

Children of Paradise (*Les Enfants du paradis*, 1945)

Chiara Tognolotti

dir. Marcel Carné; prod. Société Nouvelle Pathé Cinéma; screenplay Jacques Prévert; photography Roger Hubert; music Maurice Thiriet, Joseph Kosma. 35mm, black/white, 195 mins. Société Nouvelle Pathé Cinema, distrib. Pathé Consortium Cinéma.

The entire film appears to be embodied in one sequence towards the end of the film's first act (*époque*). The spectators share the point of view of an excited audience in the popular Théâtre des Funambules, situated on the Boulevard du Temple in 1840 Paris. The famous mime Jean-Baptiste Debureau (played by Jean-Louis Barrault) is on stage with one of his early successes, *Le Palais des mirages ou L'Amoureux de la lune*. In the previous sequence, Garance (played by Arletty), the woman Baptiste loves madly, welcomes the courting of the actor Frédéric Lemaître (played by Pierre Brasseur), as the mime's extreme shyness prohibits his chances of becoming Garance's lover. Now, while performing Pierrot on the stage, the artist looks up lovingly at Garance, who is standing still, interpreting the role of a statue, and offers her a luxuriant bunch of flowers. As the charming, motionless woman remains indifferent to Pierrot's glance, he falls soundly asleep. Soon after Harlequin/Lemaître steps in, and with only a seductive glimpse he brings the wonderful statue back to life. She promptly gets down from the pedestal and runs off with him. Upon his awakening, Pierrot can do nothing but despair for his love's loss.

Baptiste/Pierrot's love for Garance/the statue is but an illusion, a *mirage*, as goes the title of the pantomime. As a new Galatea, the statue comes back to life and departs arm in arm with her Pygmalion, leaving Pierrot in his sorrow. Garance first becomes Lemaître's mistress, then that of the rich Count Édouard de Montray (Louis Salou).



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Baptiste continues pursuing his dream of unattainable love but ends up reluctantly marrying the actress Nathalie (Maria Casarès), who loves him dearly. Several years later, Baptiste sees Garance again. She is still attached to the Count, yet she has not forgotten the mime and every night she attends his show, sitting incognito in a box of the theater. They meet again for what will be their only romantic night. The Count is shot by the outlaw and amateur playwright, Pierre-François Lacenaire (Marcel Herrand), Garance's lover of old who is jealous of her ties with de Montray. In the end, Nathalie, Baptiste, and Garance will split up forever, conscious of the intensity of the attraction they share but cannot realize.

Shot in the Studios de la Victorine in Nice between 1943 and 1944, when France was still occupied by German troops, *Les Enfants du paradis* was produced by Pathé under extremely difficult conditions and shown in Paris in March 1945, a few months after the liberation, with war still underway. The film represents French cinema's desire to create a national vision in competition with Hollywood, relying on Marcel Carné's masterful directing, Jacques Prévert's writing, and the acting of stars such as Barrault, Arletty, and Brasseur (Sellier; Forbes; Jeancolas; Driskell 2012). The plot fluidly blends historical figures (besides Debureau, there are Lemaître and Lacenaire) and fictional characters and events (Garance, the Count, and their sentimental intrigue) that stand out from theatrical life on Boulevard du Temple, among a crowd of acrobats, jugglers, fire-eaters, and popular theaters mostly dedicated to pantomime, restored in great detail by Alexander Trauner's set design (he was Jewish and Léon Barsacq acted as his front).

Les Enfants du paradis is deeply rooted in the French cinema of the thirties. The collaboration between Carné and Prévert marked that decade with alluring and mysterious shades swaying from noir to *mélo*, in such pictures as *Drôle de drame* (1937), *Le Quai des brumes* (*The Port of Shadows*, 1938), *Hôtel du Nord* (1939), and *Le Jour se lève* (1939), and further up to *Les Visiteurs du soir* (*The Devil's Envoy*, 1942). Much of the visual style of these works is echoed in *Les Enfants du paradis*: Sparkling passions in working class Paris and ambiguous figures of the slums (especially in Lacenaire's character) resume the motif of the lyrical dimension of a sad daily life—typical of »poetic realism«—and underline its melodramatic tone in the iconographic and narrative theme of impossible love (Vincendeau 2018). What significantly changes, in comparison to the films of the thirties, are the features of the characters. Instead of the sterling male figures conforming to strict patriarchal rules represented in prewar pictures, shy and silent men like Debureau/Jean-Louis Barrault now make their appearance, kindly refusing their forerunners' loud behavior (Sellier; Burch and Sellier). Moreover, female characters attain an unusual degree of emotional autonomy. While Nathalie is locked into the domestic stereotype of a mother and wife designed to self-sacrifice, Garance leaves herself open to the freedom of desire—even though Arletty's disputed star persona, accused of collaborationism because of her relationship with a German officer, reflects in some respects her character's ambiguity (Vincendeau 2000; Driskell 2015). Compared to previous films by Carné and Prévert, the storytelling in *Les Enfants du paradis* seems to disintegrate: The rhythm slows down, and the flow of the events is almost lost in a lazy *mise-en-scène* that spreads the characters' deeds in the timeless dimension of a stage drama. Thus, the plot of *Les Enfants du paradis* mixes theatrical affections with those of the characters' lives, until it makes them indistinguishable. Therefore, the contiguity of illusion and »reality« is the picture's red thread that interweaves two motives that are preeminently melodramatic: impossible love and extreme passion. The characters, like theatrical masks, play out

their drama aware of moving towards a well-known ending, within the stage's unvarying space and time. The theme of life as theater, then, emphasizes the *mélo* style: The characters' awareness of merely rehearsing a script, written once and for all, echoes the melodramatic motif of a tragic and predictable destiny, making the film yet more intense.

A few years later, Jean Renoir and Max Ophuls again combine theater, life, and cinema. At the end of *Le Carrosse d'or* (*The Golden Coach*, 1952), Camilla chooses to renounce the »real life« and live on stage, the only place where she can be happy, through becoming another person, as the camera literally leaves the theater and thus reveals the artificial nature of the story to the audience. In one episode of *La Ronde* (1953), Jean-Louis Barrault and Isa Miranda play an actor couple who are unable to live together without resorting to the dramatic lines they use onstage. The whole picture is a vivid and clear reflection on the artificial nature of filmic representation. Renoir and Ophuls' pictures display their characters with ironic detachment, acquainting the audience with the deception of what they are looking at, as the artificiality of the theatrical world reflects on filmmaking and reveals its fictional nature. Carné, on the contrary, stays inside the false universe of representation: He does not disclose its workings, for he stops short of the threshold of the stage. In *Les Enfants du paradis*, the cinematographic device does not expose the fiction that innervates it, and instead remains upright and firmly inside the borders of a genre: a perfect world that chooses to fully accept the *mélo*'s extreme and absolute affections in order to move its audience to tears.

References

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