

### Contextualising *Les enfants du paradis*

It's now 70 years or more since the success of what was known as the 'poetic realism' of 1930s French Cinema established an international reputation for French studios and for a group of 'film artists'. In the US, 1939 is often seen as a high point of the Hollywood system (with films like *Stagecoach* and *The Wizard of Oz*) and into the wartime period, Hollywood would produce an epic like *Gone With the Wind* and massive popular successes like *Casablanca* alongside more obviously propagandistic films supporting the war effort. In Britain, the cinema in wartime had many popular triumphs directly supporting the struggle against fascism and eventually the interest that they generated in 'domestic' cinema led to the huge audiences of the immediate post-war period. Propaganda films were of paramount importance in Germany and filmmaking was supported by Goebbels for that purpose.

In France, however, the film industry entered a kind of twilight world post 1940. With Northern France under Nazi Occupation and Southern France run by the Vichy government and later partly by the Italians, the film studios were allowed to continue but only if they steered away from any form of commentary on wartime conditions. The successful filmmakers of the 'Golden Age' of French Cinema in the 1930s faced a dilemma. Some, like Jean Renoir and Julien Duvivier fled to Hollywood. Others, including Jewish artists and German exiles went into hiding or discreetly moved to the South and worked occasionally through the Victorine studios in Nice – where surveillance of activities was less intense. Those who remained in Paris either made historical films or used stories set in a 'not quite present day' society. German control over production included the funding of a studio, Continental, from scratch. It soon established itself as a producer with the resources to attract some of the better filmmakers. Wartime genres tended to be comedies, crime films or melodramas (often with a theme of guilt about turning away from 'order' – see Hayward 1998:156). Filmmakers were forced to become very clever in working allegorical themes into otherwise innocuous material.

#### What is 'poetic realism'?

This cinematic form approaches 'reality' in everyday life through a heightened sense of poetic expression. It



Marcel Carné on the set of *Les enfants du paradis*

doesn't attempt the 'reality effect' of location shooting and non-professional actors that might be found in later forms of 'documentary realism' – although one of the directors associated with the approach, Jean Renoir, made a film in 1934, *Toni*, about Italian migrants in the South of France, which used precisely those two elements.

The style or movement is seen by some critics to have had three phases – first during the rise of the 'Popular Front' (the alliance of socialists, communists and radicals which produced the governments from 1936-38), then a second phase of a more doom-laden period with fear of the onset of war from 1938-40. During the Occupation the style was actively discouraged by both the Germans and Vichy sensibilities. *Les enfants du paradis*, with its complicated production history and allegorical qualities has been argued to represent the third and final phase.

The 'poetic' quality was achieved primarily through carefully-written scripts with heightened 'poetic' dialogue alongside music and detailed studio sets designed to accommodate precise camera movements and lighting. It required directors and actors to work closely together to the same ends, so that the defining experience of watching the film

became a sense of ‘coherence’ in representing the intensity of mood.

The poetic realist films focus on stories set in working-class environments with central male characters who are industrial workers, petty criminals, army deserters etc., often caught up in plots which involve them in impossible choices. Meanwhile, the women are servants, assistants, orphans, prostitutes, entertainers etc.

The dominant male figure in these films is usually played by Jean Gabin. The female leads include Michèle Morgan and Arletty. Morgan and Gabin left France for America in 1940 but Arletty stayed to star in *Les enfants du paradis*.

### *Le crime de M. Lange* (1936)

Perhaps the first film to combine the ingredients that made up poetic realism, this little masterpiece was directed by Jean Renoir with dialogues by Jacques Prévert. The story idea originated from a left-wing theatre group. It concerns a community that lives in an apartment building around a courtyard. In the basement is a laundry business and upstairs is a publishing company run by the unscrupulous M. Batala. In the extract we see the scenes immediately after the (false) news announcement that M. Batala has been killed in a railway accident. The workers in the company decide to form a co-operative and the death of M. Batala promises some freedom for the caretaker's family and for M. Lange, one of the company's employees who is the writer of a popular serial about 'Arizona Jim'.

As well as the general support for the workers during the period of the Popular Front, the film is important because of Renoir's decision to build a large 'courtyard set' at the Billancourt Studios in Paris. This enabled him to develop the long take style with a moving camera and staging in depth. What is noticeable in the extract is the large number of characters and staging that focuses on a group in the foreground and others discernible in the background – sometimes seen through windows, doorways etc. This film was a low budget production but it demonstrates the beginnings of a style which in *Les enfants du paradis*, with a much larger budget, produces quite stunning effects in representing the hustle of Parisian streets.

### *Le quai des brumes* (*Port of Shadows*, 1938)

“The term [poetic realism] can perhaps best be understood by reference to the popular music of the time, specifically the style called *chanson réaliste*. As made famous by Edith Piaf, Damia, Fréhel, and Lucienne Delyle in particular, this



Jean Gabin and Michele Morgan in *Le quai des brumes*.

genre evokes a world-weary romanticism with untrained and frequently raspy voices, minor-key melodies, and dark narratives set more often than not in semi-criminal milieux. What made it realistic was its scorn for happy endings and bucolic settings; even if it amounted to another sort of fantasy, it was at least a fantasy that was congruent with working-class lives. Similarly, *Port of Shadows* and the other examples of poetic realism in the cinema owe little to Émile Zola, but neither do they have anything to do with dinner jackets, cruise ships, or independent incomes. The high artifice of *Port of Shadows*, meanwhile, might best be understood if the movie is considered as a kind of song: a boy, a girl, surging love, lurking death. Its fated momentum adheres to the mind as tenaciously as a refrain.” (from the Luc Sante essay on <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/335-port-of-shadows>)

*Quai des brumes* comes in the second phase when the alliance of left parties was breaking up and France was shifting right. Jean Gabin plays a soldier who is presumably a deserter. He hitches a ride into the port of Le Havre where he finds an isolated bar/shack in the fog on a beach. Here he meets a girl (Michèle Morgan, not yet 18) and becomes involved in her troubles. He also takes over the identity of an artist who decides to end his life. The omens are not good and Gabin meets his fate in the foggy world of the port.

This film was produced by the full team of Marcel Carné, Jacques Prévert, Maurice Jaubert (music), Alexandre Trauner (art/production design) and Eugen Schufftan (cinematography). The cast also includes several major actors from the period such as Michel Simon, Pierre Brasseur and Robert Le Vigan – the latter pair later working on *Les enfants*.



Raymonde (Arletty) is worshipped by a client in *Hôtel du Nord*

### *Hôtel du Nord* (1938)

For his next film Carné was not able to use Prévert but Jaubert and Trauner were available for this adaptation of a novel set in working-class Paris. The real Hôtel du Nord still exists on the bank of the Canal St. Martin – now renovated for tourists. It was impossible to film on location so Carné decided to build the entire location next to the Billancourt Studio.

Although the story is meant to focus on a pair of young lovers, it is rather stolen from them by Arletty and Louis Jouvet as a prostitute and her pimp who live in the hotel. The film was enormously popular with audiences.

### *Le jour se lève* (1939)

Released in France just three months before the outbreak of war, the ambiguously titled '*Daybreak*' is the most doom-laden romance of all of Marcel Carné's features. Again with dialogue by Prévert, sets by Trauner and music by Jaubert, *Daybreak* begins with a shooting on the top floor of a tall rooming house. François (Jean Gabin) remains in his room while his victim tumbles down the stairs. The police arrive but François barricades himself in and flashbacks begin to tell us how the situation arose. François is a worker in a local foundry somewhere in the industrial North East of France. He meets the beautiful Françoise (Jacqueline Laurent) and is then dismayed to see that she is already involved with the manipulative Valentin (Jules Berry) a 'dog trainer' with a variety act. In turn, Clara (Arletty) leaves the dog act, in which she is the 'beautiful assistant' and turns to François for support. This 'square' of relationships threatens to prevent anyone from being happy. As for François, we know he will die or will be arrested at dawn when the police will return in large numbers.

The three Carné films (and those of Duvivier and Renoir) were banned during the Occupation but they had already opened in the US and several other overseas territories. It isn't difficult to see now that

they were clear precursors of the Hollywood *film noir* that emerged in the 1940s. Several of them were re-made in Hollywood (with Henry Fonda (!) weirdly cast in the Gabin role in *Daybreak*). Of course, they shared the influence of the German emigré technicians who moved to Hollywood from France. This has been suggested as another reason why they were banned by the Nazis.

### Marcel Carné (1906–1996)

Marcel Carné, the son of a cabinet maker, entered the movies as the assistant of Jacques Feyder. At the age of 29 he directed his first film, *Jenny*, in 1936. Feted after the release of *Les enfants du paradis*, his reputation amongst *cinephiles* collapsed during the 1950s. Because of these later films, Carné became the kind of director deplored by Truffaut – but he deserves to be remembered for the earlier films.

### Jacques Prévert (1900-1977)

Prevert was a poet first then a 'dialoguist', providing Carné's films with one of their essential ingredients. His poems were published after 1945. Earlier he had been part of a surrealist group in Paris and then the 'agit-prop' group Octobre during the 1930s (when he worked on *Le crime de M. Lange*).



Gabin and Arletty in *Le jour se lève*

### Arletty (1898-1992)

Born Léonie Marie Julie Bathiat, Arletty was a working-class girl who made her name in music hall before claiming roles in cabaret and the theatre, eventually achieving success in the cinema by the mid-1930s. Her performances were always 'strong' and believable and she was perhaps the only female star of her generation who could compete on screen with Jean Gabin. Her role as Garance in *Les enfants* made her an icon of French Cinema – though she was criticised after the Liberation for 'fraternising' with a German officer. This prompted the possibly apocryphal remark "my heart is French but my ass is international".





Arletty as Garance amongst the crowd in *Les enfants du paradis*

### *Les enfants du paradis*

The production of *Les enfants* was extremely difficult. Carné, Prévert and Arletty made a film in 1942, *Les visiteurs du soir* (*The Devil's Envoys*), a medieval-set struggle between good and evil with possible allegorical undertones. In 1943 Carné was searching for new ideas. He moved down to Nice (in Vichy France) where Prévert was living. Trauner, in semi-hiding was only a few miles away. They met Jean-Louis Barrault in Nice and the actor told them some tales about the mime artist Debureau and the 'Boulevard du Crime' in Paris during the Bourbon Restoration period (1814-1830). Carné liked the tales and researched them back in Paris before presenting an outline to the others in Nice. With a major producer on board, they thought of two films with the possibility of a third. But moving into production was not straightforward. They had a script by early 1943 and an Italian company was attached for a co-production. The plan was to build a gigantic set for the Paris street scenes in the Victorine Studios in Nice – with some interiors and post-production scheduled for a Paris studio shoot. The sets were designed by Trauner, but since he was concerned about exposure (as a Hungarian Jew he faced the possibility of being taken to a camp) someone else had to build them. Jaubert had been killed early in the war and the music was partly written by another Jewish member of the team Joseph Kosma. At the same time, one of the actors cast, Rober Le Vigan was anti-semitic and pro-German. He was eventually replaced.

Shooting began in August 1943 but after the Allied landed in Sicily the co-production deal soon collapsed. Carné had to return to Paris. Trouble with the Occupation authorities meant that filming could not restart until February 1944. In the meantime the set in Nice had been damaged and it couldn't be lit at night due to restrictions. After the Allies landed in Normandy in June and the production was still not completed, Carné began to drag his heels on purpose, postponing the film's release until 9 March 1945 in Paris, by which time France was virtually a free country again. Carné persuaded the distributor to release the two films, *Le boulevard de crime* and *L'homme blanc* together as the 190 minute film we are screening today.

### The film narrative

The title refers to the 'popular audience' for Paris theatre in the early 19th century – those up in the 'cheap seats', the 'Gods' as English theatre parlance has it. In French this is *paradis*. Although the film is set in a historical period over 100 years earlier, these 'children in paradise' are kin to the working-class characters in Prévert's 1930s films.

In his essay, Jean-Pierre Jeancolas points out that Prévert carefully wrote parts for three historical figures (the mime artist Debureau, the cold-blooded killer Lacenaire and the actor Frédérick Lemaître). The roles also included the 'historical imaginary' – the rag-and-bone man character who was a staple of the

popular theatre of the time – and Arletty as Garance, a character from the ‘contemporary imaginary’. Garance had her roots in the previous films of Carné and Prévert.

Jeancolas suggests that the film’s length allows Prévert’s script to delve into the depths of the characters in a way that was impossible in the earlier 90 minute dramas. In this way, the film can be ‘romantic’ and full of despair, but still not be quite as pessimistic as the earlier films. Where those films clearly signalled the end of an era, there is a sense in *Les enfants du paradis* that whatever happens to individual characters, the show goes on.

Equally important is the sense of spectacle. The big films of the period (e.g. *Gone With the Wind*) were popular because they took audiences ‘out of themselves’. Life in Paris in 1945 was not easy. Once the euphoria of liberation was over, conditions were difficult on a day-to-day basis but *Les enfants* offered three hours of escape.

Jeancolas offers one other reason why the film continued to resonate with audiences over the years that followed (it was shown in Paris almost continually in one small cinema or another until the 1980s). It offers an iconic view of a Parisian community and a group of memorable characters that doesn’t come from adaptations of literature or theatre but directly from cinema itself – this is what helped imprint it on the memories of the audience.

The question that remains is “what were the filmmakers trying to say?”. Were they making an allegory to comment on the Occupation? The short answer is that we have no way of knowing. Because Carné changed the date of release, it was never tested on screen during the Occupation. Watching it now it is impossible to recreate the sense of how it might have worked then. But what we do know is that the film drew on the best aspects of the poetic realist legacy and that it presented a community and a set of characters who displayed humanity in their range of attitudes and behaviours. It’s good to have such a film back on cinema screens.

At least one critic has tried to relate the film’s meanings to a commentary on its context. The following extract from Peter Cowie’s essay on the Criterion website at <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/175-children-of-paradise> does contain SPOILERS – so don’t read it now if you want the film to give you surprises:

“Although the film works perfectly well at a surface level, every character, every gesture, springs from a coded approach to contemporary history.

Garance, with her stalwart commitment to liberty and the simple things of life, represents Occupied France. The count serves as a chilling paradigm for the Nazi regime, believing that his opulence can purchase anything in sight. Jéricho is the archetypal informer, flourishing in the atmosphere of confusion and mistrust of the Boulevard of Crime. The art of Baptiste [the Debureau character], and to some extent Frédérick, seems to encapsulate a folkloric tradition that touches the people at a profound level. Lacenaire awaits what will certainly be a visit to the guillotine with a smile of malevolent gratification on his lips, after dispatching the count in a Turkish bath. At once anarchist and career criminal, he exists to undermine the established order.

Just as the historical and political overtones of the film enable Carné and Prévert to pass oblique judgment on France under the Nazi yoke, so the erotic mood of the film is unusually ambiguous. Carné’s own homosexuality, at a time when diversity was not exactly welcomed in the movie industry, finds its metaphor in Baptiste and his androgynous appeal. Baptiste is attracted to Garance not just for her physical beauty, but for her statuesque strength in the face of condescension from the men surrounding her. When they do finally make love, one has the impression that Baptiste is succumbing to the embrace of Garance, and not vice versa.”

### References and further reading

Faulkner, Christopher, (2000) ‘Paris, Arizona; or the redemption of difference: Jean Renoir’s *Le crime de M. Lange*’ in Hayward and Vincendeau (eds) op cit  
Forbes, Jill (1997) *Les enfants du paradis*, London: BFI  
Hayward, Susan & Vincendeau, Ginette (eds) (2000) *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (2nd edition), London: Routledge  
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Jeancolas, Jean-Pierre (2000) ‘Carné’s *Les enfants du paradis*’ in Hayward and Vincendeau (eds) op cit  
Turim, Maureen (2000) ‘Poetic realism as psychoanalytical and ideological operation: Marcel Carné’s *Le jour se leve*’ in Hayward and Vincendeau (eds) op cit

<http://www.criterion.com/explore/15-poetic-realism>

(follow the links on this page to find other material on the films discussed today)

All four Carné films discussed here are available on DVD in the UK.

Roy Stafford, 10/12/2011