



Program Notes: *Lumière d'été* (1943)

Director: Jean Grémillon

Scenarists: Jacques Prévert and Pierre Laroche

Cinematographer: Louis Page

Music: Alexis Roland-Manuel

Actors: Madeleine Renaud, Pierre Brasseur, Madeleine Robinson, Paul Bernard, Georges Marchal

French, B&W, 110min.

“A house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality. It is one of the appeals to our consciousness of verticality” – Gaston Bachelard

Our five-film series at the French Institute, titled “Interiors: Cinema & the Home”, takes its inspiration from Gaston Bachelard’s seminal treatise, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), whose first Hebrew edition has come out recently, through the loving translation of Mor Kadishzon. What this study interrogates, first and foremost, is the role spatial experience plays in constructing a sense of home. Our experience, for the philosopher, is not bound by the physical attributes of a given space, but exists in an imaginative relationship with them. The boundaries between human subject and material domicile are therefore always already blurred:

“Our soul,” Bachelard posits, “is an abode. And by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves. [Thus] the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them.”

The dyadic dance of these two directions affects the nature of how a house is figured on the page, in poetic and literary renderings that serve Bachelard “as a tool for analysis of the human soul.” In this context, great symbolic significance is given to the figuration of houses as “vertical beings.” A house “rises upward” along its vertical axis; “it differentiates itself in terms of its verticality.” By experiencing such differentiation, we come to realize “our consciousness of verticality,” which imaginatively constructs internal life as a structure, one floor on top of another.

Within the vertical enmeshment of human soul and “the soul of the house,” Bachelard places an emphasis on “the polarity of cellar and attic,” which echoes the opposition between irrational id and rational ego (respectively). Thus, “up near the roof all our thoughts are clear. In the attic it is a pleasure to see the bare rafters of the strong framework. Here we participate in the carpenter’s solid geometry.” Similarly, “when we dream of the heights we are in the rational zone of intellectualized projects”; it is there that our fears can be effaced, like “attic rats and mice” that “return to the silence of their holes” once “the master of the house



arrive[s] unexpectedly.” As for the cellar, Bachelard elucidates, “it is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths.” There is no escape from fear, no room for easy rationalization; in the lower depths of our psyches, “even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls.”

One feels at home when oneirically stretched by these polar opposites, and at the same time, fully sensing “the verticality of the human being.” In this setting, experience takes on the “provision of ‘cosmicity,’” as if grounded in “the most earthly, watery depths” and ascending “to the abode of a soul that believes in heaven.” House and person, object and subject, are thus mystically united around an *axis mundi* – what religious scholar Mircea Eliade once defined as “the image of a universal pillar, [...] which connects and supports heaven and earth, and whose fixed in the world below (the infernal regions)”. Vertical movement of this “anthropo-cosmic” nature, in Bachelard’s terms, allows us to connect our sense of home with a broader conception of the world and beyond. Our favored territory, our humble abode, is therefore unveiled as a microcosm, replicating the universe’s cosmic floorplan.

The idea of being at home in a broader world was profoundly challenged during the production period

of the film chosen for tonight’s screening – Jean Grémillon *Lumière d’été* (*Summer Light*, 1943). Under German occupation, French society found itself in a predicament, its national abode overtaken by a foreign landlord. Some precincts clung to a compromised sense of home by acquiescing to the new house rules; others rebelled against these rules, from within and without, in hopes that what was once only theirs would be reinstated. In particular, these disparate approaches shaped the local film industry, which in the decade before the war, experienced a golden age of creativity under the heading of “poetic realism.” Forced to relinquish freedom to the demands of Nazi rule and its collaborationist lackey, Marshal Pétain’s Vichy government, several key figures in filmmaking – such as directors Jean Renoir and Julien Duvivier and actors Jean Gabin and Michèle Morgan – left the country in protest. Others, however, found a way to work within the new system, and serve their new masters, while establishing an unproblematic image of the French home for local consumption. Famous in this context is director Marcel Carné of *Le Quai des brumes* (*Port of Shadows*, 1938) and *Le jour se lève* (*Daybreak*, 1939) fame. Though the occupation period would mark the heyday of his career, with *Les Visiteurs du Soir* (*The Devil’s Envoys*, 1942) and especially *Les Enfants du paradis* (*Children of Paradise*, 1945), this success was achieved at a price: namely, to quote critic Michael Koresky, ignoring the harsh conditions of everyday life,



which were interrogated in his earlier poetic realist work, in favor of “dramas set in what seemed to be a safely distant past.”

Contrastingly, Jean Grémillon, who also continued to work in occupied France, chose a path of resistance – at least in *Lumière d'été*, his most celebrated creation. Scripted by Carné collaborators Jacques Prévert and Pierre Laroche, this film continued in the poetic realist vein of exploring social tensions through the melodramatic form of a doomed romance. Several characters of different social classes intersect here – an aristocrat with a violent streak, a drunken bohemian painter and his young lover, a handsome miner, and a disillusioned hotel *maîtresse*. Set to a remote mountainous background, all persons engage in complicated romantic liaisons with each other, which soon become too hazardous to leave anyone unscathed. The plot's escalation onto the “nightmarish,” as Koresky puts it, was intended as an allegorical critique “about its time – a depiction of a battle for the soul of France, waged between the decadent upper class and the salt-of-the-earth working people.” There was “nothing benign” in the French microcosm Grémillon created on screen, and as a result, his film was banned from theaters, after “the censors read it as an attack on the establishment, as well as too cynical a view of human nature to show to an already disturbed populace under occupation.”

In its exploration of France's class struggles, *Lumière d'été* is reminiscent of Jean Renoir's acclaimed poetic realist satire, *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939). In no small part, this similarity arises due to the acute verticality of both films, which give physical expression to the upstairs-downstairs structure of social stratification. Yet if Renoir limits this structure to an actual, multi-level country mansion, Grémillon stretches it to encompass the entirety of the imaged world as a grand “cosmic house.” The mountainous topography supplies the filmmaker with his *axis mundi*: on mountain tops, the homes of the well-to-do; in the valley, mining sites populated by the unwashed masses. Juxtaposed together, they foreground the polarity of attic and cellar. Thus, below is an arena of danger, where one must tread carefully in fear of being hurt by an errant mining explosion; indeed, in the film's climactic sequence, apparently inspired by Fritz Lang's dystopian masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927), the workers' descent into the worksite is figured as a descent into menacing darkness. On the other hand, the upper regions – including the hotel and the aristocrat's chateau nestled above – seem devoid of such obvious dangers. Their occupants keep the shadows at bay, imagining themselves safe as they float amongst the clouds, bathed in the soothing summer light. Yet what at the outset seems consistent with Bachelard's anthropo-cosmic reading of verticality, is gradually revealed as something



quite different. In this process, as the site of irrationality, the lower depths not only breed danger but also the affirmative force of love, associated with the poor and downtrodden. On high, where the upper classes reside, an enlightened rationality may be used to repress the dangers of irrationality. Yet, like Bachelard's "attic rats and mice," irrationality does not disappear; and after lying in wait, it slowly rears its ugly head, unleashing dark passion instead of spreading illuminated love.

While the social and even cosmic dramas of *Lumière d'été* do not bind themselves to the verticality of the built house, they also do not abandon this verticality either. Although different in architectural nature, the two houses in the film – hotel and chateau – share a similar vertical makeup. They both do not exhibit a cellar, as if their sense of home is predicated on the denial of a hidden undercurrent of darkness. What appears as the lowest level in these structures, then, are their public entry points – the hotel lobby and the chateau's foyer. Through the former's glass walls and the latter's permeable garden access, the basis of verticality appears open and transparent, in direct contrast to the closedness and opaqueness associated with cellars. Yet this impression is progressively overturned as we see how these spaces are used by their inhabitants. Rather than exercising their freedoms away from fear, characters seem trapped in the denial of its existence, like the caged

birds in the hotelier's private chambers. They do not confront their irrational impulses through the bright light of day, but instead hide them behind a rationalized system of social roles, like the masks in the chateau's masquerade ball during the film's penultimate sequence.

If the lower levels of verticality are denied their endemic link to the irrational, how does that affect the upper levels of the house? Do they realize the fantasy of a divine ego, of a heaven where, in Bachelard's words, "the day's experiences can always efface the fears of night"? Indeed this is a state the painter wishes to recreate after being asked by the aristocrat to work on the chateau's second floor. His plan is to paint the space "all white," so as to achieve "pure form, pure color," while relegating one "sordid" image of a landscape to the insides of a small closet, where it will sit in darkness like a secret, for which the artist has the only key. Yet this project is left half finished, perhaps because the artist himself admits that a room so white would also be so bright as to dissuade anyone from entering through its doors. It is a heaven not fit for humans, entirely bereft of the irrational dimension that makes them human. This irrationality, which is denied a place down below, ascends the stairs in full force, and impels characters to pursue their passion and hatred, behind the closed doors of private living quarters.



Hence, in this complex vertical relationship between people, houses, and the world, *Lumière d'été* presents an image of instability. As such, the aim of Grémillon's film appears different to that of Bachelard's treatise. For Bachelard, verticality may invite dynamic movement along its axis, but in itself it is steady, ensuring "the human being's certainty of being." Accordingly, in experiencing the vertical from within and without, we feel at home in our surroundings, small or large, built or unbuilt. Space becomes "felicitous," in Bachelard's terminology, and through its "stabilizing" effect, can allow us to "start a new life, a life that would be our own, that would belong to us in our very depths." For his part, Grémillon does not deny this enlivening power. Nevertheless, shaped by the realities of occupation, he could not but highlight the immense difficulty of achieving it, as well as expose its inherent fragility. The vertical axis upon we descend and ascend in our experience, the filmmaker seems to say, is fraught with challenges, which often render space infelicitous. To be at home in a house, in the world, is therefore never a feeling of certainty; it exists in a symbiotic rapport with its undoing, like light with its encroaching shadows.

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Curator