



Program Notes: *L'Inhumaine* (1924)

Director, Editor, Co-Scenarist: Marcel L'Herbier

Cinematographer: Georges Specht

Art Directors: Claude Autant-Lara, Alberto Cavalcanti, Pierre Chareau, Fernand Léger, Robert Mallet-Stevens

Actors: Georgette Leblanc, Jaque Catelain, Philippe Hériat

Silent with French intertitles, B&W, 123min.

Thus, an immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses. Winds radiate from its center and gulls fly from its windows. A house that is as dynamic as this allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his house. – 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. Over sixty years since its initial publication, this important volume continues to impact architectural thinking on what turns a house into a “home”. Distancing himself from pure “objectivity”, Bachelard asks us to accept that a home cannot be reduced to its physical

walls and foundations; rather, it is constituted as “a home” through the user’s imaginary encounter with a living space—an intimate relationship that projects onto that space the vastness of his or her inner world, memories and dreams. The interior qualities of this bond do not appear on blueprints and cross-sections, but only manifest themselves through ephemeral descriptions of various spaces in literature and poetry. This is why, in Bachelard’s mind, a “true home” is a home that we “read”.

Yet is the world of the Word the only one capable of enlivening the domestic space and exposing through it life itself? My screening series aims to counter this view by showing that the world of Cinema can achieve the same goal, though through its own particular means and inflections. With one foot in reality and another in dream, cinema releases the space of a house from its mundane entrapments, and transports it onto a poetic plane. As a result, in a manner that does not “break up the solidarity of memory and imagination,” we are suddenly made to “see” a home as more than the sum of its material parts: as our home, *chez nous*, a repository for all the meanings it evokes for us and all the spaces it occupies within us. No longer a mere background for cinematic action, the home thus emerges as a central figure, rich in human—and for Bachelard, even “cosmic”—signification.



Yet as much as our series extends Bachelard's poetic definition of a home onto the imaged houses of the silver screen, it also does not leave this definition without challenge. Where for the philosopher, a sense of home is inevitably intertwined with a sense of comfort, of protection, of warmth, of the close proximity to our innermost thoughts and feelings, in the films I've selected such notions are present only as a possibility, and one that is often contested. In these iterations of the house's cinematic life, we can palpably feel the hope – and even the invitation – to dream of our belonging to the on-screen space, the discovery of our origins, ensconced in a familiar womb. Hope nevertheless appears as a double-edged sword, highlighting the very fragility of our sense of home – our inability to sustain it for long durations in the face of external threats and demands, the pressures of “real life”. Bachelard aims to save us from this fragility, and in so doing, solidify our imaginary relationship with the home. For us to be saved, however, we must adopt his position of willful naivete, which is blind to the home's potentially negative charges. In the coming weeks, we will see films on this screen that operate differently – instead of sidelining these negative charges, they bring them to the fore, and with them, important questions about Bachelard's idealized account.

Tonight's film is no exception. One of the most intriguing and unfortunately neglected examples of 1920s French Impressionist cinema, *L'Inhumaine* was imagined as a showcase of France's modern style – “grande mosaïque de l'Art modern,” to quote the film's director. L'Herbier, a central filmmaker of the postwar period and founder of the national film school IDHEC, pulled together the talents of key representatives of French artistic modernity in order to bring this showcase to life: architect Robert Mallet-Stevens designed exteriors following the modernist principles of the international style; painter Fernand Leger created a few interiors that closely resemble his signature form of cubism, which emphasized cylindrical shapes (tubism); architect Pierre Chareau supplied the furniture, as did future film directors Alberto Cavalcanti and Claude Autant-Lara; arts and crafts specialists such glass designer Rene Lalique, Jewelry maker Raymond Templier, and costumer Paul Poiret, also contributed objects and artifacts; and Jean Börlin of the Royal Swedish Ballet choreographed the dance numbers. At one point, for a concert scene, L'Herbier even enlisted such luminaries as Erik Satie, Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, James Joyce and Ezra Pound to appear as audience members. As one would expect, the result is extravagant: so much so, that it belongs less to the realm of reality than that of a fairytale, *une histoire ferrique* to quote the film's byline. Contemporary responses were similarly



exuberant, with urban legends telling us of spectators fleeing from the theater in shambles at the sight of such outrageously fantastical imagery.

The film's plot centers around a famous singer – portrayed by real-life operatic soprano Georgette Leblanc – who is desired by many, and commits to none – rather heartlessly, or perhaps, inhumanely. She nevertheless discovers love in the end through the wooing of a young Swedish scientist, who lures her not only with gestures of adoration, but also with the promise of technology as means of bringing humans together – and to life. A modern twist on an arcane form of melodrama, this story would appear rather trite if not for the enchanted landscape in which it is set. Occupying this landscape are two houses: the singer's and the scientist's. Both are designed in different fashion, yet are similarly detached from the solid foundations of actual architecture. At the domicile of the singer, a modest and functional façade does not disclose the vastness of inner space, divided into various chambers, diverse in character and rich in detail. Upon entering, the visiting spectator seems to step into a magical kingdom that continually unfolds into new dimensions. The scientist's residence and laboratory, on the other hand, does not strike a similar air of fancy; here we see futuristic designs, that exchange art deco ornateness and orientalist influences with the purity of the machine. Cubism takes

hold, abstracting space by highlighting its geometrical shapes, and overlaying them in collage fashion. Much like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, which took some of its inspiration from *L'inhumaine*, we are allowed entry into the bowels of technology, or rather to a world made in technology's image, as we feel our way through its cogwheels and circuits.

Juxtaposed together, these houses are made of what Bachelard would call the stuff of “poetic reverie”. Each captures the sheer power of imagination in transforming a house into a home, and freeing it from the chains of history and geography. Each manifests, to quote Bachelard, as “an immense cosmic house [that] is a potential of every dream of houses. Winds radiate from its center and gulls fly from its windows. A house that is as dynamic as this allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his house.” The sheer intensity of liberation is intoxicating, overwhelming. It does not so much encourage our daydreaming as confronts us with a daydream that is not our own, thereby forcing a choice – either submit, or flee. Historical accounts of the film's reception do not indicate a third option being taken.

We may never know if spectators did run away from this sight of cosmic houses, or were mesmerized by their immensity. Regardless, the intense nature of spectatorial experience here raises questions about how



we inhabit houses in our daydreams, and how dream-like poetic texts can invoke this process – or suppress it. *L'Inhumaine* shows viewers ready-made dreams, and consequently reveals how we, as humans, attach ourselves in our imagination to houses and turn them into our homes, our nests. Yet this revelation is not an invitation, and the houses appearing on screen are too full of imaginary content so as to allow spectators to occupy them with their own idiosyncratic dreams.

It is therefore particularly challenging to feel at home in this film. Indeed, even the two main characters are not particularly housed in their houses. The singer orchestrates her space as if to distance herself from everyone, and ends up wanting to leave abroad; the scientist looks away from his space by seeking to connect it with other spaces across the world, via the power of radio and television technology. In spite of seemingly shaping the homes of their dreams, these dreams do not bring the characters back to stable foundations, to the architecture of their innermost soul, as is the sacred promise of the home according to Bachelard. It is a strange alchemy that turns *a house* into *my home*, and together with these characters, we find out how truly difficult a metamorphosis like this can be, even with the immense power of reverie by your side. For dreams that allow us to find ourselves in space, to discover the bedrock of our existence, are not as solid as

we would perhaps like to believe; they move from presence to absence, from invitation to occupation, they lay us to the ground, and suddenly take us into the heavens. Thus we can never fully control them, even as they emerge from within us; there is no guarantee, and searching for one only leads away from the proper destination, rather than toward it. Under such conditions, as *L'Inhumaine* shows us, a dream house can easily become, not a home, but a gilded prison. Accordingly, it is not only beauty but also darkness that is found in our desire to use dreams as a cure for homesickness – a darkness from which even the space of a lover's embrace cannot offer an adequate escape.

Dan Chyutin, PhD

Curator