

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH LAURENT CANTET AND KAREN YOUNG

Laurent Cantet, the French filmmaker who directed the Cannes Film Festival's 2008 Palme d'Or winner *The Class*, discussed his film *Heading South* (2005) at the Museum of the Moving Image, along with Karen Young, one of the lead actresses. Set in Haiti, the film follows a group of female tourists who travel to the country seeking adventure and some form of romance. They participate in the country's sex trade and, beneath the surface beauty of its lush beach front setting, the film deftly and powerfully unravels a complex web of race, sex, class, power, prostitution, and politics.

A Pinewood Dialogue with Laurent Cantet and Karen Young following a screening of *Heading South*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (October 20, 2005):

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Please welcome back Laurent Cantet and Karen Young. (Applause) I just wanted to start by asking you about the source material, which is based on a collection of short stories. Could you tell us how you came across it and decided to make the film?

LAURENT CANTET: First, I discovered the country. I went to Haiti four years ago to meet people who were there at that moment. You know, when you arrive in this country, you are obviously shocked by what you discover, because you see very terrible things, with violence, with misery, with sort of dis... the disparence?

KAREN YOUNG: Despair?

SCHWARTZ: Despair, desperation. (Laughs)

CANTET: Despair. Thank you. And in the same time, I had a feeling of being in sort of a lost paradise, where you feel a way of living, a way of speaking—people like to speak with you. You never know when you go out in a street in Port-au-Prince if you're going to hear a gunshot or meet someone who will talk to you for two or three hours and just take time to enjoy life. When I left the country for the first time, I knew that I would come back. I didn't know I would make a film but I knew it was a place

that touched me a lot; that moved me a lot. On the plane back to Paris—I bought the book by Dany Laferrière in Port-au-Prince—I began to read the book at the very beginning of the flight, and couldn't sleep during the whole night, and just read the book. After that, I knew that I would like to make a film from this novel.

SCHWARTZ: What I'm really interested in is the view the film takes of the character. It's very complex, I think, and very interesting. They're not easily sympathetic characters, they're very complicated. I wanted to really ask both of you about Brenda, this woman, this character; Charlotte Rampling's character passing judgment on her. I wanted to know what you both felt, maybe from your standpoint as a writer, and then when you got the script and how you started to interpret that.

CANTET: Those two women impressed me because they are obviously wearing masks. I think that they believe that they are the person they show at the beginning of the film. For Brenda, she's this very romantic teenager, who is arriving here with the feeling that she can meet her prince, a charming prince. She looks like a teenager for me. At the same time—as soon as she makes her first monologue—you're sure that she is hiding something from herself about herself, which is what she is coming here for. I like all the time it takes to take off the mask so that she can accept the woman she is—a woman who is in love, a woman who was so frustrated by her life that she needed this journey to accept herself and accept that she is

someone who is desirous.

YOUNG: She thinks she has to be in love for fulfillment—which is what leads her to Haiti, under the circumstances. She's not able to recognize that she's entitled to desire, and to do what she needs to do to fulfill that, so she goes and falls in love—madly in love. Like a teenager. What I liked best about the script when I read it is how they—Ellen [Charlotte Rampling's character] and Brenda—switch at the end. Where you think Ellen is so cavalier, she's really deeply wounded and deeply in love. And it's the opposite for me. I'm just, "Oh, that's all that was... Oh! Well, now I'm free. I can go do life differently." I liked that aspect of it when I read the script, very much.

SCHWARTZ: Could you tell us about some of the challenges in preparing yourself to play the role? Did you go back to the source material?

YOUNG: No, it's not in English. I only had the script. So I wasn't privileged to read the... it's not translated into English, unfortunately, so...

CANTET: So she just obeyed. (Laughter)

YOUNG: I just obeyed—yes; I did! (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: How did you view Brenda? The film is sort of obviously questioning her romanticism, and yet it has to be believable, too.

YOUNG: It's very American. I just found her very, very American. She throws herself into it without a lot of thinking about what she's actually doing with a lot of preconceptions. Her entitlement is misplaced, I think. She thinks she's madly in love but she doesn't question it. She just acts blindly and sort of leads Legba [Ménothy Cesar's character] to this dangerous place. I think Ellen is right. Her—well, stupidity is a strong word, but—her blindness to his situation, to the circumstances in the country... She really draws him into getting a lot of notice, a lot of attention, which is not good for him there.

SCHWARTZ: One question, then I'll open it up to the audience. But I want to ask about how pervasive this portrait of what you call sex tourism in Haiti is. How exaggerated is it, how true is it?

CANTET: Well in fact, in Haiti right now, you don't

have any more tourism at all. (Laughter) The hotel, in fact, we shot in the Dominican Republic. There, that's very common, to hear that women have come here to meet boys and to be fulfilled... sexually; that they come to fulfill their own fantasies.

YOUNG: When I was telling people the story, two people said they knew other people who were doing this. One woman had taken her pension fund and bought a horse farm in Jamaica. (Laughs) And her boyfriend was running it. Another person had another similar story. So it was totally believable.

CANTET: Historically, most of the women who *came* (Laughter) to Port-au-Prince were American or Canadian. It was not a place where the Europeans were coming.

SCHWARTZ: You had a question right down here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I disagree with your take on women, by the way. I thought it was a pro-feminist film. I think the mask that you're describing is necessary. When I was growing up, girls who had fun were called sluts, and it's still that way. They had no choice but to wear a mask and to be a lady and intelligently go down to these islands. How is she supposed to know the complexity of the politics down there? I think she was sweet and loving. I don't think she was strictly out for herself. We're all self serving to some degree. If she was sweet and loving, how was she supposed to know how corrupt and racist...

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) The question in a way is that it's a pro-feminist film, and it's showing a woman's desires. I guess you said maybe there are few films about women in their forties and over, and this character wouldn't know about the political ramifications.

CANTET: What the cop said at the end of the film—"Tourists never die"—is that they don't want to accept that Ellen could be involved in Legba's death, even if she tries to tell him that it is maybe her fault. I think when you are a tourist, you never really share anything with the country in which you are.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You always manage to get really incredible performances in all of your films. One of the scenes that stood out was early on,

when Brenda is dancing on the beach with a younger boy, and Legba jumps—you see on Charlotte's Rampling's face, first surprise, and then hurt, and then she tries to cover up and put on a smile. I'm wondering about your method or your technique for directing actors.

SCHWARTZ (Repeats audience question): Yes, a question about your working method with actors; that we see so many different emotions going on. You seem to also like long takes, long shots, where we can see things unfold.

YOUNG: It's really rare to have. There are fifteen scenes in the movie, luckily, so we could go to location and spend days there, which is very unusual. Usually, you go to a location for half a day, move to another location, and the next day is another location. You never get used to it, you're just sort of trucked around. This was different because you could actually get acclimated to your location, to the people you were working with. It was a very different way of working.

SCHWARTZ: Just on a shot by shot basis, it also seems like the shots are a bit longer, that Laurent gives you space to have things unfold and have...

YOUNG: Yes, many takes; we did many takes of the scenes... (Laughter) Compared to shooting here, you get three. Four, if you're really in trouble. (Laughter) This is six, seven, eight, sometimes more. (Laughter) I like that way of working.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) This is for Laurent: how much instruction, aside from, "Do another take?"

CANTET: I don't know... (Laughter)

YOUNG: He's very particular. Very particular. He knew what he was seeing. When you're acting, you never know. I don't watch dailies, so I don't know how I'm appearing. He knows what he's seeing. He knows what he wants to see and he guides you into giving him what he wants to see. It can be very specific or it can be just a suggestion, but I like the specificity of it. The more detailed he was, the better the results. I love to be told what to do, and it worked.

CANTET: Another part of the work we had, together

with all the actors, was that one week before starting shooting, we were all together on the set, and we rewrote the script, and we changed what we needed to change. We rehearsed some scenes, and we had a lot of time to speak. Usually I rehearse much more than that. With someone in New York, someone in Montreal, in Dominican Republic, others in Port-au-Prince, it was very difficult to have everybody together for a long time. For one week—even more than one week, ten days—we stayed together. First, learned to know each other—which is for me, really important. I can't imagine arriving on the first day of shooting and, "Ah, so it's you". Everybody knows each other, and I think that's maybe the most important thing about it.

SCHWARTZ: How did you cast Karen?

CANTET: I came to New York and someone showed me a lot of cassettes of young woman of this... type. (Laughter) I met her, and we discussed for an hour. I thought she could be the one. She came a second time, with a scene—the monologue in fact—and she performed in front of the camera. I really, you know, came close to crying at the end. I thought, that's her.

SCHWARTZ: You mentioned that there were changes made during the rehearsal process, that you had changed the script. What was the nature of that? What were you learning and changing in that early process?

CANTET: Well, on this particular film, we mainly changed some dialogue, because of the translation. The fact that I don't understand English as well as some others do. (Laughter) And you know, these...

YOUNG: Subtleties, nuances.

CANTET: Are very difficult for me to analyze. Karen and Charlotte were discussing a lot on the translation of the words that one should use or not use. And we made a lot of changes on that level. You look at my other films; I rehearse much more, and there are bigger and bigger changes.

SCHWARTZ: Karen, I just wanted to ask you one thing about process. In a film that's so much about sexuality—it's one of the main themes—is there an

awareness of your body, of sexual desire? How did this affect your acting process and your self-consciousness? Did it make you more self-conscious than you would be in another role?

YOUNG: It was what the movie was about, so I knew that when I read it. It was really clear. You knew that was what it was about, so it was nice to have a chance to go through all that. Usually, you have an aspect of your sexuality—you've either lost it, or you're hiding it, or you're flaunting it. It's always like a little sliver of it; you're allowed to play one aspect of it. But here, you go the whole gamut. Brenda looks terrible in a lot of scenes, but then she looks very different... when she's dancing. It's a fully realized sexual portrait rather than just a little aspect, just a piece of this.

SCHWARTZ: What was that dancing scene like to do?

YOUNG: It was really hard. It was really hard to do, because the music requires that type of dancing that you don't really do in this country. It's a lot of muscles that I never used before. (Laughter) I was just very sore afterwards. (Laughter) It happened two nights, and it was a night shoot, which is always a little bit cold. We were up all night long, you know. It's great music, though, so it was great to do, but I suffered afterwards. (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I think I paid attention and all I know about Brenda is that she's forty-five when she has an orgasm. She takes what she wants. Did I miss anything about her background? That's my question. She's so absolutely only present in the present. We don't seem to be able to go back into any kind of a history at all. Did I miss anything? Does she have a family? Does she have a house?

SCHWARTZ: Okay, how do you think about Brenda's character?

YOUNG: We had discussed it when we had gotten together. We understood it. I think it was understood between the cast and Laurent. She had a husband, no children, and she had a very comfortable life in Atlanta and just was unhappy.

CANTET: With her husband.

YOUNG: Yes. (Laughter) She just went on vacation,

like upper middle class people can do. They found themselves in Haiti. Then at that point the story takes over. I think that turning point in her life—when she meets Legba, when she goes to Haiti—is everything. There's no point in going back and slogging through history; that's so boring. It doesn't really help me, to be honest.

CANTET: That part of her past we know, this afternoon in which she meets Legba for the first time, three years ago—the beginning of her story is here.

SCHWARTZ: Tell us about your first viewing. You said you don't watch dailies; can you tell us about your first experience seeing the film?

YOUNG: I was wearing jewels that were lent to me from Bulgari, and they were really hurting my ears when we were sitting in this room. (Laughs) I knew that, when I was watching it, when you see a scene and you remember that's how it felt—when you watch certain scenes you think "that's what it felt like when I was doing it," and then you watch it and it's not at all what you thought it was going to be. I was very happy to watch it. I'd like to keep watching it. I never get tired of watching it. Normally, I can't watch things unless I could watch it again tomorrow. I was really happy with it.

SCHWARTZ: Could you tell us, do you have a next film, yet? Could you tell us about your next project? Do you know what you're going to do?

CANTET: I don't know enough about it to speak of it really. It's supposed to take place in the States.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Could you talk briefly about the casting of Charlotte Rampling?

CANTET: In fact, I met her even before writing the film. I had the film in mind and I asked her if she would accept to discuss with me, and we met. After two hours of speaking, she asked me the question that helped me to do writing, and she told me that would really be happy to make the film. I sent her the script as soon as I had a first version. She took quite a long time to answer. Well, not a very long time, one week. (Laughter) I was very afraid that she didn't like the film. She finally agreed. She acknowledged that the character is very difficult to accept. She liked the film, she liked the character, but she was afraid of being this character. She

wrote again, and decided that she wanted to make the film.

But she was always with me, even when we had to change the date of the shooting. We were supposed to shoot one year earlier, but it was exactly at the moment where the president Aristide was fired from Haiti, and we couldn't go there, the crew and the actors. So we had to change the date of the shooting. Charlotte told me, "There is no

problem for me. I want to make the film, so even if you change, I will be with you."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: She seems perfect.

CANTET: She is. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Well, I want to thank both of you. It's been very generous of you to share this film. (Applause)

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