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“To Show the People in Paris How We Live Here”: Working-Class Representation, Paul Carpita, and Film History

Sabine Haenni

French and Anglo-American film historians usually stress the “idea of continuity” that dominated French cinema after World War II.¹ Susan Hayward claims that “the look of France’s cinema did not change considerably” after the war, and Alan Williams suggests that the foundation of institutions such as the CNC (Centre National de la Cinématographie) helped nurture “the strong artistic continuity between the new French school of the Occupation and the postwar Tradition of Quality.”² During the war, when the German company Continental made films in Paris, production in the South had become more important, at least before the occupation of the Southern zone in 1942. Many film professionals found themselves in Nice, the country’s second largest production site, and other cities such as Toulon and Marseille saw the foundation of new production companies.³ After the war, however, most film histories shift their focus back to Paris. Film production seems once again centered in the capital.

In terms of representation onscreen, however, historians have noted one major change compared to the pre-war period. The 1930s, Susan Hayward tells us, saw “the emergence onto the screen of the working class in a big way. The proletariat—most especially the Parisian working class . . . became the new iconography denoting ‘Frenchness.’” Such a new iconography entailed a shift not just to the representation but also to the *valorization* of the working class. And yet, “after the Occupation and into the 1950s, the working class all but disappeared both as an icon and as a preoccupation (either positive or negative).” Instead, the 1950s are characterized by an “aura of uninventiveness” during which genre films such as the *film policier* and comedies dominate.⁴ In a more detailed account of the

fate of the cinematic working class, Michel Cadé acknowledges the paucity as well as the diversity of working-class themed films that in his view do not constitute a clearly defined “genre,” but equally emphasizes their relative flourishing in the 1930s, after 1968, during the 1980s, and from 1992–2002. Cadé also notices a brief moment of flourishing working-class representation during post-war liberation, which came with a brief left-wing political victory.⁵

I want to start with this brief post-war moment marked by “revolutionary illusion” and “great Hope for social change.”⁶ According to historian Emile Temime, this was particularly true for the country’s southern port city of Marseille, which had been deeply affected by the war, when it was the major port in Europe from where people fleeing fascism tried to escape, and which had resulted in the total destruction of one of its central neighborhoods.⁷ After the war, Marseille was a stronghold of the Communist Party and briefly had a communist mayor, before strikes in 1947 paralyzed the city’s port—strikes that would flare up again in 1950 and 1951.⁸ One of the more fascinating filmmakers to come out of this milieu was Paul Carpita, a son of a dock worker and fish-monger, who had become a schoolteacher, who had been active in the Resistance, and who had joined the French Communist Party (PCF) in 1943.⁹ In 1947, Carpita created Ciné-Pax, a small filmmaking collective—which he was happy to call a “counter-school of cinema”—committed to filming “counter-actualities” that were then screened unofficially in Marseille’s Saint-Lazare Cinema. Some footage shot for Ciné-Pax, particularly that of a strike of the dock workers in 1950, was incorporated into the fictional feature-length film, *Le Rendez-vous des quais/Meeting on the Docks* (FR, 1955), about the daily life of dock workers in Marseille during the Indochina War (1946–54), which would be finished only in 1955.¹⁰ In this essay, I understand Carpita as coming out of this postwar moment, and I will unpack how especially his feature film creates spaces where intersectional working-class identities—differently marked by anti-colonial struggles, gender, and race—come together in an alliance based on friendship. Carpita creates images of a complexly differentiated working class and opens up spaces of difference that gesture toward centrifugal, pluralizing forces in French film history.

In making this argument, I resist inserting Carpita into a linear, Paris-based film history. French film critics have understood *Le Rendez-vous des quais* as the “missing link” in a history of French cinema that connects Neorealism with the French New Wave.¹¹ To be sure, Carpita himself has acknowledged his debt to Italian Neorealism, but he has also asserted his antipathy toward the New Wave, which he called “petit-bourgeois.”¹² If one were to insert Carpita into a genealogy, it would have to be based in Marseille, for this city has a long history of innovatively nurturing working-class representation. Carpita’s film is preceded by Jean Renoir’s *Toni* (FR, 1935), a film about Italian and Spanish migrant workers in the

Marseille region, and is followed not so much by Godard's *Breathless* (FR, 1960) but by the films of René Allio, especially *La vieille dame indigne/The Shameless Old Lady* (FR, 1965), a film about a working-class widow's discovery of consumerism, and *Retour à Marseille/Return to Marseille* (FR, 1980), a film about generations of workers, particularly young workers, living through major urban restructuring.¹³ This is the tradition of Marseille-based working-class representation that Robert Guédiguian, the best-known and most persistent filmmaker telling stories about working-class lives, draws inspiration from. Such a minor tradition of working-class cinema is interrupted, or tends to disappear entirely, when French film history is written from Paris.

After its re-release in 1990, *Le Rendez-vous des quais* received some attention in France. The film's plot mixes the difficult apartment search of a young, amorous couple—Robert (André Maufray) works on the docks, Marcelle (Jeanine Moretti) in a biscuit factory—with their involvement in the dock workers' strike as well as workers' actions against the war in Indochina. But the film is mostly known for its production history. The Communist Party paid for the feature's film stock, but Carpita consistently insisted that the film itself did not belong to the Party, because funds were also raised by public subscription.¹⁴ The crew was shooting illicitly, with a fake authorization provided by the Studio Pagnol, where the film was also edited and postsynchronized.¹⁵ Marcel Pagnol's sound engineer, Marcel Royné, had talked Pagnol into providing the space to Carpita—a compelling example of how a more mainstream film studio inadvertently helps create other forms of fiction. A number of professionals, including editors Suzanne de Troye (who had edited many of Pagnol's films) and Susan Sandberg, worked on the film for free.¹⁶ But Carpita also went to Paris, to show the film to Procinex, a production company affiliated with the Communist Party, and apparently had difficult negotiations about cuts.¹⁷ In the end, the film was denied a screening license. In a now well-known event, the CRS (riot police) seized a copy of the film at an unauthorized screening in Marseille, and the film disappeared until 1981–82, when it was found in the National Film Archives where the Communist Party had deposited in 1979.

To some degree Carpita's activity fits into the brief moment of post-war leftwing politics and filmmaking. Thus, in 1947, the Communist Party released a campaign film for Marseille's communist mayor, Jean Cristofol, *Voilà Marseille* (Georges Baze, FR, 1947), which describes an alternative mythological history of repeated mobilization, defiance, and reconstruction.¹⁸ It produces remarkably inclusive images of the local population, insisting on a broad alliance of people participating in reconstruction—"captains of industry, workers, employees, functionaries, shopkeepers, owners," the enthusiastic voice-over tells us. Carpita's film shares this enthusiastic pluralism and inclusiveness, maybe most visibly during



Figure 1. Women march during a Bastille Day parade.

a joyful Bastille Day sequence that mixes shots of marchers with shots of carousels and other entertainments.¹⁹ But already this image of marching women calling for unity and struggle suggests that Carpita relocates this sense of enthusiasm and participation within a broadly conceived working class. By contrast, Cristofol translates this enthusiastic pluralism into an alternative nationalism. When addressing the citizens of Marseille in a heavily accented French, he declares that “in order for our country to retake the place in the world that it deserves, in order to reconquer the sovereignty and the independence of France, to lift up our country, we have to produce, produce, produce ever more.” In the wake of increasing cold-war tensions, Cristofol would lose the election, the communists would be excluded from the governing coalition on the national level, and Marseille would be marked by strikes. By 1949, the Communist Party would declare that the colonial war in Indochina went hand in hand with a war on the working class at home.²⁰ Carpita films shorts during the strikes, footage from which would be incorporated into *Rendez-vous*, and he shares the Communist Party’s stance against the colonial war.

And yet, *Rendez-vous* does not only *not* align with nationalist tendencies, it will also be in conflict with communist politics. By the time the film was released in 1955, the war in Indochina had ended and the Communist Party now supported the war in Algeria (1954–62). The tensions between Carpita and the State, and Carpita and the Communist Party become apparent in the film’s censorship

history. In 1955, the censorship board prohibited all screenings with the following justification:

This film retraces (which the synopsis does not mention) a strike launched by the dockworkers of Marseille, under a trade union pretext, to organize an action against the war in Indochina. It includes scenes of violent resistance against the police. Its projection presents a menace against the public order.²¹

Marc Vernet argues that the film was censured in at least three different ways: by the State, which feared that it would fuel strikes that had flared up again in 1955; by the Communist Party, which could not endorse the film's pacifism, because it now supported the war in Algeria; and by Carpita himself who was unwilling to speak up against the Communist Party. Though apparently, between 1957 and 1979, the Party screened a shortened version of the film, with scenes of a strike-breaker removed, illegally within France and internationally in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.²² While that alternative, secret distribution fascinatingly gestures toward another circulation and another film history, the censorship and lack of support from the Communist Party reveal the tensions between Carpita and the Party, a friction exacerbated by the geographical distance between Paris and Marseille, where local communists' sentiment did not always align with Parisian party lines.²³

Rather than being communist propaganda, rather than advocating an alternative nationalism, the film is above all a veritable archive of everyday working-class life in the port city and makes a point of including different kinds of scenes. "I wanted to film the old neighborhoods of Marseille to show the people in Paris how we live here," Carpita said about a scene in which women get water at a fountain, chatting, but also lamenting the lack of running water in some old city neighborhoods.²⁴ In other scenes we see a group of folks relaxing in a cabin [*cabanon*] at the seaboard, playing a party of *pétanque*, fishing, swimming; or young female factory workers chatting during lunch break. And we see lots of children: children getting washed, doing homework, having birthday parties, running in the street. Carpita, a schoolteacher, had already included many children in his shorts, but these images are striking nonetheless, telling us micro-stories about everyday life. They gather multiple social spaces, facets of life, ways of being. Talking about Carpita's later shorts, Agnès Libbra discusses how the films show people in culturally diverse spaces that are deeply social, "favorable to a person's emancipation."²⁵ And Carpita sums it up best: "My goal is to defend the right of human beings to be themselves."²⁶

Such gathering of working-class social spaces involves different points of view. A good example can be found in *Toine* (Georges Pasquini), the owner



Figure 2. Women wait in line at the fountain while Simone sells them the magazine *Femmes Françaises*.

of an excursion boat, who early in the film invites the young couple, Marcelle and Robert, on a boat ride. Not an activist, Toine somewhat resembles one of Marcel Pagnol's good-humored characters but is embedded in a textured working-class life. He ends up loaning his boat for a night-time action protesting the war in Indochina during which workers write "Peace in Vietnam" on the jetty. Moreover, he allows the young couple to assume a point of view usually reserved for tourists. "Marseille is beautiful," Marcelle says during the couple's early boat excursion: the young working-class couple has a right to look, to visit, to enjoy. Other points of view have a right to exist. Robert's brother Jean (Roger Manunta) is a leader among the workers. At a key moment, he becomes a disembodied narrator over a montage of loading and unloading boats with merchandise, describing how busy the port was right after liberation. Then the image of a car is replaced by an image of a cannon being loaded: "Suddenly work changed, and simultaneously became rarer. . . . And yet there could be work. But they only have space for their tanks. Kilometers of quay for their dirty war." And yet, much of the film's plot involves Robert's willingness to be a strikebreaker because he thinks it may help him get an apartment. Apparently scenes cut by the Communist Party involved Robert fighting with his brother in the street and Robert unloading boxes under the protection of the riot police.²⁷ The film makes a space for it, and Robert is forgiven. Working-class cinema may well involve a dialectic between solidarity and isolation, as Cadé has argued, but



Figure 3. During the night, workers wrote “Peace in Vietnam” onto the jetty.

here, solidarity amounts to the inclusion of different points of view and exceeds communist politics.²⁸

While some of Carpita’s later shorts, such as *Marseille sans soleil/Marseille without Sun* (FR, 1961) and *Graines au vent/Seeds in the Wind* (FR, 1964), as well as his later feature *Les Sables mouvants/Quicksand* (FR, 1996), insist on solidarity across ethnic and racial divides, *Rendez-vous* is remarkable for the ways in which it integrates female and domestic labor into larger political issues. Cadé has noted the important plotline involving Robert’s girlfriend, Marcelle, who is a stronger political character than Robert, and who after being fired from the biscuit factory, gets her job back because of her co-workers’ solidarity.²⁹ Just as importantly, Robert’s and Jean’s mother (Rose Dominiquetti) comments on labor, infrastructure, and economic issues. Jeanne (Louisette Cavolino), Toine’s more politically aware wife, suggests that the men write “Peace in Vietnam” onto the jetty, which, as it turns out, they had already planned to do. Simone (Annie Valde), Jean’s wife, drops off her girl Danielle (Yolande Marchand) with Jeanne while she sells the magazine *Femmes françaises* to neighborhood women, a magazine published by the communist/feminist Union de femmes françaises.³⁰ Meanwhile, domestic labor is not limited to women. In a remarkable scene in Jean and Simone’s kitchen, their daughter Danielle sits at the table doing her homework, while her father Jean cooks pasta, asks her to taste it, and then helps her learn nouns with irregular plurals. Carpita calls it his “most engaged,” “most

political” scene, because it shows workers at home, reveals that the kitchen table was the only table where a child could do homework, and yet resists focusing on misery.³¹ The film makes visible the social spaces that form workers, while disturbing the gendered nature of such spaces.

Such a logic of solidarity and inclusion has its fascinating possibilities as well as limits, which becomes most visible when considering the film’s anti-colonial connections. The film has been criticized for marginalizing the resistance to the colonial war, for its inability to assume a clearly anticolonial stance.³² While the film does not put anticolonial resistance at its center, it recognizes that colonial and class oppression intersect, but are not the same. Competing discourses are embodied in individual workers, who are affected differently by geo-political events. Consequences are particularly dire for young people like Robert and Marcelle, who seek to start a family, but need a place of their own before being able to do so, and who thus see their futures blocked. Yet Robert and Marcelle react differently, maybe because Marcelle’s cultural role as the female partner puts less pressure on her to provide housing for the two of them. Rather than aligning the colonial war with a war on the working class in any facile way, *Carpita* is interested in articulating how multiple forces intersect in each character, making for a complexly differentiated working class.

Such differentiation, which gestures toward but also tests the limits of anti-colonial solidarity, extends beyond the specificity of France’s colonies in Southeast Asia. During a late confrontation with the riot police, we get shots of Marcelle at the forefront of a group of demonstrators, while an unnamed black person demonstrates next to her. On the one hand, the inclusion of this extra is entirely within the logic of the film’s insistence on a complexly differentiated working class. On the other hand, this unknown figure seems just as marginalized within the logic of the film as the extras in Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), who Laura Mulvey has argued are “rendered invisible by racism and oppression.”³³ The inclusion of this extra is particularly compelling, because we know that Ousmane Sembène lived in Marseille from 1946-1960, working on the docks and being active in the labor movement, before writing his first novel, *Le docker noir/Black Docker* (1956), training in Moscow, and becoming one of black Africa’s most important filmmakers.³⁴ The film here gestures toward a much broader anti-colonial solidarity that it cannot quite articulate, but that is particularly interesting in context of—and different from—Parisian cinema’s simultaneous investment in modernized streamlining that Kristin Ross has understood as part of France’s attempt to disassociate itself from its colonies and from people of color.³⁵ And it points toward, but also misses a connection with, a film history that would take us to black Africa and anticolonial filmmaking rather than white Paris and the New Wave.



Figure 4. Demonstrators clash with police.

To include *Rendez-vous* into a linear film history that proceeds from Neorealism to the French New Wave does not do justice to the explosive and centrifugal forces within the film. The film very consciously posits itself against Paris, insisting on “how we live here.” The port city on the country’s southern border becomes a crossroads gesturing towards alternative histories—the militant version of the film circulating in Eastern Europe, the tenuous connections to anti-colonial struggles. While these do not become fully articulated, the film advocates for a pluralized French film history attentive to spatial divergences. To the extent that Carpita is preceded by Renoir, and succeeded by Allio and Guédiguian, the Marseille region as a location has sustained a different cinematic space—one that allows a frequently migrant, precarious, complexly differentiated working class to occupy visual space.

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NOTES

1. René Prédal, *Histoire du cinéma français: des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2013), 171. All translations from French are mine, unless otherwise noted.
2. Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 155; Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 277.
3. Prédal, 155–65; Claudette Peyrusse, *Le Cinéma méridional, 1929–1944* (Toulouse: Eché, 1986), 37.
4. Hayward, 145–46, 158.
5. Michel Cadé, *L'Écran bleu: la représentation des ouvriers dans le cinéma français* (Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2004), Kindle edition, loc 426, 692–94. Cadé is very aware of the complex considerations that go into the constitution of his own filmic archive on which his claims are based: from questions of access and distribution to questions of what types of films to include. He ultimately settles on 162 films made from 1902 to 2002. His filmography is included as an appendix to his book.
6. Emile Temime, *Histoire de Marseille de la révolution à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 1999), 310.
7. The sexualized and racialized neighborhood on one side of the old port, known for its poverty and prostitution, had long been contested, and was finally dynamited by the Nazis in 1943. For a detailed excavation of the issues, see Sheila Crane, *Mediterranean Crossroads: Marseille and Modern Architecture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 111–54.
8. Régis Bertrand, ed., *Histoire d'une ville: Marseille* (Marseille: CRDP de l'académie de Marseille, 2012), 215; Emile Temime, *Histoire de Marseille* (Marseille: Editions Jeanne Laffitte, 2006), 183–86.
9. Pascal Tessaud, *Paul Carpita, cinéaste franc-tireur*, preface by Ken Loach (Montreuil: Editions Echapée, 2009), 25–35.
10. Tessaud, 37, 39, 41, 44.
11. Fabrice Barbaro, “Le chaînon manquant,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 428 (February 1990): 46.
12. Tessaud, 85, 110. In that interview, Carpita also candidly admits that the mismatched shots were due to a combination of a lengthy production time (two years), minimal funds, and non-professional cast and crew who worked on the film in their free time, rather than New Wave aesthetics.
13. *Breathless* indeed starts with a car theft in Marseille, but it borrows that scene from a very different, much more mainstream genre to which the city has also much contributed, the gangster film.
14. Tessaud, 78; Claude Martino, *Le Rendez-vous des quais: Un film de Paul Carpita et ses histoires* (Mallemoisson: Editions de Provence, 1996), 54.
15. Edouard Waintrop, “Le deuxième rendez-vous des quais,” *Libération* (13 February 1990).
16. Tessaud, 66–67.
17. Martino, 140.
18. The film is available at <http://www.cinearchives.org/Films-447-136-0-0.html>.

19. For a note on the connection between *Voilà Marseille* and Carpita, see Daniel Armogathe and Pierre Echinard, *Marseille, port du 7e Art* (Marseille: Editions Jeanne Laffitte, 1995), 151.
20. Edward Rice-Maximin, *Accommodation and Resistance: The French Left, Indochina and the Cold War, 1944-54* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 78.
21. Cited in Marc Vernet, "Si Orphée se retourne, Madame Dupont lui sourira: A propos du *Rendez-vous des quais* de Paul Carpita (1953-55)," *Cinémathèque* 1 (May 1992): 94.
22. Claude Martino, "Le rendez-vous des quais: La charnière mutilée du cinéma marseillais," *Revue Marseille* 173/174 (1995): 104–109. The details of the actual events are notoriously difficult to ascertain. While doing careful archival research, both Vernet and Martino infer quite a bit. Carpita's own testimony is also a complex source because he recalls events more than 30 years after they happened.
23. Thus Carpita insists that the communists in Marseille were for Algerian independence. See Tessaud, 102.
24. Tessaud, 62.
25. Agnès Libbra, "Défense d'une ville: l'espace marseillais chez Paul Carpita," *Revue Marseille* 173/174 (1995): 111.
26. Tessaud, 87.
27. Martino, "Le Rendez-vous des quais," 108.
28. Cadé, loc. 2159.
29. Cadé, loc. 2200.
30. According to the catalog entry at the French National Library (BNF), *Femmes françaises* becomes *Heures claires* in 1946. See <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32774119z>. public.
31. Tessaud, 60.
32. Chantal Chabert, "Au-delà des quais, y-a-t-il l'Indochine?" *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* 57 (October 1992): 47–49.
33. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 157.
34. Samba Gadjigo, *Ousmane Sembène: The Making of a Militant Artist*, trans. Moustapha Diop, foreword by Danny Glover (2007; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), chapters 11–13.
35. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).