



Les Enfants du Paradis :

The Children of Resistance

“L’art se révèle [dans *Les Enfants du Paradis*] par une synthèse rigoureusement propre au cinéma, entre . . . l’image et l’imagination . . . la poésie et le réel.”¹ Gabriel Audisio captures the theme of this masterful wartime collaboration, which successfully overcame innumerable production obstacles in occupied Paris, to present illusion and reality as psychological concepts fused together in a volatile complex. Through cinematic and narrative elements, director Marcel Carné and writer Jacques Prévert construct a sweeping analogy to communicate their ideas. A theatrical milieu is the vehicle used to convey the theme of the film as well as provide an atmosphere in which specific characters may exemplify the illusion-reality relationship with varying consequences. Just as the reality of the everyday audience enters into a relationship with the illusionistic “Théâtre des Funambules” (Theater of Tightrope Walkers), so do its actors and patrons attempt to impose their illusions on circumstantial reality. The film’s metaphor of the “funambule” influences the lives of the characters as well as the audience, echoing symbolically the general struggle to balance reality and illusion. This cross-

commentary from the collective “we” to the unique individual, and back again, lends a resonant universality to the consequences of each character’s inner resistance.

The strength of the characters’ thematic elaboration in *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945) depends on the construction of the theater as an analogy for the psychological struggle of the actors. This analogy becomes pertinent through the visual universalization of the theme. To convey this, Carné packs every few frames with undifferentiated “extras.” A scale nineteenth-century replica of the Boulevard du Crime is captured in long establishing shots, turgid with milling people. These crowds will serve throughout the film as a leitmotif underscoring the presence of the universal human community. Carné’s crowds cannot be dismissed as mere extras. They sit on rooftops, press into bars, and gather loudly around street vendors and sideshows. Individual lead actors must push their way through the masses to enter the foreground of the frame and often disappear back into the crowd, most notably the main characters of Garance and Baptiste in the film’s closing long shot. From the boulevard, the crowds eagerly

spill into the Théâtre des Funambules, whose very name is rooted in fantasy. The rowdy, everyday reality of the audience participates in the creation of the illusion as enthusiastically as children.

Jacques Prévert has written that “Les Enfants du Paradis” are “the actors . . . and the audience too, the good-natured working-class audience.”² And, indeed, the title seems to embrace both sides of the stage in the divine creation, just as an onstage brawl in the storyline physically unites the actors and the audience. However, the film’s title also points up the childlike vulnerability to such dreamy delusions as God and paradise. This close relationship between the massive, undifferentiated audience and the film’s action is intensified by frequent use of reverse-shot editing, creating an intimate visual bond through parallel shots of house and stage. Stylistically, the film’s illusionistic quality—as analogy—is also stressed by the design of the opening credits (the theater’s proscenium arch and curtain are used as a wipe at the beginning, middle, and end) as well as the classical two-act structure of the film’s narrative.

With this symbolic framing established, Carné projects the theatrical fusion of illusion and reality into the lives of individual characters. “L’atmosphère et les personnages comptent . . . plus que l’intrigue elle-même,” says Prévert.³ The screenwriter utilizes these various characters to render the theme more complex, fleshing it out with differing examples of struggle and consequence. Frédéric Lemaître, as his name might imply, is an example of illusion working to the benefit of personal reality. Through his visions of theatrical greatness and a puffed-up sense of his own potential, he successfully convinces the director of the Funambules to allow him to act onstage. Later in the film, a less naïve Lemaître cunningly outwits the conventional reality of “les trois unités classiques,” stylistically embodied in three playwrights. By trusting his bond with the audience, he imposes his own creative illusion on a stage performance, disregarding the rehearsed script altogether. Baptiste, the mime, is less successful imposing his illusion on the reality of circumstance. His love object, Garance, says he “speaks like a child,”⁴ aptly describing the

vulnerable goddess fantasy that he tries to make of her. Garance is not Baptiste’s precious creation, however, but a common, streetwise woman easily seduced. The failure to impose illusion on reality is echoed in the larger theatrical analogy as Baptiste pantomimes the same narrative of unrequited love to a joyfully receptive (universal) audience, especially those working-class masses packed tightly into the cheap seats at the top of the theater (known euphemistically as “paradise”).

Other characters have similar difficulty imposing their illusions on reality due, in part, to the illegitimate methods they use. Édouard, Comte de Montray, tries to buy the “goddess” illusion of Garance but incurs the fatal wrath of the thief Pierre Lacenaire through his jealous pride. Nathalie pines for Baptiste, dreaming of a love she will never receive. The actress is docked three francs when she calls after the mime unthinkingly, breaking the rules of stage decorum. She breaks the rules of love later in the film with a dearer price to pay to reality—a son by a man who does not share her tender feelings. That very man, Baptiste, will subsequently “steal” the identity of a rag seller off the street in a pantomimed attempt to win the heart of Garance, his imagined goddess, only to chase after her shadow in an empty box seat. These characters are never satisfied because they refuse to adapt their illusions to the reality of other characters. Too weak to overcome reality with illusion, they are, at the same time, unwilling to compromise—echoing, perhaps, larger sentiments about France and its citizens of the era.

Les Enfants du Paradis extends its metaphorical world of theater and real life in the Boulevard du Crime beyond the teeming Parisian street, even beyond the film itself. Together, Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert create a milieu that binds the mass public with the individual, the audience and the actor, reality and illusion. Prévert’s intention to make *Les Enfants du Paradis* “a story like any other”⁵ in its universality is achieved through specific characterization and Carné’s inter/intra-frame compositions. These narrative and cinematic techniques fuse the struggle between illusion and reality into a poignant, and historic, artwork of French cinema.

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¹ Gabriel Audisio, in Robert Chazal, *Marcel Carné* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1965), 162.

² Jacques Prévert, *Children of Paradise: A Film by Marcel Carné* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 9.

³ Marcel Carné, in Chazal, *Marcel Carné*, 98.

⁴ Prévert, *Children of Paradise*, 85.

⁵ Prévert, *Children of Paradise*, 9.