

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 39

Issue 2 *Testimonies of Environmental Injustice
in the Global South*

Article 15

2015

Leon Sachs. The Pedagogical Imagination: The Republican Legacy in Twenty-First Century French Literature and Film. Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska P, 2014. xi + 227 pp.

Zachary R. Hagins
Rhodes College, haginsz@rhodes.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Hagins, Zachary R. (2015) "Leon Sachs. The Pedagogical Imagination: The Republican Legacy in Twenty-First Century French Literature and Film. Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska P, 2014. xi + 227 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1843>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Leon Sachs. *The Pedagogical Imagination: The Republican Legacy in Twenty-First Century French Literature and Film*. Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska P, 2014. xi + 227 pp.

Abstract

Review of Leon Sachs. *The Pedagogical Imagination: The Republican Legacy in Twenty-First Century French Literature and Film*. Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska P, 2014. xi + 227 pp.

Keywords

republican, pedagogy, education, formalism, France

Leon Sachs. *The Pedagogical Imagination: The Republican Legacy in Twenty-First Century French Literature and Film*. Lincoln/London: U of Nebraska P, 2014. xi + 227 pp.

In the 2002 *Dictionnaire critique de la République* (*The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*), historians Christophe Prochasson and Vincent Duclert assert that France's republican culture must rediscover its strangeness, a call for scholars to look at this familiar object of study in a new way. Leon Sachs views the challenge of defamiliarizing republican ideology as a task best suited to works of art. He connects contemporary cultural products to the history of republican pedagogy, principally through formal devices found in select twenty-first-century French literary and filmic texts representing education. Aligning with New Formalist criticism, Sachs argues that critical reading embodies modern pedagogical principles inextricably bound to creating and perpetuating the republican tradition. He demonstrates this connection through reading Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*), Erik Orsenna's *La grammaire est une chanson douce* (*Grammar is a Sweet, Gentle Song*), Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'esquive* (*Games of Love and Chance*), and François Bégaudeau's *Entre les murs* (*The Class*) as literary or filmic object lessons. These works, he contends, demand a formalist reading because they draw attention to their own formal properties.

The notion of the object lesson (*la leçon de choses*) allows Sachs to establish a historical framework of pedagogical doctrines dating back to the late nineteenth century. In the first chapter, he outlines an intellectual and cultural genealogy connecting the Third Republic's "pedagogical revolution" to present-day cultural depictions of republican education. In particular, Sachs offers the object lesson as paradigmatic of a pedagogical shift in which the student participates in engaged, pragmatic learning. Modeled on scientific inquiry and requiring personal observation, the object lesson focuses on a cultural text's formal properties. It engages the reader/viewer in an active, experiential activity and thus, for Sachs, reflects the cultural legacy of autonomous rational inquiry essential to republican pedagogy. Subsequent chapters thus investigate how a given literary or filmic text's dialogical relationship between form and content allows the reader/viewer to reexamine contemporary republican education.

In Chapter Two, Sachs posits the appearance of the *Nouveau Larousse illustré* ('New Illustrated Larousse') in the opening sequence of Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* as a structuring device for the entire project, one that connects it to republican pedagogical culture. Sachs contends that the opening montage and the penultimate segment, which focuses on literacy classes for immigrants in a disadvantaged Parisian suburb, bookend a sustained reflection on reading and learning to read that has heretofore been overlooked. Founding his

argument on Varda's penchant for lexicology—also reflected in the alphabetical organization of memories in her autobiography *Varda par Agnès* ('Varda by Agnès')—Sachs envisions the filmmaker as a modern-day Pierre Larousse. Highlighting the work's form and its usage of Larousse's dictionary, he finds that Varda's to and fro between word and image reflects innovative pedagogical techniques developed by Larousse. For Sachs, Varda's documentary surpasses a mere reflection on reading; it uncovers nineteenth-century approaches to literacy still present in how the contemporary reader/viewer approaches traditional and new media.

Exemplary of Sachs's reading of the interplay between form and content, the third chapter draws on the metaphor of gleaning to demonstrate how Orsenna's *La grammaire est une chanson douce* rewrites G. Bruno's 1877 *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* ('The Tour of France by Two Children'), the classic fin-de-siècle reader steeped in republican morality, culture, and tradition. Sachs identifies the similarities of the two works' forms to underscore differences between them. He contends that these disparities exist because Orsenna's text positions itself as a corrective to an excessive scientification of literary studies. Although Sachs points out that *La grammaire est une chanson douce* condemns dispassionate literary analysis that distrusts texts *a priori*, he also displays how the structure of Orsenna's work relies on the very republican pedagogical tradition it critiques. For Sachs, Orsenna's text is less a call for the return to prescientific humanistic literary studies than a caution against overinterpretation.

Sachs argues in Chapter Four that Kechiche's *L'esquive* engages with the complexity of contemporary pedagogical debates through a dialectical opposition of progressive republicanism and conservative republicanism. The former aims to accommodate France's multicultural population while the latter upholds the universal value of the literary canon regardless of students' cultural differences. The film, however, does not take a clear stance on the place of literary studies in republican education, a conflict that, for Sachs, is reflected in the characters' unresolved relationships. He displays that *L'esquive* defends the legitimacy of both antithetical stances towards literature's role in the classroom and thus provides a more balanced view of republican education often overlooked by film critics and scholars.

In a similar fashion, Sachs suggests that Bégaudeau's *Entre les murs* presents the contemporary state of the French educational system as neutrally as possible so that readers can judge the "crisis" for themselves. For Sachs, the text's chronicle form, including the interjections of realia from the sphere of education, reduces perceived authorial interference and increases acceptance of the text's supposed impartiality. Showing that *Entre les murs* conflates spaces of reading and learning, Sachs argues that its political engagement lies in its poetic features. In particular, he examines the metaphors of walls to demonstrate how the work

proposes an alternative conception of *laïcité* (secularism), one that must be constructed in the present rather than handed down as an immutable, historical pillar of republicanism. The act of critical reading that, according to Sachs, the text's form requires of its audience is founded on a dialectical reasoning that represents a central tenet of republican culture. This act enables a distancing from that culture, however, which allows the reader/viewer to consider republicanism anew.

Throughout *The Pedagogical Imagination*, Sachs's analyses establish how reading critically enacts republican pedagogy. Sachs's own incisive readings of these works recuperate textual aspects that others have generally disregarded. As a result, the formal properties of the cultural products to which he attends defamiliarize republican pedagogical thought. The primary contribution of Sachs's work thus lies in how it reframes contemporary debates to gain fresh perspectives on intersections of the French educational system, republican ideology, and national identity.

Zachary R. Hagins
Rhodes College