

Media Review

Chroniques du tiers-exclu/Tales of the Madhouse, DVD, directed by Claire Angelini (France: La Fabrique, 2017), 116 min, French with English subtitles.

On 15 November 2018, *Chroniques du tiers-exclu* (literally *Chronicles of the Destitute* but translated as *Tales of the Madhouse* in the subtitled version) was shown for the first time in Switzerland at the Cinema section of the University of Lausanne. Directed by independent film-maker Claire Angelini, the aim of the film is to cast a different light on the past of French psychiatric institutions by involving patients in the interpretation of the history of one particular establishment: Armentières, a hospital situated at the border between Belgium and France, nine miles north of the city of Lille. Thus, *Chroniques du tiers-exclu* was not conceived as a simple historical documentary but rather as a participative work and, even, as a ‘political act’ that entailed ‘a gesture of freedom, which enabled patients to better face their return to the city’.¹ As such, the film tackles some of the crucial issues that are at the core of the tortuous relationship binding cinema and psychiatry together. What attitude can film-makers adopt when they are sponsored by public funding and medical authorities, which was the case for Angelini? How does filming in a psychiatric facility impact patients and, more broadly speaking, users in general – including the staff and the broader public? And, finally, can history be used as a therapeutic tool to assuage institutional tensions?

Initiated in 2015, the *Chronicles* owes its existence to a unique context. In 2015, Armentières was not only celebrating its 400-year anniversary: it was also turning a new page of its history. Following institutional reforms and budget cuts, the establishment was engaging in a drastic process of shutting down most of its long-term inpatient facilities. As patients were sent to outpatient services and other ‘open’ structures, its rooms were rapidly emptying. Hence, by financing a film, the hospital authorities not only wished to commemorate an anniversary: they also sought to document the disappearing past of the old asylum structure in the face of a rather uncertain future.

But when she was contacted by the hospital authorities, Angelini told them that she was not interested in filming a simple documentary. Rather, she wanted to use this opportunity to question ‘biopolitics’ and, by looking at the past, show that ‘another psychiatry’ was possible.² The hospital accepted her relatively uncompromising stance and even gave her carte blanche to develop her own cinematographic project. So Angelini began by gathering historical information on Armentières: she explored the archives of the establishment and interviewed the older members of staff. She then proposed that this material be interpreted by patients – that is to say, those users of the hospital who were less knowledgeable about its past. She recruited seven of them on a voluntary basis: seven men and women who were included in the entire creative process. They contributed to the script, using Angelini’s sources to write scenes (the so-called ‘tales’), which depict daily life at Armentières from the 1950s onwards. And then they proceeded to read and enact

¹ http://claire-angelini.eu/art/Chronique_du_tiers-film.html.

² Claire Angelini, ‘*Chronique du tiers-exclu*: une fiction politique en hôpital psychiatrique’, *Chimères*, 89, 2 (2016), 125.

these scenes in front of the camera. In other words, Angelini asked patients to embody stories that were previously told by physicians and nurses, the idea being that this inversion of voices (usually the psychiatrist tells the stories of the patient, not the reverse) would help 'question the frontier between society and the mad', leading to 'a kind of emotional catharsis' and, therefore, contributing to 'healing' the institution.³

Revealed in an eleven-page-long manifesto written during the filming of the production,⁴ Angelini's project was ambitious, to say the least. But what is the cinematographic result of this endeavour? The adjective that first comes to mind when trying to describe the *Chronicles* is 'disruptive'. If the spectator is not aware of the process that led to the film – as in the case of this reviewer – she/he will be most likely disconcerted by the tone and the images. The film begins with a first, rather traditional, section, which presents an overview of the history of Armentières's architectural structure. As we are shown architectural plans and medical archives, we discover the logic lying behind the arrangement of its buildings, which were completely remodelled after the First World War following the principles of the cottage system. The second, and main, part of the film comprises the 'tales'. The viewer is confronted with a series of individuals, who read, often rather monotonously, various texts that deal with Armentières's past. These long readings are interspersed with dramatised scenes in which the actors interpret traditional institutional stories (such as a scene where an imaginary patient is forced to endure electroshocks) and which use long tracking shots that show the deserted insides of the hospital buildings.

The result of all of this is rather abrupt and cold. At first sight, the unprepared viewer will probably not realise that all the actors are, in fact, patients. Nor will she/he understand the insistent presence of some obsessive piano melodies, if she/he does not know that the eighteenth-century composer Jean-François Rameau was once locked up in Armentières. As for the shots of vacant buildings, disused rooms and endless corridors where one can hear the wind whistle, they will most likely evoke gothic horror films rather than make the spectator think of budget cuts in the French mental-healthcare system. In sum, nothing is given and nothing is explained. The viewer is left with a feeling of uneasiness, not really knowing what the status of this cinematographic oddity is and what, exactly, it wants to show. A few clues are given at the very end, where the actors express their opinions on what the film-making brought them ('a better sense of self and community', 'feeling proud and wanted, for once') and on the future of mental healthcare (the common demand being less stigmatisation and more patient participation). One may infer that these actors were actually patients – but, still, nothing is sure.

As the debate with Claire Angelini at the screening in Lausanne made clear, disconcerting the audience was one of her ambitions: 'The idea was that the perplexity of the viewers would lead them to question their own definition of in/sanity, as they don't know for sure who speaks and where the stories come from.' In this respect, the film certainly reaches its goal. But, still, what makes it so interesting is precisely the underlying process that structured it: the inversion of voices, the appropriation of historical material by patients, the uncertain future of Armentières's gigantic facilities – all elements that Angelini had time to explain after the screening. Without such explanation, however, the film is too cryptic and will most likely appear unfathomable to the uninitiated. If you are unaware that the actors are all patients and that the film was made on a very limited budget,

³ *Ibid.*, 121, 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 114–25.

you will also perhaps only notice its flaws, such as its length or the hesitant speech flow of some its protagonists. Given the originality of *Chroniques du tiers-exclu*, it really is a shame, therefore, that the DVD does not include bonus elements, such as an interview with Claire Angelini, which would help outside audiences to better grasp its meaning.

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