



Where Are You...

Ma Petite Lise?

by Fred Patton

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With no DVD in sight, spending some words on this neglected film seems all the more urgent, as rare French SECAM VHS tapes are still somewhat available, albeit in the original French without subtitles. This is the only video release I am currently aware of. The death of Grémillon is sad. I became interested in his films after reading Richard Roud's fine book on Jean-Marie Straub, simply titled STRAUB, and where this "composer of film" was noted as being an important and early influence.



Jean Grémillon's first talkie, the 1930 *LA PETITE LISE*, is anything but talky. While opening and closing with soulful afro-Latin strains, something just above silence reigns throughout the film. Grémillon is already orchestrating the auditory menace of nuanced sound sculpting that would later pervade *REMORQUES* (1941), setting forth evolving rhythmic figures at an atmospheric whisper. Grémillon grafts this aural frieze onto smoldering b&w photography. Truly, the frame is often smoking for purposes of motif.



In truth, this film has the most impressive use of sound I know of, including Bresson's *MOUCHETTE*. It's up for speculation as to how much technical issues played into his creative use of sound and off-screen. What is of particular note is that instead of milking the capability of sync sound dialogue, Grémillon uses it very sparingly, increasing the range of expressiveness. An abstract score of atmospheric insinuation is always in accompaniment with the imagery tonally, rhythmically and dynamically. Listening carefully, ambient sound is

ever at work in a subliminal music score.



The story of LA PETITE LISE belongs to the sandbox of melodrama, but Grémillon grinds it into expressionistic minimalism. What is this story? Perhaps it will suffice to say that it is the reunion of a father fresh out of prison with his daughter now grown up, all prepared under a pressure cooker of lens and mic. Conflagrations arise periodically from the embers of troubled quiet, with lighting flickering to and from peaks of intensity. Emblazoned gestures extend from the sustain of affective brood, while conversations flare up before subsiding back into the simmering cauldron.



Upon locating his daughter, Lise, Bertier's ascent to her room is countered aurally in such a foreboding fashion that it feels more like an ominous descent. She's not there, so he's been given the key to wait. Where the doors of cinema typically close with snappy effect, Lise's door closes with a disquieting hush. Grémillon uses this waiting period to establish the

significance of some objects for future narrative finesse. When Lise arrives, her ascent up the stairs is not the same aural spectacle, naturally. When she enters her room, the camera remains at the staircase, fixing its gaze upon the landing outside her door. We only hear the reunion, and in the infant legacy of the silent era, it is evident where inter-titles have been traded in for off-screen dialogue and the title card for an evocative film frame. While the off-screen dialogue commences, the staircase and landing aren't completely vacated; flickering light presides.



As evidenced in an early prison scene, the camera movement can at times approximate a probing searchlight. In this case, the camera moves through a large prison quarter lightly shrouded in the smoke from fires used for cooking and illumination. An odd inferno in that these men who bide their time seem to cheat misery and torment as they congregate in varied forms of diversion. The camera moves over a group of men gaming, then moves down as though side-stepping an obstacle. From here it encounters a compositionally centered posterior that protrudes from a young prisoner. Moving over it, the camera slopes into a downward pan to reveal another man's hand clasping this young prisoner's arm. The camera next pans in an upward diagonal to capture the faces of both men, their heads in a close proximity that implies a vertex forming a diamond with the inside of the older man's elbow below. Now the older man's other hand enters the frame and moves to the prisoner's arm he's holding. It now becomes apparent that the older man is tattooing a woman's head on the young man's arm. The nature of this activity has now been clarified (corrected for the spectator) without completely canceling the initial implication drawn out in a compact dramatic series.



The spare dialogue gives way to artificial grumblings and snatches of vocal strains orchestrated so as to create a counterpoint to the gutted melodrama. This counterpoint recalls the function of a classical chorus—one that has been muffled and stripped of linguistic virility. But this loss is superficial and momentary. The aesthetic cause, rather than being lost, is made all the richer as the mise-en-scene fills the gaps left by the mise-en-heard. This choir of atmospheric rumbling when lingering over depopulated spaces seems to endow a degree of sentience corroborated by the often oddly shifting illumination that pulses like an erratic and elongated strobe, and this very breach from regularity is the very opening of communicative ‘differance,’ moving like a menacing Morse of cinematic codes. If rhythmic regularity means death, as with the absolutely regular heartbeat, these unpredictable rumblings of sounds and light are descriptive vitality, albeit striking discord and spreading dissonance. As the plot bears out, this synthetic chorus maintains the essence of moral imperative. The slow, dirge-like introductory segment of afro-Latin music that fell in line with the fresh group of arriving prisoners at the film’s opening is concluded at the film’s end by the full frenzy of afro-Latin music in a way that parallels the narrative proceedings.



The appropriation of sounds, like the passing of trains and planes, work on the cusp of estrangement. The train noise dying away suddenly as a door is opened, yielding immediate and disarming quiet. The sound of some off-screen, outdoor train while Bertier negotiates a room in the dark. The partitioning of space such that the whole is denied and the point of view of gazing subjects are made ambiguous, often played up to create intrigue. There is a gnawing build up, a fragrance of foreboding. Frequent conjurations of smoke.

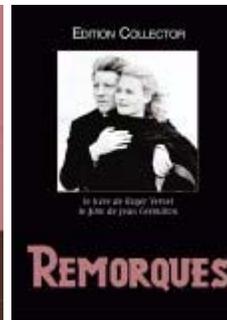
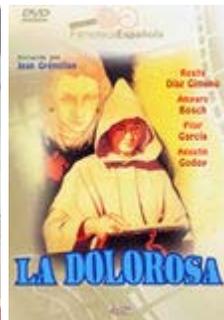
The film reveals a tendency to move the camera, not in a stealthy pan or tilt, but a rhythmic multi-axis walk with a strong rhythmic quality. This kineticizes the still figure and maintains the musical measure of movement.

It's rather astonishing to discover Grémillon experiment with the disjunction of sound and image with his very first sound film—no wonder Godard's admiration. After the reunion that takes place between father and daughter, a montage ensues for almost a minute while their off-screen dialogue picks back up. Over this montage, a transition to morning is effected, such that the resumption of their speech occurs the morning after.

Thus far, I've managed to reel in eleven Grémillon films on video: *La Petite Lise* (1930); *Pour un Sou d'Amour* (1931) (DVD) ; *La Dolorosa* (1934) (DVD) ; *L'Étrange Monsieur Victor* (1937) ; *Centinela Alerta* (1937) (DVD) ; *Gueule d'Amour* (1937) ; *Remorques* (1941) (DVD) ; *Lumière d'été* (1943) ; *Le Ciel Est à Vous* (1944) ; *Pattes Blanches* (1949); *L'Étrange Madame X* (1951). A lamentable omission is *L'Amour d'une Femme* (1954).

Any information on how to track down anything else would be appreciated immensely. And thanks Ross Wilbanks for the input!

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