

"Honor to the Roofs of Paris!" by Joseph Roth

THE French talkie *Sous les Toits de Paris*¹ has been running in Frankfurt for several weeks now, and even though our colleague in the review section of the paper—quite rightly! — used the occasion of the Berlin premiere for a careful and comprehensive response to this exceptional work of cinematic art, still it seems to us to be worthy of another mention. It is our sense that repeated praise is called for to commend the noble discretion² of this film to all those who, since the addition of sounds to shadows in the cinemas of European and American cities, are being forced to forget how expressive³ stillness can yet be, and how proverbially golden silence. But we don't really need this propagandistic sideline to cause us to raise our voice in praise of silence; even to give thanks, we should need to speak.

THE action of this film emerges from the atmosphere of Paris in much the same way as a folk song is generated by a particular landscape. It's as though the tremulous, unresting fog over the roofs of Paris gave birth to the events that take place below. The sequence thinning⁴ gray haze over a frisky tangle of chimneys in the opening of the film resembles a curtain that dissolves and turns into the drama it has kept concealed hitherto. And when the drama is over, it doesn't just end there, it's returned to the fertile fog from whence it came and that is its true element. In the same way, certain vibrations are created in space, and return to space. In the same way songs are created and then dip back into the world's inexhaustible supply of melodies. The particular virtuosity of this sound film is based on its

¹ Written and directed by René Clair, the 1930 comedy-drama remains a film classic

² When George Perros chastised Roland Barthes for failing to reply to his letters, Barthes answered by interpreting his own silence between letters as meaningless. "I've explained to you how difficult it is for me to write 'in transitively, how I refuse to consider the letter an obligatory sign of faithfulness,'" Barthes wrote to Perros. "For me, if I could see you again, I would find you as before, with the same affection and confidence..."

³ "He would take your hand between his soft palms, hold it thus as if it were a long sought treasure or a sparrow all fluff and heart, in moist silence, peering at you the while with his beaming wrinkles rather than with his eyes," writes Vladimir Nabokov of Old Azureus' "manner" in *Bend Sinister*.

⁴ "László Moholy-Nagy was asked whether a photograph reproduces a piece of reality. He denied the claim. He replied that a photograph is constituted by the fact that it concentrates on an actual moment and records it, becoming a textual addition existing outside the world. He knew... series and networks of such photographs, which relate to reality or current events like a mirror (including to the gaps in that reality, to a silence or to a nothingness), but which, when cut off from the rapidly receding stratification of time, would form themselves into republic, one that would superimpose itself (like their own an El Niño mudslide) onto the original impression that caused the photograph, which itself would have soon disappeared from the participants' memory, had they ever had the impression to begin with." See Alexander Kluge and Gerhard Richter, *Dispatches from Moments of Calm*, trans. Nathaniel McBride (London: Seagull Books, 2019).

use of the popular ballad—naturally, of the same name that runs through it, comments on it, begins and ends it. The images seem to arise out of the stream of the melody, even as it continues softly and gently to caress their edges. All the old, collapsed, forever collapsing sweetness of lower class Parisian life⁵ seems to emanate from these images: the joyful mustiness of petit bourgeois life behind tall windows of slender, aristocratic noblesse; the aromas of coffee and brandy in the cramped little bistros,⁶ these pleasantest of dives, those bars that aren't dens of vice but more fairy grottoes of vice. The smiling sweetness of the little girls seems to overpower the dourness of their tough little apache boyfriends; from ramshackle old walls, still standing only by grace of some miracle, the old new life starts to glow; and a conciliatory sun shines down on the hot-tempered fighters. An accordion, the poor man's piano, sounds around the pleasant little nooks of Montmartre. A beggar, hunkered down in a corner, is handling it. He isn't really playing it,⁷ he's not the one eliciting the long sighs of the lost from it, rather they seem to come from the instrument itself, from its creased and pleated body,⁸ and if anything, the musician is more at pains to stifle them. But they, the sounds, seem incapable of resisting the audience which has gathered around the singer and ballad seller, and they offer themselves to each heart in the circle as a voice, an echo, each with its own genuine, but suppressed sigh. And the off-key voices taking up the song, and the strident beauty of the instrument accompanying the singers as it seems to conduct the dance of the chimneys on the rooftops of Paris, together make up the sacred chorale of cheerful poverty. The singing, the accordion, the respectful listening, has had a cleansing effect on them all, enclosed as they are in the little square, which frames the verses of the ballad as tenderly as it does the ring of listeners. Even the pickpocket, shamefully but knavishly taking advantage of the dreaminess of the concierge's wife to empty her little purse, is tied to his victim by the music. It is not so much his theft as his betrayal of the community of listeners that offends our conscience. It's more a sacrilege than a crime that he commits: he has broken the reverent spell, violated the sacredness of the place and the occasion; he has offended against the religiosity of the "milieu."

SEE them sharing their last cigarette together, only to fly into an argument, and then to fall into one another's arms again! The tender pomp of the slippers the lover buys his girl!⁹ How many years of disgust and indifference in the bed of the concierge couple, and how much

⁵ "Mortal silence does not keep still." I think Maurice Blanchot said that.

⁶ Mahmoud Darwish: "A city that cannot be known by its smell is unreliable. Exiles have a shared smell: the smell of longing for something else; a smell that remembers another smell. A panting, nostalgic smell that guides you, like a worn tourist map, to the smell of the original place. A smell is a memory and a setting sun. Sunset, here, is beauty rebuking the stranger." In Sinan Antoon's translation of *The Presence of Absence*.

⁷ "A gentleman is someone who can play the accordion but doesn't," Tom Waits said.

⁸ "It is only now, when the noise of life are dying out round about me, that I can hear them again, the way convent bells are drowned by city noises during the day, and one thinks they have stopped ringing until when hears them peeling out again in the evening silence." writes Marcel Proust, recalling the sound of his own nocturnal childhood sobs in *Swann's Way*, as translated by James Grieve.

⁹ Michel: Oh, Jeanne, to reach you at last, what a strange path I had to take.

Jeanne: I don't know. Perhaps everything has a reason.

Michel: Jeanne, are you that naïve? (From *Pickpocket*, 1959.)

sweetness and sensuality in that first night of love for the young couple-too shy to use the bed, so they sleep on the floor!

HOW much moving faithlessness in the little girl's little heart, when in her despair at her boyfriend's arrest during their honeymoon, she falls with his best friend—yes, falls! There is a fine, gentle falling in her life; she obeys the laws of gravity, which smilingly give her her orders, a charming, foolish creature, the most complete personification of feminine frailty. It's as though one could actually hear the thin, sinful voice of her red blood.¹⁰ She's falling, she's falling! She's in love, she's dancing, they're throwing dice for her, the pretty thing! Today she's conquered and tomorrow merely won.¹¹ In her lovely little bosom are the stars of her destiny.

THIS sound film has all the charm of perdition. Not one of those playing here will ever leave this world. They will fall further and further into it, sink into the hill of years that come rolling up unstopably, smiling, to the song of the accordion. Melancholy will always be a sister to their joys. They will always drink, love, throw dice, steal. Their fate is implacable. That's what gives the film its sadness. But the implacableness has a sheen of mildness, which makes it seem, as it were, placable. That's why it's such a joyful film.¹²

¹⁰ In her posthumous trial and judgment, Sophie tells the tribunal of religious authorities, legal authorities, and family: "I'm sick of all this fuss. Go ahead, you dodos, and condemn me for eating fried octopus, cock sucking, animal worship." See Susan Taubes' *Divorcing* for the entire scene.

¹¹ "People are terrible. They can bear anything. Anything! People are hard and brutal. And everyone is disposable. Everyone! That's the lesson" according to Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

¹² Joseph Roth, *Report from a Parisian Paradise: Essays from France, 1925-1939*, trans. Michael Hofmann and Katharina Ochse (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003): 202-205. Originally published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* on October 28, 1930.