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Dimitri Kirsanov (1899-1957)

Ménilmontant

1924-25, 25 minutes

Cast: Nadia Sibirskaia, Yolande Beaulieu, Guy Belmont, Jean Pasquier

Produced by Dimitri Kirsanov. Scenario by Dimitri Kirsanov. Cinematography by Dimitri Kirsanov. Edited by Dimitri Kirsanov. / Standard 35mm spherical 1.37:1 format.

Ménilmontant by Donato Totaro

Every now and then you are caught unaware by an unfamiliar film. Exactly that happened when I watched a 16mm print of a film I was preparing to teach, the 1924 short French film *Ménilmontant*, by Russian emigré Dimitri Kirsanov. After previewing it I calmly walked back into the projector room, threaded it up and re-watched it. I did it one more time. The film's story is pure melodrama, maybe even banal, but its visual treatment is pure poetry. I stress visual, since this is one of the earliest films that I know of to completely refrain from using any explanatory intertitles (French film scholar Richard Abel speculates that it is the first French film to do so). [1] What is fascinating is that director Kirsanov begins the film with an audacious and brutal montage flurry which contains several split second shots that foreshadow Eisenstein's famous *Odessa Steps* sequence of one year later.

But Kirsanov's varied style is more properly placed within the tradition of French Impressionism, which valued a musical approach to cinematic rhythm with alternating rapid montage scenes and slower lyrical moments, and 'in-camera' effects such as dissolves, fades, irises, fast motion, blurred or out of focus shots, and superimpositions. Counter pointing the film's raw montage is the realistic on-location shooting in the seedy, rundown milieu of the 20th arrondissement of Ménilmontant. Kirsanov depicts two urban visions: a thriving Paris depicted in vivid daytime flash montages of trams, cars, wheels, and storefronts, and dark, lonely alleyways, cobblestone roads, and plaster-decaying buildings.

Before we settle into our seats the sum of the opening montage leaves us with an unexplained double murder. We infer this from a series of jump cut images: a billowing window curtain, close-ups of people struggling, enraged faces, a woman violently clasped by the hair from behind, an axe raised in the air, a bloodied face, an axe falling to the muddy ground. This brutal *mélange*, both in its harsh cuts and disturbing content, gives way to a counterpointal scene of two young girls playing in a rustic park, climbing a tree

after a cat. The scene cuts back to a group of people huddled together looking down below frame at what must be an awful site: the two corpses. Although the spatial relationships are never made clear, the next series of shots unites the previous space with eyeline matches. The younger of the two girls is attracted to the crowd. A series of four dynamically articulated static shots of her face, from medium to extreme close-up, reveals her shocked expression.

The film soon flashforwards ten or so years, without any clues other than what we must infer: the two sisters, now older but played by the same actresses, the older sister (Yolande Beaulieu) and the younger sister (Nadia Sibirskaia, Kirsanov's wife), dressed in black at a cemetery. The camera cuts to closer shots of two headstones that read: "to our mother," and "to our father." We can now infer that the two people murdered in the opening were the parents of these two sisters, who have since had to fend for themselves.

The sisters move to Paris, where they become involved in a three-way relationship with an enigmatic young man (Guy Belmore). Things begin well, as they share an apartment and find work in a flower shop. The motivation for the subsequent actions of the three characters remain unclear. The younger sister's first encounter with the young man is spied on by the older sister from a street corner. After realizing the amorous nature of the encounter, she walks away dejectedly down a cobblestone road. In one of the most enigmatic scenes, Kirsanov crosscuts from the younger sister's first-time visit to the young man's apartment and the older sister lying in wait in bed. As he does throughout the film, Kirsanov makes arresting use of the dissolve (like in the earlier scene of the sisters' long walk away from the cemetery down a long narrow country road, with the walk advancing through a series of elliptical dissolves). The man and woman enter the room in long shot. A slow dissolve finds them seated on the other side of the room. The sister resists his sexual advances, but then coyly kisses him then runs to the window. The scene cuts to her sister in bed. She glances at the alarm clock on the night table, and then her sister's absent side of the bed. What follows is a complex montage of a clock, a nude female torso, and alternating car wheels whose conflicting rhythmic movements superimposed over the nude corpse suggests the sexual act. The montage ends and she moves her hand over to caress her sister's pillow. What are we to infer from this montage? Was it her imagination of her sister with the man? Or was it her own sexual fantasy? After her encounter with the man the young sister takes a stroll along a bridge and stops to gaze at a park down below. Perhaps triggered by the loss of her innocence, the film cuts from a close-up to a flashback of her as a young girl, dressed in white with long curls, playing in the park as she did prior to the murder of her parents.

For reasons never explained, the older sister allows herself to be seduced by her sister's lover. Kirsanov establishes their sexual consummation with a series of simple shots and dissolves of the street level door they enter and exit from. Once they exit the door Kirsanov dissolves from a shot of them embracing which oddly flips their position in the frame (crossing the axis), resulting in a quiet emotional effect of discord and unease. Echoing the sister's initial encounter with the man, now it is the younger sister who accidentally sees the amorous encounter, a revelation which leads her into an emotional downspin which leads her to contemplate suicide.

Kirsanov advances the narrative forward approximately nine months with a simple transition to a stone sign above a door which reads: "maternite." The camera tilts down to the younger sister crouched on the doorstep, looking worn and unhealthy, holding a baby in her arms. As a single mother living in one of the poorer districts in Paris, things become desperate. In a touching park scene that would make Chaplin proud, Kirsanov demonstrates the strength of the human spirit and human kindness. The scene begins with the two-timing lover seated alone on a park bench. He stands to leave, but before he exits in the foreground his body fades out, while the younger sister's body fades into view at the exact same spot on the bench. This use of the dissolve demonstrates the problematic association of cinema as a language akin to the written word. The dissolve is a technique rarely used today, but in the 1930's and 1940's was a common form of temporal transition. However, when the dissolve was first used in early cinema it was not coded as a temporal signifier. It was most often used to 'soften' a cut from, for example, a long shot of a person to a closer shot. By 1924, as evidenced in this film, the dissolve was already being used not only as a means of temporal ellipsis, but to establish mood, invoke irony (as in this latter case), or for an emotional effect. Seated next to the woman is an old man quietly eating bread with salami. The woman can not stop her starving eyes from glancing at the man. After a few alternating cuts, the camera films a close up of the man gently placing a piece of bread and meat on the bench between them. The woman picks the food up and begins to eat, the gesture bringing sorrowful tears to her eyes.

The film concludes with a series of powerful moments that include a reconciliation between the two estranged sisters, another brutal murder that echoes the opening one, and an ambiguous ending perched somewhere between despair and hope. While walking through the dark city streets the younger sister, with baby in arm, notices a well dressed woman standing outside a hotel. The camera marks her stature with an angled shot of her high heels sinking into the muddy terrain. The two sisters make eye contact. It only takes a few moments before they take pity on each other: one a single mother drenched in poverty, the other a night owl prostitute. An amazing juxtaposition symbolizes their estrangement: Kirsanov repeatedly sandwiches close-ups of the two sisters with the flashing neon hotel light. The sign "hotel" signifies all that has come between the two sisters: the big city, the seedy nightlife, the life of prostitution. She hands her the baby, and they embrace. The older sister takes her into her well furnished apartment. Meanwhile, poetic justice brews on the outside. A nervous looking, steely-eyed woman shuffles into a bar and helps herself to unfinished drinks on the bar counter, almost as if to instill courage for an upcoming act. She spies on our young male protagonist, who hovers about the side of the hotel. The woman enters the hotel door with a man. The camera tilts up to the hotel sign, and then back down. A man counts coins in his hand. The strange woman from the bar, aided by a barely seen male accomplice, attack the male protagonist, a character whose actions have painted him as the villain. In a flurry of shots matching the intensity and violence of the opening, the woman picks up a large stone and brings it crashing down onto the man's head, knocking him unconscious. The two assailants flee. The nature of the attack remains as oblique as the first. Was it simply a random attack, or a robbery? Or was the woman a prostitute settling scores with her pimp? Given the status of the older sister as a prostitute, the latter reading holds weight.

The film concludes with a final 'poetic justice' moment that crosscuts from the injured man crawling along the street trying to find his way to, we imagine, the older sister's home, to the two sisters in the comfort of the apartment. In the final shot we see the older sister asleep with the baby, and the younger sister seated at the foot of the bed, praying. The overall effect is one spiritual rebirth. The younger sister appears angelic, with her hair down, bathed by the sunlight streaming into the room. But the hope invoked through the formal properties seems oddly unwarranted. For in the end the sister is still a prostitute, and the other a troubled single mother.

There is so much to admire about this precious film. For instance, I have not even broached the stunning performance of Nadia Sibirskaia in the lead role of the younger sister. Kirsanov's camera loves her. In certain profile close-ups Sibirskaia reminded me of Anna Karina, Jean Luc-Godard's actress wife of the 1960's. Her performance, the Soviet-styled montages, and the alternating between the background realism and the low tech impressionist camera effects makes *Ménilmontant* of the great lesser known classics of silent cinema.

Notes

1-Richard Abel. *French Cinema: The first Wave, 1915-1929*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 395.

Biography

In France from 1923. Kirsanoff was at the forefront of Parisian avant-garde filmmaking thanks to works such as *Ménilmontant* (1926), which combined soviet style montage with hand-held camerawork and lyrically composed static shots. Kirsanoff's early silent films, many starring his first wife Nadia Sibirskaia, are considered his best works. With the coming of sound the quality of his output declined, though he continued to direct commercial ventures into the 1950's. His second marriage was to editor Monique Kirsanoff.

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