

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

**Time in and out of synch:
The sound of melancholia in
*La Maman et la putain***

By André Habib

One can argue that Jean Eustache's *La maman et la putain* (1973) is a film about listening. Listening to records, to the radio, and to one's partner in conversation are the principal activities of this exceptional film. Smoking, love making and drinking are also important, yet these activities are often combined with various modes of listening as well. Throughout the film, we are in situations of seeing and hearing someone listening to a song or a long speech, in a domestic room or a public café. When records are played, the songs are usually heard from beginning to end in long sequences with minimal editing, as is the case with the closing scene of the film's first half.

After two hours of screen time (and with still more than 90 minutes to go), we are — as we have been and will often be again — in the early hours of the morning, sharing the intimacy between Alexandre (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and Véronika (Jeanne Lebrun), “squatting” in the apartment belonging to Marie (Bernadette Lafond), a friend who is away on a trip. The light is a soft and natural

grey, the shots consist mainly of close-ups, and every sound is recorded direct. At times the sound is also “improperly” mixed, with frequent distortion and sudden shifts in level, adding another layer of “purity” to the film’s auditory dimension.

The scene begins with a shot of a vinyl record placed on a turntable. The sound of an accordion, enveloped by the crackling of the record’s grain, begins to resonate. A female voice follows shortly after, enunciating with the rugged rolling of the r’s typical of French singers of the 30’s. The song that we hear, *La Chanson Des Fortifs*, recorded by Fréhel in 1938, is a nostalgic evocation of the Paris of *La Belle Époque*, the Paris of Aristide Bruant, of Casque d’or, of the songs of pre-WWI (“*les rrrrefrrrrains d’avant guerrrrre*”) and les “*p’tits bistrots des barrrièèèrrrrres*.” As the song plays, Véronika listens, smiles, smokes. Alexandre hums and clumsily tries to sing the words, laughs and whistles the tune, beating the rhythm with his index finger: “*Il n’y a plus de fortifications, mais y’aurra toujourrrs des chansons*.” The song talks of the charming décors of yesterday that have disappeared, but also of the ones which will tomorrow appear, and disappear as well, “*à chacun son temps*.”

The nostalgia in this scene plays on at least two levels: the song is a typical tune which evokes the *Belle Époque* (1895-1914), that a French singer of the late 30’s can reminisce upon with distance and regret; on a second level, the song and its acoustic particularities (the sound of the recording technology of the time, the grain and accent of the voice, etc.) in this post-May 68 film, melancholically recalls a past that has now disappeared, a sentiment of a fleeting

present shared by many in the 70's. Thus, the song by Fréhel is transformed into a complex time-capsule: it not only evokes, but has itself become, a "*joli refrain d'avant-guerre*" (WWII). The "fortifications" now immediately parallel the "barricades" of May 68 that have also disappeared (and with them, this romantic revolutionary spirit of the 60's). Eustache transforms this banal "old French song" into a self-reflexive "*objet trouvé*": it evokes a long-lost past and encapsulates a present while projecting itself into a future. And in the same way, the song is a "mise en abyme" for what *La maman et la putain* achieves using the technology of film: it is in itself a melancholic film about time's fleeting; at the same time, by the way it bears the imprint of its own present, it appears to us today as a fleeting collection of fragments of a reality that has now disappeared.

When the record ends, Véronika sings an "old song" of her own, her thin and high pitched voice delicately interpreting a love ballad which reflects the situation between her and Alexandre: "*Mon Coeur est une fleur d'automne/Sans savoir pourquoi ni comment/Vous l'avez pris/Je vous le donne/Tout simplement*". Alexandre listens patiently. When she is finished, the camera remains a long time on her face, until she says: "*Vous me gênez...* (You're intimidating me)." Alexandre looks at the time and says: "*Ah! C'est l'heure du prédicateur du petit matin*" ("It's time for the morning preacher"). He puts the radio on, finds the station, and we hear the voice of a man with a thick accent, preaching about the decadence, laziness and moral decay of modern civilisation, ultimately soliciting subscriptions to the magazine *The Pure Truth*. At the end of the broadcast,

Alexandre shuts the radio off and begins to explain how he is fascinated by the pronunciation and rhythm of speech of the announcer. He tries to imitate his voice, repeating the last sentence: “*Alors, mes amis, c’est Ditar Apartian qui vous parle et vous dit: au revoir et à bientôt.*” This man, as Alexandre puts it, is nothing but a voice to him. He has no idea what he looks like. He is like “the man of the 18th of June” (i.e. Charles de Gaulle, who’s famous speech on June 18th 1940 consolidated the spirit of the resistance) who, for four years — during the occupation of France— was only a voice, the very-voice of “la France libre,” broadcasted from London.

If the vinyl record evoked this double relation of presence of and distance to the past, the radio broadcast of Ditar Apartian invites an association with another relationship to the “sound of the past” which is no less complex: the sound of De Gaulle’s voice. This voice is at the same time the very embodiment of Resistance and Liberation, but also the paternalist voice that represented the repression during the months of May and June 1968. (It is worth noting, in this respect, that it was through the radio, and not a television broadcast, that De Gaulle addressed himself to the people of France on the 30th of May 1968, during which he dissolved the parliament and announced the ensuing elections). The following moments in *La maman et le putain* will confirm this association.

Alexandre, right after talking about “*l’homme du 18 juin,*” all of a sudden begins to speak of a little café on St-Michel, which opens at 5:25 and where they could go for breakfast. He talks about the people one encounters there, imitating

their voices, repeating their sentences, trying to speak, as he says, “*avec les mots des autres*” (“in the words of others”). As Alexandre evokes the movement and agitation, anecdotes and diverse accents which form the rich sound tapestry of the café, its vibrancy begins to burgeon and take shape before our ears. After a pause, he begins to recall a particular day during May 68. The café was full of people. Everyone was crying: “It was very beautiful, he adds. A teargas bomb had fallen in the café...” After another pause, he continues: “If I hadn’t gone there every morning, I wouldn’t have seen any of this. Whereas there, before my eyes, a breach had opened in reality.” His voice becomes worried and he begins to shake his head, saying, “it’s too late, let’s not go there. I’m afraid I will not see any of it anymore. I’m scared. I’m scared. I wouldn’t want to die.” And here the image fades to black...

This 9 minute sequence is emblematic of the way Eustache explores and intertwines issues of temporality and memory (individual and collective) with sound technology (phonographs and radio), creating an intimate portrait of a generation (his own) caught between the glorious myths of the New Wave and the depressive aftermath of May 68 (the presence of Léaud being crucial for both). This is a generation in search of lost time, regained only by working through the complex layering of time’s various tenses: the sound of melancholia, in this film, is situated precisely here, in the oscillation between past and present, condemned to be simultaneously in and out of synch with the sound of its own time.

Bio:

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