in the film?

Conclusion: A Happy Ending?

At the end of the film, it looks like the year has not ended well. Relationships have broken down and there are lots of unanswered questions. What will happen to Souleymane now he has been expelled – will his dad send him back to Mali? What will happen to Wei’s family – will his mum be allowed to stay in France? And yet, the final scenes are mostly positive. For example, M. Marin gives all the pupils an end-of-term present: a sort of souvenir yearbook he has made of the self-portraits they did in class. And, in the very last scene, a staff-student football match is taking place in the playground. Everyone looks happy and the space is filled with shouting and laughter (a sound which lingers as the camera returns to the empty classroom). All the clashes and conflict seem to have been forgotten, or left behind.

- What do you think about this ending?
- Is it optimistic or pessimistic?
- Who do you sympathise with most by the end of the film, and why?
- What do you think the director wants to say in these final scenes?

I hope these questions get you talking. Thanks for listening!