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Paths of words: The political dimension of friendly conversation in Robert Guédiguian's films

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the political dimension of friendship in Robert Guédiguian's cinema, delving into the crucial role that conversation plays in this relationship, and taking Stanley Cavell's thought as a main reference. Aristotle's concept of civic friendship, along with its contemporary readings, and Cavell's notion of conversation provide a theoretical frame for the analysis of three recent feature films directed by Guédiguian that present a strong thematic and narrative unity (and have barely received attention in previous scholarship): *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro/The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (2011), *La Villa/The House by the Sea* (2017) and *Gloria Mundi* (2019). Based on, but going beyond, Cavell's moral theorisation of the filmic portrayal of human relationships, the analysis of these films has identified four milestones in the transformative process—both personal and political—that stems from conversation with friends: conformity, confrontation, acknowledgement and renewed community. In all three films, this process of change is not only presented as a progressive discovery of one's own voice, but also as a progressive unmasking: both are necessary prerequisites for welcoming foreigners in need of acknowledgement and, consequently, for the renewal of community.

KEYWORDS

Robert Guédiguian; Stanley Cavell; civic friendship; conversation; acknowledgement; community

'I try to talk like a good neighbour,'¹ Justin responds to his neighbour Caroline in *Marius et Jeannette/Marius and Jeannette* (1997) when she suggests they have dinner together that night. This remark from Justin in the film that made Robert Guédiguian famous sums up one of the common threads that have continued to run through Guédiguian's films to this day: an interest in filming conversations between characters who are united by a friendship that often arises from belonging to the same local community. Something more than a simple exchange of words underpins these seemingly trivial conversations. Through them, the characters set different visions of the world and ways of living in it against one another. Ten years after *Marius and Jeannette*, Guédiguian had this to say about the main characters of *La Villa/The House by the Sea* (2017): 'What I like is how, with a few isolated characters in this enclosed space [...] the whole world is brought in. [...] Everyone sees the world differently, each in her own way.'² (Einsenreich and Tobin 2017, 13) It could therefore be said that some of Guédiguian's feature films are a paradigmatic example of stories in which the figure of the friend takes on a political dimension that

mainly emerges through conversation. Concern for both the part played by political friendship in everyday life—the role of which has been asserted in recent decades in philosophy—and for its place in fiction films has a special place in the thought of Stanley Cavell, whose work is a valuable tool for analysing the figure of the friend and its political dimension in Guédiguian's films.

The starting point for reflecting on moral life is conveyed, according to Cavell (2004, 392), by the question that Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay 'Experience' begins with: 'Where do we find ourselves?' (1844). This is largely the same question that Marie-Claire asks herself in *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro/The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (2011) after suffering a violent robbery at her home: 'What kind of world is this?'³ Such questions reveal a desire to find an orientation, or, in Cavell's words, to know 'what our stance is toward whatever degree of compliance with justice we have reached' (2004, 174). Cavell uses the word 'compliance' to refer to the acceptance of moral cynicism in one's life and to renouncing 'a life more coherent and admirable than seems affordable after the compromises of adulthood come to obscure the promise and dreams of youth' (23-24). The previous questions are aimed at unmasking this conformity and ascertaining to what extent it has eclipsed the ideals of youth. In this sense, they are questions formulated by people whose lives have reached maturity, as is the case of the main characters in the latest films directed by Guédiguian (Figure 1). These questions start a conversation that opens the door to a possible change in their lives: a change in their way of facing the injustices that surround them, in their own acknowledgement as members of a community (a family, a group of friends, a neighbourhood) and in their way of welcoming others who come to the community from outside it. Ultimately, the result of this exchange of words and actions is the emergence of a new human community, one united by bonds that are stronger than those established within the community at the beginning.

This article seeks to study the political dimension of the friendship relations portrayed in Guédiguian's cinema. The word 'friendship' is used in a broad sense here, in accordance with Cavell's thought, which links back to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1934, books VIII



Figure 1 Marie-Claire (Ariane Ascaride, right) and Michel (Jean-Pierre Darroussin, left) in *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro* (Agat Films, Film Diaphana Distribution).

and IX) and encompasses different types of human relationships, such as the love between a man and a woman (Cavell 2004, 362). In turn, what Cavell puts forward is part of a growing interest in recovering the political role of friendship. Set against a perspective that we might call 'anti-politics', which bases friendship on common estrangement and is set out by authors such as Jacques Derrida ([1994] 2005) and Maurice Blanchot ([1971] 1997), Cavell's vision fits within the tradition of authors such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1999), Giorgio Agamben (2004), Sibyl Schwarzenbach (2009) and Todd May (2012), who assert that friendship is naturally political.

To date, Guédiguian's work has been analysed in academic texts such as those by Laura Rascaroli (2006), Joseph McGonagle (2007), Philip Anderson (2008), Martin O'Shaughnessy (2007), Ludovic Cortade (2009), Joseph Mai (2014) and Steven Ungar (2014). Alongside these works, Joseph Mai's book (2017) is especially relevant to this study, as it explores the concept of political friendship with Aristotelian roots in Guédiguian's oeuvre. Mai argues that, 'for Guédiguian, friendship is rather an essential part of the search for new forms of politics' (2017, 14). His book underlines the importance of conversation in the friendly encounters conveyed by Guédiguian via analysis of some relevant scenes from his filmography. In this regard, Mai asserts that the characters' conversations 'try out their opinions, exploring ethical points of view and developing trust and confidence' (21). Considering Mai's valuable insights, we will attempt to take a closer look at the role of conversation in the political friendships that Guédiguian's films portray using Cavell's thoughts on the moral conduct of film characters as a frame of reference.

Methodologically, this study combines theoretical discussion with cinematographic analysis. First, we outline the concept of civic friendship from the Aristotelian perspective, showing the potential of this relationship in the political sphere. Second, we take an in-depth look at the role that conversation plays in this relationship as a catalyst for reciprocal acknowledgement of the interlocutors as members of a political community and for an active response to social injustices. Third, we analyse the dramatic evolution of some of the characters in Guédiguian's films in order to shed light on how this evolution encompasses four moments—we will call these 'conformity,' 'confrontation,' 'acknowledgement' and 'renewed community'—resulting from conversation. As we shall see, the criterion that guides Guédiguian's construction of characters is the same that runs through Cavell's work, namely the need to achieve a conversation that is 'something more [...] than just talk, [...] a mode of association, a form of life' (Cavell 1981, 87).

Due to the limited length of this article, we have chosen to study three of Guédiguian's latest feature films: *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*, *La Villa* and *Gloria Mundi* (2019). This selection gives the study a more current relevance, since these films receive barely any attention in the studies of Guédiguian's filmography mentioned above (e.g. Mai's book extends to *Une histoire de fou/Don't Tell Me the Boy Was Mad*, released in 2015, leaving the subsequent films by Guédiguian out). In addition, the three selected films present, like most of his films, a strong unity in terms of space (they are set in or around Marseilles), theme (all three address social injustice in connection with couple or family relationships) and characters (the same actors, namely Ariane Ascaride, Jean-Pierre Darroussin and Gérard Meylan, embody similar archetypes across all three films). In the case of all three films, we will conduct an analysis of scenes in which conversation plays a leading role, placing these scenes within the characters' overall dramatic development.

The political dimension of friendship: a conversation between Aristotle, Stanley Cavell and Robert Guédiguian

Friendship and politics were linked to one another for centuries, but they have diverged to such an extent in the modern era that today the combination would be considered dangerous, because friendship can bring an arbitrary use of power into politics (Devere and Smith 2010, 341). As a result, friendship has been reduced to its personal and affective dimension, while its intrinsic social and political quality has been forgotten. Alongside personal forms of friendship—for pleasure, utility or virtue (Aristotle 1934, 1156a)—Aristotle mentions another specific form of friendship, one he considers necessary for civic life: ‘political’ or ‘civic’ friendship (Aristotle 1934, 1161b; Cooper 1977, 645). This type of friendship can be connected with the political in two ways: through the social impact of particular friendships or through the political nature of the relationship itself. Both are reflected in Guédiguian’s work and we will therefore briefly explain them.

First, friendship has a political impact, and it is socially relevant in terms of democratic self-government: it encourages citizens to exercise free and independent judgement, since it makes friends more aware of themselves and reinforces their critical capacity (MacIntyre 1999, 115). Accordingly, friendship protects against ideology and manipulation. In addition, friendship can promote citizens’ civic and political leadership.⁴ It has the capacity to bring about not only life changes, as Cavell (2004, 27) would put it, but also social changes. As a relationship born from common objectives or interests, it generates internal cohesion and affirms each friend in her being, reinforcing her individuality without causing her to fall into individualism. Friendship is intrinsically cooperative because it is built on what is common. In this sense, it allows citizen-friends to freely and responsibly engage with others based on common projects that contribute to the social good.⁵ In view of the current deterioration of democratic institutions, civic friendship could be valuable for civil society, which might find in it the opportunity to assume a greater political role. In this regard, Guédiguian portrays friendship relations as a new way of doing politics, above all through the exercise of two of the specific elements of friendship: conversation and communal life (at home, in a workplace, in a neighbourhood, etc; see Rascaroli 2006, 99-100). It is a type of politics that rests on citizens and that can function as a factor in social construction, though also in resistance to social structures.

The second way of connecting friendship and politics understands the former as a political reality in itself, both by its very nature (Agamben 2004, 6) and because there is a specific type of friendship suited to life in the city: civic friendship. This form of friendship is present in Aristotle’s moral and political philosophy, as well as in the writings of contemporary thinkers such as Derrida ([1994] 2005) or May (2012). This article takes the Aristotelian approach, both because of its current influence and because Cavell himself draws on it to develop his ideas of conversation and friendship. Although Aristotle’s thought is not directly transferable to contemporary society (Healy 2011, 230-232), his vision of human beings as political animals (ones who live in cities) and of the role of friendship in this type of community offers valuable pointers for understanding friendship relations in Guédiguian’s films.

For Aristotle, the properly human form of life is communal life, since humans are by nature political animals (Aristotle 1944, 1253a). This means that happiness and human flourishing not only consists in the individual good of each person but in some way includes the good of each person's family, friends and fellow citizens. It also implies that living in cities—that is, in communities that are constituted not only to 'make possible secure and comfortable lives' (Cooper 1993, 303), but also to live *well*—comes naturally to human beings. This *good* life in the Aristotelian context is of a moral nature: people in the city care about each other, in terms of both common economic interests and a mutual concern for one another's characters, 'so that no one participating in civic life be unjust or vicious in any way' (Schwarzenbach 2009, 52).

In addition, properly human coexistence is not limited to being in each other's presence. It is about a community of free and rational beings who govern themselves via words (Aristotle 1934, 1170b). And coexistence 'is the work of friendship, since choosing communal life presupposes friendship' (Aristotle 1944, 1280b). If humans are animals who must by nature coexist and are also talking animals, their essential good will be a good that contributes to coexistence and conversation—that is, friendship (Barrio 2006, 19). Accordingly, the polis can be conceived of as a community of friends who enter into dialogue about what they share as citizens and as humans: what is fair, good and beautiful. This is the friendly conversation that is typical of life in the political community and that Guédiguian's cinema seeks to portray: friends who speak in support of what makes them human.

Cavell takes the idea of conversation as a linkage point between his moral theory about human relations and the film medium. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, he affirms that 'film exists in a state of philosophy' insofar as it 'demands the portrayal of philosophical conversation' (1981, 13-14). In line with Emerson, J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Cavell uses the term 'philosophical conversation' to refer to an interest in 'proceeding in philosophy from ordinary language, from words of everyday life' (14). This kind of conversation, capable of tackling moral life's questions using the simplicity of ordinary language, is what the main characters undertake in the classic Hollywood films studied by Cavell that he calls 'comedies of remarriage'. Under the surface of triviality offered by these exchanges lies a true moral confrontation between the characters, who strive to achieve acknowledgement from the other and, to that extent, a shared language. In this sense, conversation initiates a form of political association, since it affords the interlocutors the possibility of speaking together in support of what they share. '[I]t is essential to the idea of a polis, to political association, that its members be those who can speak, speak together, an association, accordingly, made for the human' (2004, 51), Cavell writes, echoing Aristotle. We might add, drawing upon Cavellian terms, that this 'unattained but attainable' (13) form of association that he describes as a 'realm of ends' (164) evokes a pitch of utopia that connects with the similarly utopian aspirations of Guédiguian's Marxist worldview.⁶

One could counter the above by pointing out that Cavell analyses films where, broadly speaking, the protagonists are a couple—a male-female one—that is united by marriage and that, after separating due to a series of disagreements, raises the possibility of being together again. The man and the woman ultimately remarry by mutual consent (that is, without turning to external, religious or civil bodies), thus initiating a 'happy conversation' (Cavell 2004, 49). A case in point is *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), in which C.

K. Dexter Haven's premeditated revenge against Tracy Lord, whom he divorced two years earlier, results in a second marriage between them. In this respect, Cavell's moral theory of the power of friendship and conversation seems to be restricted to the realm of loving relationships between a man and a woman. Yet Cavell repeatedly emphasises that the key to his concept of friendship is not that it happens between a man and a woman, or that they are already married, but that said relationship is conducive to conversation. The friend is 'the other to whom I can use the words I discover in which to express myself [...] a figure that may occur as the goal of the journey but also as its instigation and accompaniment' (27).

According to Cavell, therefore, the three characteristic features of friendship are its ability for each party to accompany the other, to make that other acknowledge herself in one's words and, finally, to cause a change in her life. In his study of Guédiguian's filmography, Mai emphasises the last of the three aforementioned traits: 'Challenging conversation might not even take place without friendships, since without them we may not develop the deep level of trust necessary to tackle subjects on which we are vulnerable to challenge from other points of view' (2017, 12). The fact that conversation, supported by reciprocal acknowledgement, can open a door to change makes it '[o]ne of the greatest transformative tools of friendship', Mai argues (12). Therefore, it is reasonable to state that, to a large extent, friendship attains a political dimension owing to the transforming power of conversations between friends. In turn, the failure of conversation—preceded by a loss of acknowledgement and trust—results in the negation of political friendship. In Guédiguian's films, it is possible to identify several milestones in the transformative process that emerges from conversation between friends. In the light of Cavell's writings, this article puts forward four moments, which are given the following names: conformity, confrontation, acknowledgement and renewed community.

'Lives of quiet desperation': conformity and confrontation

When Bill Mousoulis interviewed Robert Guédiguian for *Senses of Cinema* (2001), he offered an interpretation of the ordinary lives that appear at the beginning of Guédiguian's films, one based on a quotation from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation' ([1854] 2008, 8). Guédiguian said he was not familiar with the quotation, but he admitted to identifying with it. Interestingly, these words from Thoreau are used by Cavell repeatedly to describe characters' states of apathy or compliance as they tacitly give up the ideals of their youth, abandoning the hope of leading a better life. Cavell argues that desperation is now 'a political emotion' (2004, 98), since it reveals a community whose members have settled into an attitude of resignation in the face of the injustices that surround them. Thoreau points out something else: he says that this 'stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind' ([1854] 2008, 9). It is not a visible emotion, as it hides behind the mask of seemingly peaceful lives. Although it is not among the works analysed here, the title of Guédiguian's *La Ville est tranquille/The Town Is Quiet* (2001) suggests this meaning, as does its opening scene: a panoramic view of Marseilles that—by capturing only the city's façade from a distance—creates the impression of an ideal city. As Anderson points out, the vision of a peaceful, calm city is disrupted by the

film's subsequent scenes, 'in which what you see (and hear) is not what you may think you are getting [. . .]. Perhaps the town of Marseilles as metonymic city—representing the *cit * as political community—is not so calm and quiet' (2008, 239).

This disparity between appearance and truth is a constant that runs through the works by Gu diguian studied here. More specifically, the appearances that these films present when they begin relate not only to the space (the neighbourhood, the city) in which their protagonists live but also to the moral conduct of their characters. Mai states that these 'characters wear masks' (2017, 132). In most cases, it is a disguise that the characters have been putting on over the years—sometimes unconsciously, as Thoreau states. Masks are the visible sign of the state that Cavell calls 'conformity,' which acts as a prison that stunts a character's best moral aspirations. Only confrontation with a close other—through conversation—is capable of freeing the character from masks and constraints that he or she is not aware of. The sense 'of one's intellect, or life, as enclosed, entrapped' requires 'the intervention of a new or counter voice [. . .] figured as an older friend' (2004, 328), Cavell writes.

Masks play a part in *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*. Michel, a union leader in Marseilles's port, chooses to draw lots to lay off twenty workers because of the economic crisis. Among the names chosen at random is his, which he wanted to include in the draw as a gesture of solidarity with the other workers. Before leaving the port, Michel goes to the union office to collect his belongings, including a poster of Spider-Man, the masked superhero from his childhood. Based on the film's opening scenes, Michel is arguably something of a working-class hero, choosing to share in the hardships of his fellow union members. This is how his wife Marie-Claire puts things, in an ironic tone, when he tells her that he has lost his job: 'It can be tiring living with a hero.'⁷ However, as the narrative progresses, Gu diguian's film casts doubt on Michel's heroic image. Little by little, as it is pulled away, it is revealed to the viewer to be no more than a mask: Michel lives in a state of conformity—a 'bubble of privilege,' as Ungar puts it (2014, 284)—removed from the precarious conditions of his unemployed colleagues, and his decision to be included in the draw is not as heroic as it seemed. The mask slips for good when the man who violently robs his house at night turns out to be Christophe, one of the young people who lost their job when lots were drawn. Christophe has been taking care of his two little brothers, and they live in serious poverty. As Mai points out, the film uses this fact 'to recast Michel's initial political act, outwardly an act of selflessness, [but] within a socio-economic situation in which it no longer seems to have the same weight, morally or politically' (2017, 125).

Michel becomes aware of the conformity in which he lives owing to a confrontation with his wife, Marie-Claire, who plays the role of the friend in the sense explained here. Shortly after the robbery, there is a dialogue between them that conforms to what Cavell calls 'the conversation of justice' (2004, 172), whose main virtues 'are those of listening, the responsiveness to difference, the willingness for change' (174). Her sincere and direct attitude invites Michel to question his way of life:

Michel: I was wondering . . . What would we have thought of us sitting up here on a terrace having a drink at sunset?

Marie-Claire: Who?

Michel: Us. What would we have thought of us? Try to imagine us, 30 years ago, walking along and looking up. We see two 50-year-olds, two calm people sipping their drinks and spitting olive pits over the rail. What would we have said?

Marie-Claire: That they were middle-class.

Michel: We are middle-class. We go to the sea on Sundays, we own our home, we watch TV ...

Marie-Claire: We are middle-class ... but not completely. I think we'd have said, 'They look happy.' We'd have said, 'To be that happy, they haven't made others suffer. They care about others.'

Michel: Even now? Are we still happy?⁸

What Michel's wife says awakens in Michel the desire to confront the injustice he inflicted on his co-workers and, more specifically, on Christophe, whom the police have just arrested following a complaint made by the old trade unionist. It seems as though the last questions he asks his wife were not about their happiness, but about the 'degree of compliance with justice' (Cavell, 2004, 174) that they have reached. In line with O'Shaughnessy's interpretation of the scene, it could be said that this conversation supposes a 'moment of ethical transparency', as it rekindles 'the need to compensate for the loss of a collective value system' (2007, 141).

Reflection on the political dimension of friendship reappears in *La Villa*, within a context very similar to that of *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*. A reunion of three siblings (Armand, Angèle and Joseph), brought about by their father's illness, in the house where they grew up, located in a small village near Marseilles (Méjean), raises many questions about the abandoned ideals of youth within them (Figure 2). Only one of the siblings, Armand, remained in Méjean, taking care of his father, while Angèle works as an actress in Paris and Joseph lives with Bérangère, his too young girlfriend, as he calls her. The village's declining state makes Angèle and Joseph feel disenchanting. 'What has



Figure 2 Armand (Gérard Meylan, left), Joseph (Jean-Pierre Darroussin, centre) and Angèle (Ariane Ascaride, right) in *La Villa* (Agat Films, Film Diaphana Distribution).

changed?⁹ Angèle asks Martin and Suzanne, a local married couple, while she is looking at a series of photographs from times past. The question—similar to ‘Where do we find ourselves?’, which Cavell takes from Emerson—is the starting point on a journey of discovery that, according to Guédiguian, will lead the three of them to ‘a kind of rebirth’¹⁰ (Riambau 2018, 43). Once again, the steps of this journey include confrontation and conversation between the three siblings, who play the reciprocal role of friends in a Cavellian sense.

The first scenes take up the mask motif as a synonym for conformity, especially in the case of Angèle, the film’s main character. She is a stage actress who left the village twenty years ago after the death of her daughter Blanche in a tragic accident at sea. In a conversation with her brother Joseph, Angèle acknowledges that her work as an actress has allowed her to hold back her tears for many years: ‘On the stage, with all the makeup, my eyes are always dry.’¹¹ Later on, in an encounter with Benjamin, a young fisherman from the village who has been in love with Angèle since childhood, she recites some lines by Paul Claudel that describe the mask wearing that goes on in her life: ‘And something happens on the stage as if it were true. But it isn’t true.’¹² In a similar vein, Armand and Joseph have created a mask that makes them unrecognizable to their father, who lies in bed in an apparently vegetative state. ‘We don’t know if he recognises us,’¹³ Armand says to his sister. The three siblings are aware that they have led lives far removed from the utopian ideal that their father nurtured: the project of making the village a communist oasis, as Joseph puts it, a free commune based on generous cooperation among all. Ultimately, the reunion of the three opens the possibility of a new beginning: in their conversations they review the world in which they live and, at the same time, ‘weave emotional, painful or reconciliation bonds,’¹⁴ wondering ‘how they can live together, establishing a society,’¹⁵ as Guédiguian points out (Riambau 2018, 43).

In contrast to *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro* and *La Villa*, in *Gloria Mundi*—Guédiguian’s latest feature film to date—a disenchanting vision of the future of the political community prevails, one marked by the erosion of ‘values such as solidarity, class identity and collective resistance’ (Mai 2017, 9). Daniel’s return to Marseilles after many years in prison coincides with the arrival in the world of his granddaughter Gloria, who is born into a family that is experiencing serious financial difficulties. Ultimately, the issue around which this whole film gravitates is the possibility offered by birth: that of little Gloria, on the one hand, and Daniel’s rebirth, on the other. In both cases, they are beings who have just arrived in the world and who lack the identity provided by belonging to a community, either because they have never had one, or because they have lost it. To deploy the terms Cavell uses in *Cities of Words*, it could be said that Daniel is ‘a man who feels stopped or lost in his life, as if unfinished or paralyzed, who is awaiting some form of omen or signal [...] that will free him’ (2004, 389). The birth of his granddaughter is the signal that prompts him to return to his ex-wife, Sylvie, who has been living with Richard, her new partner, for years. The meeting of the three gives rise to a small community that is woven through friendly conversations. It is Richard who encourages Sylvie to send Daniel, still in prison, a photo of his granddaughter. Likewise, Richard invites the old ex-convict to stay at his and Sylvie’s home. This fragile bond of solidarity is threatened from the beginning by the selfish attitude of Bruno and his partner Aurore, Sylvie and Richard’s daughter. Bruno

and Aurore are two masked characters whose lives are built on lies and fraud. They seem unable to share the spirit of solidarity of the others and, consequently, they refuse to join their endeavour to rebuild the community of friends.

'Opening new paths': from acknowledgement to renewed community

Cavell maintains that conversation between friends gives rise to an acknowledgement that consists, above all, in discovering one's own responsibility towards the other. 'Simply put, part of knowing that another is in pain,' writes Catherine Wheatley in *Stanley Cavell and Film*, 'is knowing that the other's pain *demands a response* from me, and this being the case, knowing takes the form of acknowledging' (Italics in the original. 2019, 98). In the aforementioned conversation between Michel and Marie-Claire in *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*, Michel realises how indifferent to others he has become, and he seeks a way out of that state. The second half of the film describes the pair's efforts to 'substitute knowledge for acknowledgement, privacy for community' (Cavell 1981, 109) as they tackle 'the immediate and extended consequences of recognising the misery they had known more or less as abstractions' (Ungar 2014, 286). As Ungar points out, Guédiguian constructs this second half based on 'Victor Hugo's poem, "Les pauvres gens", in which the wife of an impoverished fisherman takes in two children orphaned by the death of a neighbour' (286). As in the poem, Marie-Claire is ahead of her husband when it comes to actively responding to the plight of Christophe's two younger siblings, who have been left homeless after the older brother's arrest. The film accentuates Marie-Claire's little gestures, full of tenderness and compassion, towards the two children. One way in which it does so is its use of the piece of music that is playing while she is watching television with the two little ones having made their dinner. The piece is a *Kyrie* by Mozart,¹⁶ and Guédiguian had previously used it in the tragic ending of *Marie-Jo et ses deux amours/ Marie-Jo and Her Two Loves* (2002). This time the piece of music does not evoke a tragic feeling, but rather an attitude of compassion towards (or deep acknowledgement of) the needs of the other.

The main characters in *La Villa* engage in acknowledgement that runs in two directions. On the one hand, there is an initial 'inward' acknowledgement between the three siblings. On the other, a second level of acknowledgement occurs 'outward' between them and three other siblings, refugee children from the Middle East (Syria or Iraq), whom Armand and Joseph come across in a forest near the village. The clear parallelism between the adult siblings and their younger counterparts emphasises the idea of acknowledgement: the refugee children, as Guédiguian points out, 'represent their childhood. I put them in front of a mirror: a girl and two boys.'¹⁷ (Einsenreich and Tobin 2017, 13). The film creates a mirror-image relationship, whereby Armand's, Angèle's and Joseph's existential helplessness—hidden behind the masks created by utopian idealism, fame and self-interested love, respectively—is metaphorically reflected in the drifting lives of the three refugee children. Moreover, this fact allows the political dimension of friendship relations to acquire 'a strong transnational dimension' (Rascaroli 2006, 101).

The first type of acknowledgement (inward) is forged through conversations between the siblings. Through these, each of them shares his or her past with the others. The form they attempt 'to give acknowledgement is to tell their story,' as Cavell writes (1981, 109). This progressive revelation of one's own story is evident in the case of Angèle, whose

return to Méjean opens up the wound caused by her daughter's tragic death. 'I wanted to forget. Like it never happened,'¹⁸ she tells Joseph, who responds to her sadness with a hug. There is also, as was put forward in the previous section, a revelation of the past of the other siblings, Armand and Joseph. The two characters talk on several occasions about their disenchantment with the political ideals inherited from their father. These conversations are typical of Guédiguian's films, which Mai (2017, 12) calls 'de la conférence,' borrowing an expression from Michel de Montaigne. Ultimately, they are exchanges of words by which the three siblings examine each other's hopes and failures, and, in doing so, acknowledge each other as members of the same community.¹⁹ In his book on Guédiguian, Mai lists the characteristic features of these exchanges between friends:

[M]odels of human interaction that [...] value [...] difference, equality and commitment; that weave our lives into a temporal fabric combining past, present and future; that intertwine them with the lives of others; that help us determine what we think of as virtuous and worthwhile; that acknowledge our vulnerability; [...] that encourage us to be invested in our city and the broader world in which we live; and that open us up to difference and dynamic change. (2017, 141-142)

The second type of acknowledgement (outward) goes hand in hand with the first. To a large extent, the main characters in *La Villa* are inclined to change having ascertained, through friendly conversation, that their lives are in need of a renewal. This need is anticipated in a conversation in the forest between Armand and Joseph: while Armand reminds Joseph of the importance of caring for old forest paths, Joseph talks about opening new paths. He is announcing, without knowing it, the arrival of the three refugees, whom they will find on those same paths. The sudden entry of the three children in the three adult siblings' lives represents an opportunity for them to redefine the small community to which they belong. As authors such as Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla (2018) and Ipek A. Celik Rappas and Philip E. Phillis (2018) have pointed out, this story of an encounter—between characters of European origin and non-European migrants—crosses the limit of the local sphere to offer a broader reflection on the identity crisis in Europe and its failure to welcome refugees. At the same time, the film succeeds in placing the refugee debate on the concrete plane of everyday life. On this level, Guédiguian says, 'no debate is possible. It is a gesture of simple humanity. No one would deny a plate of food to a child who knocked on their door'²⁰ (Riambau 2018, 43).

Finally, *Gloria Mundi* takes up the themes introduced by the other two films, leading them, however, towards a tragic outcome. The conversations between Daniel, Sylvie and Richard open up the possibility of acknowledgement for Daniel, who appears disoriented and unable to give up his prison routines. The inhospitable hostel room where he spends his days lying in bed, looking at the photograph of his granddaughter Gloria, is a space that reveals Daniel's lack of identity and his state of alienation: he is trapped inside, despite having left jail. Aware of this situation, Sylvie and Richard make small welcoming gestures towards Daniel: Sylvie goes for a walk with him through places from his youth, while Richard talks to him and confides his worries in him. Daniel's gradual integration into the small family community runs parallel to little Gloria's integration into it (Figure 3). The three friends selflessly care for Gloria in order to alleviate the economic hardships suffered by her parents.



Figure 3 Mathilda (Anaïs Demoustier, left), Daniel (G rard Meylan, right) and little Gloria in *Gloria Mundi* (Agat Films, Film Diaphana Distribution).

In all the three films, the aforesaid expressions of acknowledgement clear the path for the emergence of a renewed community. Hence, a more open form of association than that of a family formed from blood ties appears. Rascaroli highlights how this idea runs through all of Gu diguian's filmography: 'Family is often very important in his films, but community is even more significant. The director's communities go from small to large: from the extended family [...] to the company of friends' (2006, 99). In *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*, the renewal of community—what Ungar calls 'the new domestic arrangement' (2014, 283)—is symbolised by the concluding scene. Jules and Martin, Christophe's siblings, are welcomed into the dinner table as part of the community of friends, whilst the biological children of Marie-Claire and Michel fail to understand their parents' gesture. In Gu diguian's cinema, the dinner table becomes a utopian place from which the renewed community can face the future together, with hope and confidence. Mai notes how the meal scene is one of Gu diguian's preferred motifs, since 'the very decision to share a meal indicates a willingness to continue' (2017, 58). In *La Villa*, the welcoming of the three refugee children becomes symbolic in the final scene, when the children and adults shout one another's names. Under a bridge in M jean, the echoes of their voices mingle, poetically evoking the Cavellian idea of conversation: 'My speaking for others and my being spoken for by others' (2004, 51).

The renewal of community appears to be fatally cut short at the end of *Gloria Mundi* as a result of Bruno's selfishness. He mercilessly insults Nico, Gloria's father, who, overcome by anger, then unleashes a fatal blow on him. Knowing that there have been no witnesses, Daniel decides to take the blame for the murder. 'I'm doing it for Gloria. We can't let it happen again. There's no reason for it to happen again,'²¹ he says. It is a response of radical solidarity: Daniel gives up his freedom for Nico, so that history does not repeat itself (another man in prison, separated from his family) and Gloria can grow up with her father. Daniel's decision succeeds in ensuring the future of the new community at the expense of this own future; thus, we might say that he embodies

the figure of the friend in a drastic sense. Thanks to his resolution, the film—like *La Villa est tranquille*, which has the same tragic note—ends with ‘the possibility within the narrative of [...] a future and, therefore, of the continuation of another history’ (Anderson 2008, 249).

Political or civic friendship, as well as its deployment through conversation, has proven to be a recurring theme in Robert Guédiguian’s films. In this article, we have studied the relevance of civic friendship in three recent Guédiguian films (*Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*, *La Villa* and *Gloria Mundi*), focusing our attention on the ability of conversation between friends to unleash social changes that go beyond the boundaries of the family and even the local community. This transformation has four significant moments: conformity, confrontation, acknowledgement and renewed community. According to Mai (2017, 132), this process of change is not only presented as a progressive discovery of one’s own voice, but also as a progressive unmasking. Whilst each character finds her own voice in friends’ words, she discovers her true face in their gaze. Her face can even become lost, as shown in the final shot of Bruno in *Gloria Mundi*: his face is hidden under a motorcycle helmet.

The political dimension of Guédiguian’s films is also shown in their open endings: they all conclude with a question about the future of the small community, which has been renewed after welcoming one or more people in need of acknowledgement and a new sense of belonging. The last shots of the films studied show the members of this community, whose decisions have opened the door to a new way of living together. In *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*, Jules and Martin’s entry into the lives of Marie-Claire and Michel gives those lives a new direction. In *La Villa*, the three migrant children are welcomed into the small family formed by the three adult siblings, though their long-term future remains unsolved. Similarly, in *Gloria Mundi* the future appears to be uncertain, although Daniel’s sacrifice on behalf of the community—of little Gloria, but also of those who will take care of her—is a gesture that reveals bonds stronger than blood ties. It might well be said that these stories bring a new and profound meaning to Aristotle’s words: ‘For no one would choose to live without friends, but possessing all other good things’ (Aristotle 1934, 1155a).

Notes

1. ‘J’ai abordé une conversation de bon voisinage.’
2. ‘Ce qui me plaît, c’est comment, avec quelques personnages isolés dans cet espace clos [...] faire entrer le monde entier. [...] Ils regardent tous le monde différemment, chacun à sa manière.’
3. ‘Mais dans quel monde on vit.’
4. Here we use the term’s original meaning: political as referring to the city, to the civic.
5. There is scope for qualification here, since friendship does not guarantee that friends’ behaviour, judgements or values are socially appropriate. In this sense, we can state that it has a certain ambivalence.
6. It is worth noting here that, despite Guédiguian’s unfamiliarity with Cavell’s thought, there is an unmistakably utopian vision underlying his narratives. Mai traces it back to Guédiguian’s Marxist education (2017, 5–9) and, more precisely, to Ernst Bloch’s idea of History according to which ‘human beings, engaged in the struggle for life, have a forward-oriented relation to time with a desire to change unfavourable conditions’ (2017, 51).
7. ‘Pas facile de vivre avec un héros.’

8. Michel: Je me demandais qu'est-ce qu'on aurait pensé de nous, assis là comme ça sur une terrasse en train de boire un coup au soleil couchant. Marie-Claire: Qui ça ? Michel: Nous, on aurait pensé quoi de nous ? Hein, tu t'imagines 30 ans en arrière, passer dans la ruelle, lever la tête et voir deux quinquagénaires l'air paisible, en train de siroter, cracher leurs noyaux par-dessus la balustrade, qu'est-ce qu'on se serait dit à propos d'eux ? Marie-Claire: On les aurait traités de petits bourgeois. Michel: Oui, on est des bourgeois. On va à la mer tous les dimanches, on est propriétaire, on regarde la télévision. Marie-Claire: On est bourgeois, mais pas trop, non, mais je crois qu'on se serait dit: « ils ont l'air heureux », on se serait dit: « pour avoir l'air heureux comme ça, ils n'ont jamais dû faire souffrir personne, ils n'ont jamais dû être indifférents surtout ». Michel: Même en ce moment, on est toujours heureux ?
9. 'Qu'est-ce qui a changé comme ça ?'
10. 'una suerte de renacimiento'
11. 'Même au théâtre, avec tous les produits de maquillage, j'ai toujours les yeux secs.'
12. 'Et il arrive quelque chose sur la scène comme si c'était vrai. Mais puisque ce n'est pas vrai !'
13. 'On sait pas si il nous reconnaît.'
14. 'tejen vínculos afectivos, dolorosos o de reconciliación'
15. 'cómo pueden vivir juntos, establecer una sociedad'
16. The *Kyrie* is from Mozart's *Great Mass in C Minor*, K 427. This piece occupies a special place in the history of French cinema owing to its recurring use in Robert Bresson's *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé/A Man Escaped* (1956). The presence of this piece of sacred music in the aforementioned scene from *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro* highlights the 'religious' dimension of Marie-Claire's caring for the two siblings, as it allows us to discover 'one possible etymology of the term "religion" from *religiere*: to bind together, to come together, to make links' (Cooper 2018, 237).
17. 'représentent leur enfance, je les mets en miroir: une fille et deux garçons.'
18. 'Je l'ai oubliée. Faire comme si c'était jamais arrivé.'
19. In an interview with Andrew Klevan, Cavell states: 'The conversations [...] are cases in which one soul is examining another, cases of moral encounter. These people are rebuking one another, questioning one another about how they live, specifically about how they live *together*' (Italics in the original. Cavell and Klevan 2005, 201).
20. 'no hay debate posible, es un gesto de simple humanidad. Nadie le negaría un plato de comida a un niño que llama a la puerta.'
21. 'Je le fais pour Gloria. Il faut pas que ça recommence, y a pas de raison que ça recommence.'

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