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PRESENT

# RETURN TO ITHACA

A FILM BY LAURENT CANTET



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DONOSTIA ZINEMALDIA  
FESTIVAL DE SAN SEBASTIAN  
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

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## SYNOPSIS

A terrace overlooking Havana, the sunset.

Five friends gather to celebrate the return of Amadeo after 16 years of exile.

From dusk to dawn, they reminisce about their youth, the group they used to form, the faith they had in the future... but also their disillusionment.



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## INTRODUCTION BY LEONARDO PADURA

# A GENERATION IN THE HURRICANE OF HISTORY

As a single night unfolds on a Havana rooftop terrace, Amadeo, Aldo, Tania, Rafa and Eddy bare their souls – memories and traumas from the past, the shortfalls and affinities of their present, the uncertainties blurring their future – all frame the individual dramas of these five people, resisting defeat, battling to bolster one of the pillars which, until now, has kept them afloat and bound them together - friendship.

When Laurent Cantet asked me to embark upon this cinematic adventure, I knew it would be a chance for me to concisely dramatize one of the concerns that runs throughout my work – my generation's place in more recent Cuban history and the vicissitudes which have impacted its individual and collective destiny. Whether in novels that speak to other geographical climes and other historical periods or those that are centered around contemporary Cuban life, the expression of the moral and material conflicts of my generation has occupied a special place in my literary universe.

Using the meeting of these five characters (inspired by a similar meeting in *La Novela de mi vida – The Story of My Life*) as a starting point, taking place in present-day Cuba (when those characters are about fifty years old), we started sort of summarizing the expectations, hopes, frustrations, dreams and wounds of a generation which is quite unique in Cuban history – a generation born with the Revolution, shaped, brought up and educated in the country's new political and social context and which, as we moved into the 90s with all its crises and shortages, saw many of the outlets for personal and collective fulfillment cut off, forcing people into a desperate and daily struggle for their own survival and that of their children.

Through the revelations brought about by the return of one of these characters to Cuba, we have attempted to construct a probable and realistic portrayal of those men and women who, in their youth, were active participants in the country's social zeitgeist and who, like many others, dreamed that the fruit of present (now past) sacrifices, would be reaped in the future. But the nation's economic downturn following the fall of the Soviet Union was also the fall of many hopes and dreams for those who until then had believed, who had studied and worked for so long, fought so hard, even participating in faroff foreign wars.

The drama brought about by exile and its personal and collective consequences, by the struggle for economic survival, by camouflage as a way of life, by ethical loss or clinging to national and cultural loyalties, the spiritual defeat and struggle against all fears... these are a few of the ingredients which flavor the recent bends in the road for this generation, one that dreamed of a better future for all and sacrificed itself for that dream. Through Amadeo, Rafa, Tania, Aldo and Eddy's experiences, through the circumstances which went into forming their friendship from a tender age and the ways they preserved it over the years, the film attempts to find the blood, sweat and tears of a collective experience through those of a few individuals who are unique to their time and place.



So RETURN TO ITHACA is a story of a few lives and, through those lives, the story of my generation. It certainly isn't the only possible portrait but it is undoubtedly the reflection of the many uncertainties, hopes, accomplishments and frustrations of certain Cubans – cruelly tossed upon the winds of history into the open sea, where many cannot make out any safe harbor.

This is one possible story of today's Cuba. Other views might exist – in fact, they do exist. But as the director of this film, through this story we have strived to open our eyes and minds to a tragic present-day reality – to today's Cuba, where it's easy to find many life stories similar to those of Amadeo, Tania, Rafa, Aldo and Eddy.

Leonardo Padura

July, 2014.



# INTERVIEW WITH LAURENT CANTET

## I/ The film of their lives

### **How did the idea of writing with Leonardo Padura come about?**

A few years ago, I was asked to contribute to a collective film *Seven Days in Havana* and Padura was in charge of supervising all the scripts. I suggested to him that we could write a short film together based on the character in his novel *The Palm Tree and the Star*, who returns to Havana after 18 years in exile and gets together with his old friends. So I joined him to work in Cuba. Every night he wrote some pages, which I then worked on during the day. We talked in a mix of Spanish, French and English. It was a bit chaotic, but since I knew his books, it worked out.

After a week, we came to the conclusion that the 15 minutes of a short film would not be enough. I suggested that we suspend the project and I would write an outline more adapted to the occasion. As soon as I'd finished my previous film, *Foxfire*, I called Padura and we got back down to work. He came to Paris for 10 days, during which time the film's structure took shape. Then he went back to Cuba where he wrote a first draft. After that, we worked in our respective countries until we arrived at a presentable script.

### **How much does the script owe to Padura's novel?**

The film is a concentrate of the themes that he weaves from novel to novel: the difficulty of being there, and the impossibility of being elsewhere. The inability to still believe and the fatigue which takes over. All his books deal with this lost generation – his own, those born between 1955 and 1960 at the start of the revolution, who went through their education with the idea of actively participating in a budding utopia, but who, at the time when they should have been taking on responsibilities, saw it all curtailed by the collapse of the USSR, the end of Soviet support and the period of shortages that followed. It was this generation which felt the full force of the “special period” decreed by Fidel Castro starting in 1992: ten years during which everyone experienced hunger and terrible deprivation, a war economy in a time of peace, a political hardening intended to contain the expression of frustrations. For many of them, the dream was shattered at that moment, at the same time as they were dealing with the pain of having to write off a large part of their lives. Some then tried to adopt a critical position, but at

the time, that was seen as betrayal. Others left by any means possible and lived in exile, some in Spain, others in the United States, the country of the “enemy”.

### **How did you construct the characters?**

At the end of the initial improvisations, I felt I had found Tania and Rafa, but the others had yet to be clearly defined. I was very attached to the character of the corrupt little manager, Eddy, who I thought was the most poignant in the film, because he hates himself for allowing himself to be corrupted. In my head, he would be the most awkward of the bunch, but at the same time the most appealing. I also wanted there to be this diversity of bodies and skin colors which characterizes Cuba: Aldo, his mother and her son, the blacks in the film, provide the image of another class, another way of being, and perhaps also another discourse. Even if most Cubans would deny it, their society is nonetheless separated by financial, cultural and racial divides.

### **Who are the actors?**

Most of them are very famous in Cuba. Jorge Perugorria, known as “Pichi” (Eddy), is a star of Cuban cinema; he was one of the protagonists in *Strawberry and Chocolate*. Isabelle Santos (Tania) and Néstor Jiménez (Amadeo) are both leading actors who appear on the credits of most of the major Cuban films of recent decades. They all film all over South America in movies or telenovelas. Fernando Hechevarria (Rafa) is a great stage actor. Only Pedro Julio Díaz Ferrán (Aldo), who works in a theater troupe for children, was unknown. To begin with, he was intimidated about acting with these great names, which I also found interesting because that timidity helped to underline the difference he embodies. He's not from the same background and doesn't have the same concerns, and yet he fully belongs to this group of friends. What's more, the others already knew one another: Amadeo, Tania and Rafa studied together at the conservatory, and have been close ever since. So this little band partly pre-existed the script.

### **How did the actors take the fact that you are not Cuban?**

You'll have to ask them! But they often told me a Cuban would not have been able to make a film like that. Firstly, because he would no doubt not have obtained authorization and would have had problems financing it. But also because my presence in the set-up, as an outsider, made it essential to render certain things explicit which, between Cubans, would have been taken as read and wouldn't have been spelled out. Because I was there, they had to be formulated. That helped them to go further, freeing up their speech which often stays in the realm of the implied. Conversely, I think this type of culture gap also works to my advantage. It's something I feel every time I shoot: a geographical, social or cultural distance gives me a different degree of sharpness from what I might

have when I am immersed in a situation and wholly focused on what I am filming.

### **Is this greater freedom of speech also linked to a softening regarding the regime?**

According to Padura, the film was made at the time when it became possible to make it, because we have emerged from the “special period” and a period of greater freedom of speech and thought has opened up. Moreover, we obtained all the official authorizations, on the basis of a script that it wasn’t even necessary to tone down. Technicians from the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry even worked on the shoot.

This openness goes hand in hand with the Cubans’ need to tell their own story. From the moment we started talking about the film, the actors had only one thing in mind: for it to be made. For them, it was important for this kind of catharsis to take place so they could finally say certain things, and so that cinema reflects their story and echoes their lives.

## II/ The anger and the fear

### **Would you describe *Return to Ithaca* as a film about collective depression?**

It’s more a film about anger. All the characters have the feeling that their lives have been stolen from them, and perhaps that they themselves have contributed to this in one way or another. They feel betrayed, or as if they have betrayed themselves. In the 1970s, they felt they were at the center of a historical movement, against the rest of the world: they were building a system which could work. Evoking this subject, Rafa says wryly: “We were writing history, we were a beacon for the world.” Even for the most critical among them, those years were fueled by an energy and a confidence which allowed them to overcome the harshest of situations. And it’s this confidence that a character like Aldo is above all trying to preserve – perhaps because he is black and that without the revolution, he knows very well he would be shining the shoes of American tourists. I thought it was very moving when he said: “Let me think that I still believe.” The others don’t share this point of view, but they still have the energy of anger.

### **As a result, what is the reason for their animosity towards Amadeo? Are they angry with him for leaving? Or rather, are they angry for not having left themselves?**

They’re angry with him for having abandoned them, and for not coming back when his partner fell ill and then died. But I’ve got the impression that they’re above all angry because he left and doesn’t realize that he did the right thing in doing so. For them, Amadeo is spoiling what he’s got, whereas he had the opportunity for a better life. When



he tells them, the way lots of émigrés do, that in Spain he was continually reduced to his Cuban identity, they said that he is no longer altogether Cuban, and that their own experience cannot be shared with someone who hasn't lived through it.

**At the same time, the initial idea is in itself problematic. It is particularly sensitive with Yoenis, Aldo's son.**

Yoenis is, effectively, very representative of a generation, despite the fact that exile in Cuba has long been a cultural feature. There was colonization which saw people come and go; there were successive dictatorships which prompted wide-scale departures; there was the revolution, which itself led to several waves of exile. Every Cuban has an uncle, a grandfather or a sister somewhere in the world, who sometimes sends home money and who embodies the fantasy of a happier other place. So everyone has this in mind.



But even more so among the country's youth, who feel this weariness more harshly than the previous generations. Their parents believed in the revolution, they experienced that exaltation, of which they still retain a part. They still hope that the situation will improve. But time goes by, and things are changing so slowly that many – at least among the urban and educated classes – no longer believe that lifting the American embargo would be enough to improve their lot. For their part, young Cubans have no glorious past to fall back on, and can see no future for themselves. As a result, many dream of going and trying their luck in another land, especially the United States. And nowadays, it is supposed to be easier to leave. As Rafa says: You no longer have to climb in a bathtub and face the waves and the sharks. Except that you need money to pay for the trip and a visa for the destination country. So there is a semblance of the chance to

leave, but it remains reserved for a minority.

**The film gives the impression that there is no solution: neither leaving, nor staying, nor returning.**

First off, you have to ask yourself if we don't all have this feeling, wherever we live. Beyond that, the film nonetheless suggests a way out: a release from fear. That's what Amadeo describes: fear prevented him from writing, it prevented him from coming home when his wife was dying, it stopped Rafa from painting. Their lives were constrained by this fear which affected all aspects for them: their daily lives and their relationships with others, their creativity, their capacity for love. And I have the feeling that this fear is getting softer, as it happened for Amadeo, which allowed him to come back to Cuba.

### III Filming words

***Return to Ithaca* is no doubt your most theatrical film, with a predominance of dialogue, a classic dramatic structure, and a unity of time and space. Was this approach the natural way to tackle the material?**

It was a requirement for the short film project, and I wanted to keep it for the feature film version. Padura was at first somewhat reticent: to start with, he wanted the film to play out over several days and take place in different locations. For my part, I wanted to avoid reconstructions and flashbacks, and I thought that a single time and place was the only way to take on everything we wanted to tackle. But above all, I felt that I could only talk about Cuba by having Cubans doing the talking, giving them the opportunity to tell their own story. Hence the importance of the close collaboration with Padura.

**The result is your most up-front film, the one in which the emotion is most clearly on display.**

True, I am usually more restrained than this: I depend more on the sub-text, working into a scene elements that might create a diversion. This time, I allowed myself to film weeping and explosions of anger. Padura's writing invited me to take that route, and the actors also led me that way. The film thus takes on a degree of emotion that I could feel from the first improvisation sessions, and also in the evenings I spent there.

**Even if that meant coming across as pedagogical?**

Not so many people really know the Cuban history, and it appeared important to make

some events understandable.

But I think this pedagogical aspect never acts to the detriment of the emotion. We always tried to make sure that the two levels of reading -- Cuban history/more universal history -- co-exist in the film, and even mutually feed one another. And I feel like anyone can see a part of themselves in those stories : our hope, disillusionment, questions we ask toward the future of our world.

**At the same time, the theatricality, in its artifice, is counterbalanced by a sort of naturalism, both in the writing and the directing.**

We did effectively try to inject some jolts into the approach. For example, the theatrical length of the tirades had to be counterbalanced by the trivial language, the least “literary” possible. Padura has the knack of writing the language of the Cuban streets and capturing its rhythms. I also filmed with two cameras, as I have done since *The Class*, when I was already trying to break out of the restrictive framework of the single location. The approach is designed to be entirely in the service of the actors, to give them the greatest possible latitude. That allows things to happen, to film simultaneously the shot and the reverse shot, and to allow some overlaps in order to capture a lively and realistic dialogue.

**There’s also that openness on the city: the sound of a baseball match, the killing of a pig, a couple arguing.**

The idea was to invite the reality of the city onto the terrace rather than go wandering the streets. In Havana, everything seems up-close, the sounds are invasive, you live in a collective world. We may well have shot in a single location, but it was far from hermetic. We looked for a long time before we found the terrace where we filmed, climbing an incredible number of stairways. I wanted it to overlook the Malecón, that long seafront boulevard, because I wanted it to open onto a dual space: the open sea on the one side, the city and its rooftops on the other. I had pictured a terrace that would be like a raft. The problem is that the Malecón is also the noisiest place in Havana. Another constraint was that we had to avoid the low walls that surround most of the rooftops and which block the view when people are sitting down. We finally found this terrace, whose iron guardrails left the view open. It is located in Centro Habana, one of the city’s most dilapidated quarters. On the first day’s filming, we were hit by a tropical storm. There was four feet of water in the street, and I don’t know how many houses collapsed.

**Your previous film was in American English, this one in Cuban Spanish. What attracts you to filming in a foreign language?**

The question isn’t framed in those terms. The language is dictated by the story I want

to tell. I already spoke a little Spanish, but I set about learning it intensively. For six months, I did more Spanish than anything else, especially with my assistant, Elisa Rabelo de Juan, who is Cuban and who lives in Paris. I learned the dialogue in the script by heart to be sure that I really understood it well. For what might seem the most difficult aspect -- recognizing whether an actor, an intonation or a portrayal is accurate -- as presumptuous as it may seem, I don’t feel that posed a problem. In the same way I can like a Japanese actor in a film, I’m capable of recognizing when one of my actors hits the right note or when he doesn’t.

## IV Resonance

**The final scene in *Foxfire* suggests that the fate of the main character lies in Fidel Castro’s Cuba. In fact, *Return to Ithaca* seems like both an echo and a counterpoint to the previous film: they are both films about a “gang” wrestling with ideas of utopia, set in different periods and at different ages.**

It wasn’t premeditated. I can identify with an idea or a project, but that never leads to a feeling of building a coherent body of work. Of course, I can see that there is a certain convergence and resonance between my films. I have some fixed ideas: the question of the group, the pressure of the ideal and the risk of it being betrayed, or again that nostalgia which people often mention in relation to me, which I don’t like and with which I try to avoid. It’s true that at the start of the film, I wanted to give the impression that they were adolescents: the same as they were when they met at high school, when they listened to the Beatles together, or Serrat or the Mamas and Papas, before each embarking on their own different path. I liked the idea of seeking out what’s left of the kids in these characters in their fifties.

**How far do you identify with this Cuban story?**

The need for the collective, and nostalgia for a period when I was more likely to believe in an ideal, whereas nowadays I feel as if I’ve somewhat given up the fight: all that seems sufficiently universal for me that I can find an echo in it. Cuban or not, the issue of disillusionment which builds up over time can be a shared concern. In the same way that, when I was filming American kids in the 1950s, I had the feeling I was addressing the kids that I might run into today in the Parisian suburbs.

Interview by Philippe Mangeot







# BIOGRAPHY

Laurent Cantet (Director/Co-Screenwriter) was born in 1961 in Melle, France.  
RETURN TO ITHACA (Retour à Ithaque) is his latest feature film.

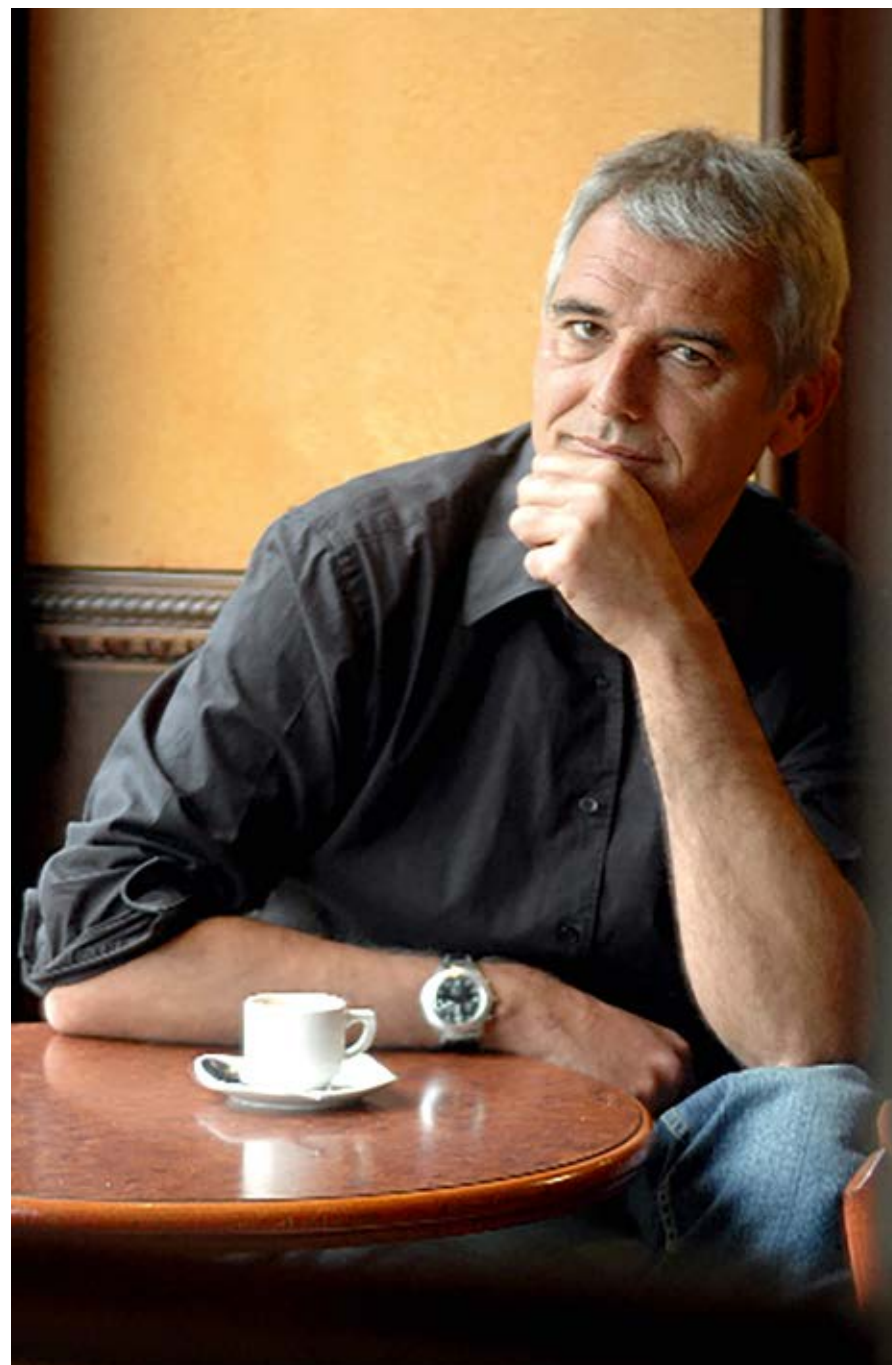
# FILMOGRAPHY

## Features

- 2014 **RETURN TO ITHACA** (RETOUR A ITHAQUE)  
Venice Days – Office Selection  
Toronto International Film Festival – Special Presentations  
San Sebastian International Film Festival - Pearls
- 2012 **FOXFIRE** (CONFESSIONS D'UN GANG DE FILLES)  
Toronto International Film Festival – Special Presentations  
San Sebastian International Film Festival – In Competition
- 2012 **7 DAYS IN HAVANA** (segment LA FUENTE)  
Cannes – Official Selection – Un Certain Regard
- 2008 **THE CLASS** (ENTRE LES MURS)  
Cannes – Official Selection - In Competition – Winner of the Palme D'Or  
Cesar (French Academy Award) – Best Adapted Screenplay
- 2005 **HEADING SOUTH** (VERS LE SUD)  
Venice – Official Selection - In Competition
- 2001 **TIME OUT** (L'EMPLOI DU TEMPS)  
Venice - Lion of the Year  
Montreal - Louve d'Or
- 1999 **HUMAN RESOURCES** (RESSOURCES HUMAINES)  
Cesar (French Academy Award) - Best First Film  
European Film Awards - Discovery of the Year  
San Sebastian - Best New Director  
Louis Delluc Award (France) – Best First Film
- 1997 **LES SANGUINAIRES** (TV)

## Short films

- 1995 **JEUX DE PLAGE**  
1993 **TOUS A LA MANIF**  
Jean Vigo Award (France)



# CREDITS

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