

***Entre les murs*: Transcript**

Listening to Marginality: The Importance of Sound in *Entre les Murs*

I want you to take a few moments to reflect upon the significance of this image, which is a screenshot taken from a film: consider very briefly how it might challenge what we understand about the cinema and what films are?

I would like to suggest that one of the ways in which this particular image challenges our understanding of the cinema is through its obstruction to our ability to see: it represents a lack of, rather than an aid to vision. This challenge to vision is in fact extremely significant because, as within society more broadly, our reception and subsequent analysis of film tends to be based on visual terms. We tend to describe and discuss films in terms of what the image shows us above all else. Indeed, as the very term suggests, the cinematic spectator is someone who watches or sees the film.

Today, however, I want to present an alternative vision of the cinema, one in fact which has little or nothing to do with what we see, but rather with what we hear. No longer simply just spectators of the film, we will become attentive listeners of the cinematic medium. More specifically still, I want to explore the importance of sound in Laurent Cantet's film *Entre les murs* and how sound is used in its representation of the multicultural population of France as marginalised, disempowered and socially immobile. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how sound itself is not simply just present in the film, but is in fact an important cinematographic technique used by Cantet, and one which you might like to talk about and highlight in your essays on the film as part of the cultural topic.

Firstly, let's contextualise the film itself:

Entre les murs is adapted from a book of the same title written by the French author François Bégaudeau. In fact, Bégaudeau himself plays the lead role of Mon. Marin in the film. The film presents snapshots from a school year in the Parisian *banlieue* and is particularly distinctive because almost all of the action, with the exception of the very first shots, takes place within the walls of the school itself (hence the title 'Entre les murs' or between the walls). It is equally distinctive for its very deliberate use of non-professional actors from the Parisian suburbs. The film therefore presents an extremely raw, almost documentary-style representation of France's immigrant population, and, alongside other well know works such as Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 film *La Haine*, *Entre les murs* marks a decisive step in an emerging cinematic genre in France called *Banlieue* cinema, a genre which turns its gaze upon the fate of the often-forgotten immigrant population in the peripheries of her major cities.

Before moving on to analyse how the film uses sound in particular, let's just briefly consider what sound in the cinema actually is, as this will be important in understanding how *Entre les murs* uses different types of sound. In the analysis of cinema we tend to make a distinction between the image-track on one the hand, so everything to do with the visual content of the shot, and the soundtrack on the other to identify everything we hear. However, to talk about a single soundtrack is in fact completely insufficient as this term implies that sound is simply received by the listener of the film in one homogenous block or unit. More correctly, sound can be broken down into at least three main areas: music, voices and noises. As we will see, the first two of these in particular (so music and voices) are critical in the analysis of sound in *Entre les murs*.

The first area then in which sound is significant in *Entre les murs* is through its specific use of music, or rather its lack of music. In the first instance therefore, the film is characterised by

what we do not hear, rather than by what we do; it is marked by an important absence. Let's return to the image of the black screen with which we began. This shot is in fact the very first image of *Entre les murs*. Critically, before we see any of the film's images, we first hear the familiar sounds of city traffic over the black space of the screen, the film then finally cuts to a shot of a human figure which we will come to recognise as the main protagonist Monsieur Marin. These opening moments of the film are extremely significant for two reasons.

Firstly, any meaningful contact with the film is grounded initially through what we hear rather than what we see. This demonstrates that Cantet is willing to privilege sound over the image and invite the viewer in the first instance to listen to *Entre les murs*, rather than to watch its images.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, these moments, are highly significant as they are characterised by their lack of music, as indeed is the rest of the film. Instead of music to accompany the images, Cantet uses so-called diegetic sound in this sequence: that is sound which comes from the universe or the world of the film itself and its story.

For example, in these opening shots we hear diegetic sound in the form of the traffic outside the cafe, or in the quiet chatter of its occupants. Critically, these are all sounds which help Cantet to create a so-called reality, or documentary effect; they give the impression of being present inside the cafe itself, complicit within the action of the film and its protagonists. Together with Cantet's use of a handheld camera, this use of diegetic sound, and the distinct lack of music, gives the film a raw, documentary feel. Subsequently, sound is not imposed on the film to manipulate the emotions of the viewer. Rather, the viewer is free to react to these natural combinations of sound and image.

The second area in which sound is significant in *Entre les murs* is through its use of voices which present us with the diverse sounds and languages of France's immigrant population. As such, multiculturalism is not just visual within the film, it is also heard through its different languages: it has what we might describe as an aural presence. One section of the film where this is particularly apparent is during the disciplinary hearing. Here, Souleymane's mother speaks in her native tongue which Cantet very deliberately chooses not to subtitle into French. Sound, in the form of language, thus becomes a barrier between the listener and the figure of Souleymane's mother; unable to understand what she is saying, the listener of *Entre les murs* is disempowered rather than empowered. This literal barrier, created by sound, is used to mirror the position of the disempowered immigrant population within French society. At this moment, the viewer is asked to empathise with this position, to liken it to their own experience of watching the film.

Finally, if sound plays an important role in the very first shot of the film, it equally plays an important role in its very last image. In this instance, we hear the joyful cries and shouts of the pupils playing outside in the playground over a fixed-frame image of a chaotic and deserted classroom inside the school. This moment is important as it represents what we might describe as an anti-traditional use of sound: it is the only image in the film where the source of the sound, what is making the sound, is not visible. In short, what we see does not match what we hear. Thus, as before with Souleymane's mother during the disciplinary hearing, the aural experience of the viewer is key to understanding what this sequence is saying about the immigrant population in France: whilst the viewer of *Entre les murs* is able to hear the world outside the classroom in the form of the cries and shouts from the playground, he or she remains trapped inside its four walls.

I would encourage you here to think again about the title of the film, *Entre les murs*, and how this feeds very directly into what the film is saying about life in the Parisian suburbs. This literal entrapment of the viewer inside the frame, and thus *Entre les murs*, is used metaphorically to evoke notions of social entrapment and social immobility experienced by the immigrant population of France. Critically, it is once again Cantet's play with sound in this sequence which is used to construct these notions of inside and outside, of included and marginalised, of empowered and disempowered.

In conclusion, the cinema tends to privilege what we see over what we hear. However, Laurent Cantet's film *Entre les murs* challenges this concept of the cinema through its dynamic use of sound in three key ways:

- Firstly, Cantet uses diegetic sound in *Entre les murs*, and no music, to give the film a raw, documentary feel.
- Secondly, the voice is used to give multiculturalism an aural, rather than just a visual presence in the film. However, this is not a presence that we are necessarily able to assimilate as a listener of the film.
- Finally, through an anti-traditional use of sound in the final image of the film, Cantet represents the immigrant population as socially entrapped and immobile.

Through our own experience of listening to the film therefore, and particularly through the challenges and obstacles that Cantet presents to this project of listening, we are in turn asked to question the experience of the immigrant population of France and the challenges it faces in achieving the ever-elusive notions of cultural and social integration.