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Joseph Mai, *Robert Guédiguian*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. viii + 158 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, filmography, and index. £70.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-7190-9647-1.

Review by Martin O'Shaughnessy, Nottingham Trent University.

Back in 2010, Joseph Mai delivered a fine volume on the francophone Belgian cinema of the Dardenne brothers.[1] That book was characterized by some very clear writing, excellent scholarship, and a judicious ability to manage the interplay of theory, informed contextualization, and perceptive close analysis. Mai's latest book on Guédiguian displays similar qualities.

Despite their relentless focus on their own de-industrialized corner of Belgium, the area around Seraing and Liège, the Dardennes are two of the most prominent international *auteurs* of the current time. Guédiguian is less well known internationally, and his films attract less critical attention. He is nonetheless a figure of considerable importance and someone worthy of the attention of any scholars of contemporary French film, especially if they have an interest in cultural responses to neoliberalism, filmic representations of the working class, or a specifically regional cinema, rather than a Paris-centered one. As Mai notes, Guédiguian has made nineteen films over a thirty-five-year period, a very considerable output. If the high point of his career so far has been *Marius et Jeannette* (1997), a film that achieved worldwide circulation and an impressive domestic box office score of two and half million spectators, Guédiguian's other films still pull in a faithful audience of around 200,000 people (pp. 1-2). Alongside his work as director, Guédiguian is also a founder member of Agat Films, an independent production company that has produced works by a number of major directors.

Guédiguian's films are particularly worthy of note for several reasons, all of which are amply explored in Mai's book. The first is the way in which cinema to some extent took the place of political commitment in the director's life: having been an activist in the Communist Party he became disillusioned around the time of the failure of the *Programme Commun* with the Socialists. Film-making was both an alternative activity and a way to continue his political involvement by other means. Secondly and relatedly, Guédiguian has worked in a sustained way throughout his career with the same core group of actors, notably Ariane Ascaride (his wife), Gérard Meylan, Jean-Pierre Darroussin, and other long-standing friends and collaborators. These off-screen friendships and relationships find themselves mirrored in on-screen friendship groups and couples. Friendship, as Mai notes, and this is a core part of his argument, steps in to offer a small-scale version of a broader solidarity on which, with the collapse of the radical twentieth-century project of the left, we can no longer count. Thirdly, because the director keeps working with the same performers and keeps returning to the same locations (Marseille in general and the l'Estaque quarter in particular), his films develop a sustained exploration of the aging process and the passage of time with more local or personal evolutions set against broader political shifts such as the unpicking of working class solidarities and the loss of an overarching language of radical opposition.

Mai's book is divided into five chapters, the first providing an overall sense of the director's trajectory and the approach to his work that will be taken, the next three discussing the films in chronological groupings (the 1980s, the 1990s, and since 2000), the last providing a developed conclusion.

The title of the first chapter, "Living with friends," gives a clear sense of what will be the main thrust of the book. The chapter discusses Aristotle's tripartite division of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* into friendships of use, of pleasure, and of character, associated with utilitarian ends, personal enjoyment, and a disinterested opening towards the other respectively (pp. 10-11). Mai connects these variants of friendship with Todd May's discussion of contemporary figures such as the consumer and the entrepreneur, with their capacity to "choreograph our movements, structure our time, orient our relation to others and contribute to our self-definition" (p. 14).^[2] While the consumer exploits others for enjoyment in the present (Aristotle's second variant of friendship), the entrepreneur exploits others to reach his or her own future goals (Aristotle's first type of friendship). In contrast to these two figures, Guédiguian provides an alternative model, in both his film-making practice (his durable commitment to independent production and to working with friends) and through the stories he tells and the long-term friendship groups and relationships at their core (pp. 15-17). At the same time, his repeated focus on quotidian discussions and interactions in cars, cafes, or around the family table means his films are able to record "the microscopic and seemingly empty units of time at play in friendship" (p. 12). Subsequent chapters flesh out the theme of friendship both as it develops across groups of films and in close interaction with other thematic foci.

The films discussed in chapter two are among Guédiguian's darkest. Made in the 1980s, they contrast sharply with the *cinéma du look* of Beneix, Besson, and Carax so associated with the period. While the films of these latter directors display a cult of style, surface and cinematic intertextuality, Guédiguian's films focus on small groups struggling to survive as broader socio-economic circumstances press in upon them. Rather than celebrating the end of the old communist left as a triumph of liberalism and the end of a (conflictual) history *à la Fukuyama*, the films suggest a closing in of historical horizons and a mounting sense of desolation (pp. 44-45). The works of the 1990s (chapter three), Guédiguian's famous *Contes de l'Estaque*, deliberately lighten the palette by introducing a self-consciously utopian element to the director's work. While still being set in a context of deindustrialization and social decay, films like *Marius et Jeannette* focus on the capacity of small groups to rebuild social connectivity and commitment even as these things disappear in the surrounding world, not least due to the rise of racist nationalism. Mai productively turns to Ernst Bloch's seminal work on utopia to cast light on these films.^[3] While Bloch knew perfectly well that the happy endings of popular fictions typically offered something illusory or compensatory, he also noted that even the most hackneyed story could contain a genuine desire for something denied in the current social order. Not simply illusory, utopian thinking is essential if we are to see beyond the limited horizons of the present (pp. 51-53). In his *Contes*, and in some of his more recent work, Guédiguian clearly displays a similar belief in the need to maintain a sense that, however dark the present may be, it also contains aspirations for something better.

The films made since 2000 and discussed in Mai's fourth chapter are more diverse and geographically wide-ranging. They nonetheless connect in significant ways to the director's core themes and locations or his family history. This is obviously the case for the multi-stranded, ambitious *La Ville est tranquille* (2001), a *film-bilan* whose darkness stands as a corrective to the willed optimism of the *Contes de l'Estaque* and reaches back to the tone of Guédiguian's 1980s' works (pp. 88-94). It is also true of works which have an Armenian connection, the director himself having Armenian roots: *Le Voyage en Arménie* (2006) takes Ariane Ascaride, playing the role of a doctor, on a road-trip to Armenia while the director's *L'Armée du crime* (2009) focuses on the group of Second World War immigrant resistance fighters led by the French Armenian, Missak Manouchian. Mai convincingly argues that neither of the latter two films are interested in identity *per se* but are instead used to pursue Guédiguian's exploration of friendship in its capacity to pull groups together through a form of primitive communism (pp. 108-118). Adding to his theoretical resources, Mai draws here on the work of Alain Badiou and his discussion of what he calls

the “communist hypothesis,” communism neither as an established political doctrine incarnated in a disciplined party nor a statist set of institutional arrangements but as a governing ideal.[4]

There are obvious criticisms one could address to Guédiguian’s work. One could see much of it as marked by a rather sentimental nostalgia, or sterile leftist melancholia, for a lost sense of working class community and political leadership.[5] One could also suggest that his films, particularly the *Contes de l’Estaque*, repeatedly offer us reassuring rather than truly progressive or questioning narratives, stories that leave us with a warm emotional glow rather than forcing us to confront the truth of our contemporary situation. Mai defends the director from this kind of accusation. On the one hand, as we have already seen, he draws on thinkers such as Aristotle, Bloch, and Badiou to argue for the political usefulness of Guédiguian’s exploration of friendship as a utopian opening onto the future and as a kind of primitive communism. On the other hand, he suggests that the director is saved from sentimentalism by the repeated recourse in his work to Brechtian strategies of distancing that force the viewer to reflect rather than simply seek emotional comfort (pp. 33-34). While Mai undoubtedly mounts a persuasively argued case for the defense, one does wonder if he is a little too generous to the director here. As Mai notes, if we scratch the surface of Guédiguian’s utopias, we always find dystopia close to the surface (p. 78). Could we not read this as the director’s own admission that he is unconvinced of the adequacy of a politics of friendship to the challenges of the current time? Could we not indeed see his almost obsessive return to the trope of friendship as a failure on his part to engage with other political possibilities that may be lurking in the present? Is his Brechtianism not perhaps an attempt to have his cake and eat it, to deploy sentimentalism and nostalgia while apparently holding them at a distance?

However, irrespective of how one judges the political usefulness of Guédiguian’s work, one has to admit his significance as a director with whom anyone interested in the politics of contemporary French cinema needs to engage. With the excellence of his scholarship, his judicious but accessible use of theory, his thorough knowledge of context and his careful eye for detail, Mai has written a book that will be a key reference on the director for years to come.

NOTES

[1] Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 2010).

[2] Todd May, *Friendship in an Age of Economics* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014).

[3] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1995).

[4] Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2008).

[5] On the concept of left melancholy, see Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *boundary 2* 26.3 (1999): 19-27.

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