



Program Notes: *L'Heure d'été* (2008)

Director and Scenarist: Olivier Assayas

Cinematographer: Eric Gautier

Editor: Luc Barnier

Actors: Juliette Binoche, Charles Berling, Jérémie Renier, Edith Scob

French, Color, 103min.

“Thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. All our lives we come back to them in our daydreams” – 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. Houses stand at the heart of this study – not in their architectural, or even wholly material sense, but in our imaginative relationship with them. This relationship, Bachelard argues, is always already blurring the boundaries between human subject and physical domicile – both in terms of actual experience

and of its poetic rendering. Looking at houses through this dual lens, we come to realize that “they are in us as much as we are in them.” On the ground of integration, we find ways to develop intimate familiarity with our living spaces, and to call them our own.

For Bachelard, integration into a house follows “the binding principle of the daydream.” Accordingly, it also manifests a different temporality than the one most commonly associated with “everyday experience.” Within the state of daydreaming, our present encounter is easily infused by future and past tenses; this admixture, in turn, charges houses with “different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another.” Between the “house of the future” and the “house of the past” that are invoked in daydreams, the philosopher stresses the significance of the latter. The former may be “better built, lighter, and larger than all the houses of the past,” but has less to do with imagination than with realization. Thus, “this dream house” of the future often expresses “a dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people.” It points to its own eventual attainment, and as such, belongs to “the psychology of projects,” where “free play [is given] to the mind, [but] the soul does not find [...] vital expression.”



The fuel of daydreaming, for Bachelard, is found “in a state of impermanence than in one of finality”; and none are more impermanent than those past homes that are no more, yet “remain in us for all time” through being “relived as daydreams.” Thus, as he puts it, “through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are”. As children we are intimately intertwined with surrounding objects and spaces, which come to life in our open imagination as protective worlds. In adulthood, we are haunted by the loss of these worlds, and “comfort ourselves by reliving memories of [their] protection.” Such recollections, Bachelard explains, “add to our store of dreams,” making us “never real[ly] historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.”

Lost poetry is not retrieved in a cerebral manner, so much as through the senses which once held “this intimacy of fusion” with the house of childhood. According to Bachelard, “the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us,” and its presence is subsequently traced through our bodily behaviors. These traces, by virtue of their effervescent sensuality, are not

easily communicable, thereby ensuring that the house will remain uniquely *mine*, even as it is shared with others. There is no use, the philosopher confesses, “in giving the plan of the room that was really *my room*, in describing the little room at the end of the garret, in saying that from the window, across the indentations of the roofs, one could see the hill. I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that it takes a lot of imagination to smell.”

Mnemonic triggers may be found in whatever house we occupy at the moment, allowing it to stir the imagination through memories of old. Quite naturally, however, the childhood house, when revisited in the present, offers the most potent “threshold of a day-dream in which I shall find repose in the past.” It is there that, “in spite of all the other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the ‘first stairway,’ we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house’s entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands.”

Olivier Assayas’s *Summer Hours* (2008) reveals exactly what is at stake in revisiting, but also



abandoning, a childhood home. The house in question is actually a country estate where the aging matriarch Hélène lives alone, surrounded by things and spaces that remind her of their former proprietor – her late uncle and great love of her life, celebrated painter Paul Berthier. Her three children and their families do not live in the vicinity – closest is the eldest son Frédéric, who resides in Paris, an hour’s train ride away; while the younger siblings, sister Adrienne and brother Jérémie, have relocated to the US and China, respectively. They all gather at the home of their youth only on special occasions, such as the one presented at the film’s outset – Hélène’s birthday. It is then that the house appears most solid, like a shelter shielding family members from an imminent storm. Yet as Hélène explains to Frédéric during the anniversary festivities, this solidity is in effect highly fragile. For what binds the house together as a living organism – as a home – is her, and specifically her memories of how things were and what they meant. In various ways, Hélène is preoccupied with reliving these memories; but she also understands that upon her death, the daydream will end, and with it, the necessity of keeping the house as a site of recollection, a *lieu de mémoire*. In an honest take on, to quote critic Kent Jones, the “excruciating conflict between maintaining the memory of the past and making way for the future,” the matriarch boldly predicts what would ultimately come to pass: her estate bought by strangers, as “the events that

occurred within its walls are consigned to legend or forgotten altogether,” and its “objects are either handed down, thrown away [...], sold, or turned over to posterity.”

Hélène’s demise confronts her offspring with the painful truths of this prediction. It also causes a rift between them, which is ostensibly focused on property, but has to do in essence with their disparate definitions of home. Both Adrienne and Jérémie wish to sell the estate and its contents in order to finance their endeavors away from French soil. They are not invested in reliving the memories of “the house of the past,” either because it means too much and must be rebelled against, or because it means too little and therefore is easily discarded. Their sights are set towards the houses of the future, their dreams projected onto the horizon, finally unburdened by the weight of personal history. In contrast, Frédéric opposes to the sale, wanting to keep the house and its contents intact, as they had been when his mother and her uncle were alive. His is the desire to preserve and thereby revive both the secondhand memories passed onto him by his ancestors, and the firsthand memories he cultivated for himself. These images of the past are all nestled in material things, which he is afraid to relinquish. For in this loss, to quote Bachelard, there is “a sort of remorse at not having lived profoundly enough in the old house,” and a certain guilt



at rejecting the old house's insistence "to live again, as though [it] expected us to [give] a supplement of living."

Bachelard asks us that we allow "the house that was lost in the mists of time [to] appear from out of the shadow [...] as though something fluid had collected our memories and we ourselves were dissolved in this fluid of the past." *Summer Hours*, on the other hand, asks us to recognize what happens when the philosopher's suggestion goes unheeded. Interestingly, the gravest crime against the estate's role as keeper of memory comes not in the destruction of its contents, but in their repurposing. Artworks which once populated the house's various rooms now find their way to the galleries of Paris's Musée d'Orsay. In so doing, they also forgo their status as personal *belongings*, and become part of public culture. No wonder, then, that when he comes across his mother's antique Majorelle desk on display, Frédéric asks out loud whether it doesn't seem "caged". Taken out of its natural habitat, the object's life force is depleted, and it can no longer bring forth, in Bachelard's terms, "the real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism."

The forfeiture of these houses of memory is keenly felt when a group is seen whizzing past the desk, as one visitor takes a call to set up a movie date for later that night. Their reaction is understandable for the film's

audience, which is similarly removed from the personal import this object holds for its former owners. Yet *Summer Hours* does not wish to encourage such apathy with the viewers. Instead, it aims to make them connect, and integrate, with onscreen objects and spaces that are not their own. The film achieves this effect by lingering upon imaged space and object, and giving intimate access to their tactility, their sensuality, their uniqueness. My memories may not be housed on-screen, but what I encounter there, in Bachelard's words, exhibits "a sonority that will ring true – a voice so remote within me, that it will be the voice we all hear when we listen as far as memory reaches, on the very limits of memory, beyond memory perhaps, in the field of the immemorial." This resonance does not divulge the secrets of another, traced back to the cellar and garret, nooks and corridors of his or her former abode, but provides "an orientation towards what is secret" within me, the "crypt of the house" where I was born, "lost in the shadow of [...] the real past" yet inhabiting my waking dreams.

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