How queer is L'Air de Paris? -- Marcel Carné and Queer Authorship

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We now know that Marcel Carné, director of such milestones in French film history as *Le Quai des brumes* (1938), *Le Jour se lève* (1939) and *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945), was queer. Following Richard Dyer (2002: 1), we use this term to refer to a pre-gay liberation conceptualisation of homosexuality, roughly spanning the period from 1869 (the first use of the term homosexual) until 1969 (the Stonewall riots, the symbolic start of gay liberation). While Carné's sexual orientation was not public knowledge at the time he made the above-mentioned films, he subsequently "came out" and became increasingly gay-identified. For instance, in 1982 he publicly took up the case for R.W. Fassbinder's explicitly gay-themed *Querelle* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1982) while on the jury for the Venice film festival (Turk, 1989: 388). This information can be used in interpreting his work, but it raises thorny questions concerning authorship and the connection between biographical data and artefacts. In this article, the usefulness of the notion of "queer authorship" will be considered through an analysis of Carné's 1954 film *L'Air de Paris*. While both Edward Baron Turk (1989) and Richard Dyer (2000, 2002) have already identified the textual and contextual elements supporting a gay or queer reading of this film, here the notion of authorship will be focused on.

Carné: auteur or author?

In the French context, the *Cahiers du cinéma* position on auteurism provides a good starting point for any discussion on film authorship. Its critics developed an auteur theory strongly emphasising mise-en-scène and style, reading off the author from thematic or stylistic properties of his films (Hayward, 1993: 141; Crofts, 1998: 313). Certain "strong" auteurs, whose visions and intentions were supposed to leave clear textual traces, were privileged. François Truffaut, in his landmark 1954 article "A certain tendency of the French cinema", did not include Carné in his list of French auteurs (Truffaut, 1976: 233). On the contrary, Carné's later work was very much part of the execrated, psychologically realist and script based "tradition of quality". Most subsequent accounts of his work seem to agree that he was not a strong auteur, for several reasons. For example, stylistically and thematically Carné's film are less directly recognisable than those of, say, Max Ophuls. Moreover, Carné is, above all, perceived as a team-player. For many, the quality of his poetic realist films is due to his working with a homogeneous team and to his talent for controlling the diverse constituents of his films (Jeancolas, 1990: 117). In particular, Carné's frequent collaboration with screenwriter Jacques Prévert is considered to be so crucial that Prévert is sometimes considered the true auteur of their films. Truffaut reportedly used to say that Carné rendered in images films created by Jacques Prévert, and even Carné himself referred to Prévert as his "co-author" (Turk, 1989: 53).

Clearly, Carné was not an auteur as defined by *Cahiers du cinéma*. However, there are significant problems with this conception of the auteur. While internationally influential at first, French auteurism subsequently met with substantial criticism, most importantly for its romantic position in relation to individual creativity, simplistically reading films as an expression of the director's intentions, untouched by cultural and industrial interference. From the late 1960s, a structuralist reworking of auteur theory took place, reconceptualising the author as a set of textual structures in a director's films, not to be confused with the empirical person. This heavily theorised notion of the author, which was dominant in the 1970s, was challenged in the 1980s by historical analyses of the author as a social subject, working within a particular historical and cultural context and within particular institutions (Caughie, 1981; Crofts, 1998). These reworkings of authorship imply a move away from "crude", reflective auteurism and from an overemphasis on the creative power of the director. Reconceptualised in this way, director-centred film criticism -- as distinct from auteurism -- still has a place in film analysis (Perkins, 1990: 57). In this light, Alexander Doty (1993: 18) defends the use of "authorship" over auteurism, as it suggests a more open and flexible approach to the attribution of influence and meaning.

While Carné may not have been a convincing auteur, an analysis of his work through this reworked notion of authorship proves to be fruitful, as he was a dominant factor in the making of his films. As noted by Crofts (1998: 312), in pre-auteurist film criticism Carné was often singled out as a director with great creative freedom. Similarly, Turk (1989: 6) draws a portrait of Carné as a true artisan, who obstinately created the film he believed in, but also a control-freak on the set, legendary as "France's most demanding, irascible and invincible film director" (ibid.: 226). This strength of vision lead to a certain homogeneity in Carné's work. Thus, André Bazin (1983: 132) states that Carné's work may not have the consistency of the universe of a Renoir or a René Clair, but that it nevertheless has a marked thematic continuity. This idea is most fully elaborated by Turk, who maps the images, themes, patterns and techniques constituting the so-called "Carné touch". He identifies slow paced shots, gloomy decors and "the pressure placed on objects to release transcendent meaning" as elements co-operating to create a powerful mood, an "atmosphere" (Turk, 1989: 41).

Most importantly in this context, Turk (1989: 6) links certain textual patterns to Carné's personality, disclosing a "private mythology" deriving from his personal needs and frustrations. Turk was the first to strongly emphasise the importance of Carné's sexuality to an analysis of his films, which had been avoided in most commentaries over the decades. While Turk links particular themes and stylistic elements to the director's sexuality, he does not assume too high a degree of directorial control. For instance, he stresses the importance of several co-authors, prominently Prévert, but also actors like Jean Gabin and Arletty. Moreover, he avoids a naively biographical reading of the films, by situating the analysis of Carné's private life in its social and historical context. This approach fits within the above-mentioned, historicised, reworking of the notion of authorship, but it also suggests a more specific notion of authorship, focusing on sexuality. While Turk does not theoretically reflect on it, he uses a notion of authorship strongly reminiscent of feminist, and above all lesbian and gay film criticism. Moving on from Turk's account, I want to investigate the usefulness of the notion of queer authorship as a historically specific category informing a particular reading of films.

Queer authorship

In the 1990s, several attempts were made to construct an auteurism to fit a lesbian and gay agenda, as exemplified in Judith Mayne's writing on Dorothy Arzner (1990) and that of Richard Lippe on George Cukor (1990). Both Mayne and Lippe are highly aware of the problematic conceptualisations of authorship in the past, but they argue it can still be a valuable and even politically necessary concept. For instance, Mayne (1990: 104-7) claims that the lack of serious treatment of Arzner's sexuality in the extensive feminist writing on her films constitutes a structuring absence, and she therefore proposes a re-reading of Arzner's work through her sexuality. Concerning the political necessity of such a reading, Andy Medhurst (1991: 198, 207) identifies a double standard in the thinking on authorship: authorship is bad, but gay authorship is good. This caveat notwithstanding, for him, biographical interpretations are more politically justified if they are concerned with the cultural history of a marginalised group.

One of the most important problems facing such lesbian and gay reworkings of authorship is essentialism. When terms like "lesbian", "gay" and "queer" are used to describe directors, there is a danger that these will be evaluated against specific definitions of lesbian, gay and queer (Doty, 1993: 115). For this reason, Dyer (1991: 186-87) is opposed to universalising concepts like "the author" and "the homosexual". However, he believes that it is possible to work with a notion of lesbian and gay identity and authorship that takes into account specific cultural, historical and social contexts. Therefore, he proposes a model of "multiple authorship (with varying degrees of hierarchy and control) in specific determining economic and technological circumstances, all those involved always working with (within and against) particular codes and conventions of films" (Dyer, 1991: 187). In Dyer's conceptualisation of gay authorship, what matters is the access of the director to gay subcultural discourses. This model both fits within and specifies the proposed historical approach to authorship, not taking the author's sexuality as all-explaining, but as a culturally and historically specific factor in the production of films.

With the aforementioned qualifications, the notion of queer authorship seems defendable, but the question remains: what are its implications? As suggested above, the answer will vary from case to case, as each director lives his or her sexuality in a different way, in a specific historical and cultural context. So the director's sexual orientation may not explain much in general, but it can help concrete analyses. Ultimately, this notion of authorship is closely related to the act of reading and to an approach looking for elements confirming a Queer reading. Again following Dyer (2002: 4), Queer is used here to refer to a more inclusive reconceptualisation of "homosexuality", focussing in particular on the act of reading male-male sexual attraction where none is overtly present. Doty (1993, 2000) strongly emphasises this function, arguing that the queer notion of authorship acknowledges the fact that meanings are produced within and across films through the interplay of creators, cultures, and audiences. Thus, the discussion of authorship is opened up to include considerations of context and audience. Doty (1993: 25) also draws attention to the useful idea, introduced by early auteurists, that unconventional biographical and ideological elements can be expressed within conventional texts, even if sporadically and in heavily coded forms. He refers to the category "e" film proposed by *Cahiers du cinéma*, comprising films containing "internal criticism" which, therefore, "while being completely integrated into the system and the ideology end up by partly dismantling the system from within" (quoted in Doty, 1993: 25). As Charlotte Brunsdon points out, this is a category of reception: "If one reads the films obliquely, looking for symptoms" (Brunsdon, 1989: 121). A Queer reading, then, is a particular, purposeful reading of a film, which may be supported by knowledge of the director's sexuality. Therefore, rather than "explaining" anything, the notion of queer

authorship provides a reading strategy, a way into the work of a director, grouping stylistic and thematic patterns which may be read through the director's sexual orientation.

The relationship between a Queer reading and the proposed notion of authorship can be clarified through Paul Du Gay and Stuart Hall's model of the "circuit of culture" (Hall, 1997: 1-2; Du Gay et al, 1997: 3). In this model, the production of meaning in cultural artefacts is considered as the result of five distinct but mutually interacting cultural processes: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. The link between these processes is conceptualised as articulation, defined as a linkage which is not necessary, determined, or absolute and essential for all time, but contingent and variable. Using this model, queer authorship can be considered as an instance of production, which may be linked to a Queer reading as a particular mode of consumption. Both, however, are historically specific and there is no necessary correspondence between them, nor with other processes such as explicitly "homosexual" textual representations. A particular text may be read as queer, using the director's sexuality as an explanatory factor, provided that this meaning is considered as one of many possible temporary articulations, whereas other linkages and contexts may make for different readings. So the question is not whether a text "is" queer or not, using knowledge about the director as "evidence", but rather whether a text may be successfully read as queer, using knowledge about the director's sexuality as a significant context. Ultimately, however, a queer reading needs no such legitimation. As Judith Mayne (1990: 104) argues, quoting Bonnie Zimmerman: "if a text lends itself to a lesbian reading, then no amount of biographical 'proof' ought to be necessary to establish it as a lesbian text". Alexander Doty (1993: 16) makes the similar point that "queer" readings of texts are not alternative readings or wishful misreadings, and that queerness is not mere connotation, but that it has been present in popular culture all along. However, this "liberation" of queer readings does not preclude the fact that knowledge of the director's sexuality, as integrated in a model of authorship, may validate them. In what follows, the proposed model of "queer authorship" within a broader theory of meaning production will be applied to Carné's work, evaluating its use as a key to read his films, and pointing at the limitations of such a reading.

The queer Carné

Making most of his films before "gay liberation", Carné's homosexuality was not public knowledge. Working in mainstream cinema, he shared this position with Arzner (Mayne, 1990: 98) and Cukor (Lippe, 1990: 26). As Richard Dyer (2000: 139) notes, the post-war period in France constituted a homophobic context of production. Therefore, Carné could not live his sexuality as freely as his straight peers. Turk (1989: 50) takes up this element in comparing Carné with Prévert, claiming that Carné was socially less at ease than Prévert and that he felt obliged to hide his private feelings. Like Mayne and Lippe, Turk (1989: 434) considers this "repressed" sexuality as a constitutive element in Carné's work. Indeed, many elements in his work are open to such a reading. Clearly, Carné's uneasy relationship to his sexuality provides a meaningful context for understanding his cinema of sadness, pervaded by loss, exile and impossibility. Turk reads recurring themes in Carné's films in this way: a particular vision of love, comprising suffering and separation (Turk, 1989: 10); the wish to escape from the city and to return to nature (ibid.: 12); the wish to escape society's repressiveness and to flee to "paradise" (ibid.: 26), and a nostalgia for lost innocence (ibid.: 64). While this picture may seem one-dimensional, it is worth noting that Turk considers Carné's sexuality as only one amongst many biographical elements influencing his work. For instance, he also relates Carné's pessimistic vision of love to the early death of his mother, and to the general climate of expectancy and fear in the late thirties, and the occupation in the

forties. Moreover, Turk acknowledges that the influence of the director's sexuality is hard to isolate and may be indirect. For instance, it seems that Prévert fashioned his Carné screenplays to conform more closely to Carné's darker views.

Turk is reluctant to directly read Carné's sexuality into his work and to consider his films as "projections" of his emotional anxieties. But while he avoids crude biographical auteurism, Turk nevertheless provides a highly psychological reading of Carné's films, which implies the strong influence of his life and sexuality on his work. In accordance with the model developed above, I would like to propose a looser bond between the author and the text, considering the director's sexuality as one interpretative context among many. This view centres on the reading process, and may better account for diverse readings of Carné's work, depending on the reading context. Thus, it is possible to read Carné's films without any reference to his sexuality, as most writing before that of Turk and Dyer demonstrates. The pessimistic tone of Carné's cinema of loss may be situated in the cinematic context of poetic realism in the thirties, which in turn is related to the broader cultural context, such as the climate of pessimism over the failure of the Popular Front (Hayward, 2000: 149-151). However, as demonstrated above, Carné's authorship also provides a valid context of interpretation, particularly so as his work most strongly grasped the cultural moment. Indeed, a film like *Le Quai des brumes* most efficiently created the "certain atmosphere" that came to signify poetic realism (Andrew, 1995: 264). So, while Carné is to be situated in a broader cultural movement, he is also one of its prime representatives and undoubtedly his preoccupations influenced it. As mentioned above and following Turk, it is possible to relate the dark mood in Carné's work to his sexuality, which therefore provides another significant reading context, not only for Carné's work but also for the poetic realist cinema as a whole. However, such a reading depends on post-gay liberation discourses about homosexuality, providing the vocabulary and confirming the validity of such a category for the analysis of cultural artefacts. Just as gay authorship is dependent on the director's access to gay discourses, as Dyer (1991: 188) demonstrates, a gay or queer reading is equally dependent on the reader's access to such discourses.

The proposed model of cultural production as the articulation of multiple processes warns against the fixing of meaning, instead stressing the contingency and historical specificity of meanings. Considerations of the director's homosexuality clearly illustrate this point, as it may operate very differently, even within a similar cultural context. Carné was a "closet case", at least according to contemporary standards. His sexuality rarely found direct expression in his work, though his films do contain many subversive elements, covered under a layer of conventionality and traditionalism. Thus, Turk (1989: 123) remarks upon the persistent negotiating of gender codes, for instance in numerous androgynous characters such as Nelly in *Le Quai des brumes*, Dominique in *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942), Baptiste in *Les Enfants du paradis*, and the angel in *La Merveilleuse visite* (1974). However, this "closet" expression of homosexuality is only one possible articulation between the director's sexuality, the social context and textual representations. Some of Carné's contemporaries lived and expressed their sexuality in radically different ways. The most obvious example is Jean Cocteau, a widely respected writer, poet and director whose homosexuality was an open secret. Moreover, homosexuality played a much more important role in his work than it did in Carné's. As Dyer (1990: 64-74) notes, at first homosexuality was mostly symbolically present in the mannerist aestheticism of Cocteau's work, but from the late forties he more overtly expressed his homosexuality. In spite of the general homophobic atmosphere, Cocteau's homosexuality only added to his artistic aura, partly because he fitted within a culturally prestigious tradition of French gay writing (Dyer, 1990: 60). As a filmmaker, he was

considered an artist and an iconoclast, whose homosexuality was part of his unique style. In this light, it is telling that François Truffaut (1976: 233) did include Cocteau in his list of "true auteurs". Carné, on the contrary, was rather perceived as a skilled craftsman operating within "the industry". Turk (1989: 394) suggests that a more explicit personal expression of the homoerotic in Carné's films might actually have benefited him.

Homosexuality in L'Air de Paris

While potentially queer elements are mostly implicit in Carné's films, they sometimes come to the surface. This is most clearly the case in *L'Air de Paris* (1954), which therefore provides a good test case for the proposed model of Queer reading. Richard Dyer (2002: 137) considers it as an explicitly homosexual mainstream feature film, but I would like to argue that such a description underestimates the importance of the reading process, as the film contains hardly any explicit references to homosexuality. The story revolves around a young railroad worker, André Ménard, known as Dédé (Roland Lesaffre). He gets the chance to train as a boxer with Victor Le Garrec (Jean Gabin), which gives him a new aim in life. Victor has been looking for a champion all his life, and his hopes revive when Dédé shows some talent. Victor's wife, Blanche (Arletty), wants to move to a house she inherited in the South and is exasperated by her husband's obsession with Dédé. Dédé falls in love with Corinne (Marie Daems), an elegant worldly beauty, but she leaves so as not to interfere with his true love, boxing. Victor comforts Dédé. The end.

Carné made *L'Air de Paris* after his creative partnership with Prévert had ended. He co-wrote the screenplay, so it seems safe to assume that it reflects some of his preoccupations. Using knowledge of Carné's queer sexuality as a reading strategy, several textual elements readily invite a Queer reading. Most obvious is the presence of an overtly gay character, Jean-Marc (Jean Parédès), a camp couturier with a limp wrist and a high-pitched voice. Jean-Marc is certainly not the kind of homosexual Carné aspired to be, but his admiring glances on Dédé's body may parallel the director's gaze. Jean-Marc is ravished at each meeting with Dédé, to such a degree that Corinne has to restrain him from jumping up and sending Dédé flowers during his first big fight. In support of a reading relating this character to the director's sexuality, it is significant that overt homosexuals were portrayed in several of Carné's films, in spite of the homophobic climate. Most remarkably, in *Hôtel du Nord* (1938) Adrien's (François Périer) homosexuality is known and accepted by the other occupants of the hotel and his portrayal is not conventionalised or stereotyped (Turk, 1989: 140). However, the gay character in *L'Air de Paris* less unequivocally supports a Queer reading, for though his portrayal is humorous and sympathetic, it is also highly stereotypical. Richard Dyer (2002: 141-142) considers Jean-Marc as a typical closet expression of homosexuality, as he -- together with the less obviously lesbian Chantal (Simone Paris) -- presents a negative view of homosexuality, which removes any doubts about the heterosexuality of the central characters. As such, the presence of the overtly gay Jean-Marc is a form of inoculation, admitting and clearly indicating homosexuality in the margins of the film and thereby confirming the heterosexuality of the central storyline. While the mere presence of a gay character is significant in the historical context, and while it can be related to Carné's authorship, textually it undermines rather than supports a Queer reading. However, two other textual characteristics invite such a reading: the strong, almost overtly erotic relationship between the male protagonists, and the extensive attention given to Dédé's physique.

Male bonding

The relationship between Victor and Dédé is particularly close, Victor acting as a father-figure and protector for Dédé, who in turn fondly looks up to Victor. While both characters are explicitly presented as straight, their shared passion for boxing seems to hide a more essential passion, for each other. From the beginning of the film, it is established that Victor loves boxing above everything, as he forgot to pick up his wife at the train station because he was coaching a young boxer. Victor is also presented as a man with a big heart, who trains and feeds poor youngsters for free. However, his bond with Dédé is much more intense, as he spends most of his time and energy on him. At first, Dédé is even suspicious of Victor's interest, but boxing is brought up over and over again as its narrative justification. Blanche, however, becomes jealous, as she complains that sympathy rather than Dédé's boxing qualities inspire Victor's interest, that he is completely wound up with his protégé and that she would prefer he had a mistress. Later on, Victor becomes jealous himself, when Dédé falls in love with Corinne and neglects his training. But Corinne leaves, so as not to interfere with Dédé's boxing career, and the film ends as Victor comforts Dédé, walking away in the street at night. This is a very "gay" alternative to heterosexual closure, particularly as the film ends with a spark of hope, contrasting with the more downbeat endings of Carné's poetic realist films.

The central, close male relationship is further accentuated by the uneasy heterosexual relationships in the film, both women being presented as damaging to Victor and André's boxing plans and to their friendship. Victor loves Blanche, but he wants to stay in Paris to coach Dédé, which makes for a continuous tension in his marriage. Corinne, in turn, is represented as a threat to Dédé's boxing future and as a superficial fake in contrast to Dédé's honesty and authenticity. Throughout the film, there is a constant battle of the sexes, as Blanche is antagonistic to Dédé and Victor is suspicious of Corinne without even knowing her. All these strained relationships contrast with the purity of the central male friendship, which may be linked to Carné's strained homosexuality, as it provides an idealised image of friendship. Again, this reading is supported by the recurrence of similar instances in Carné's other films. For instance, Carné's first feature, *Jenny* (1936), introduced a strong, almost loving relationships between two male characters, Xavier (Roland Toutain) and Lucien (Albert Préjean). Other erotically charged relationships between men are to be found in *Le Quai des brumes*, between Lucien (Pierre Brasseur) and his buddy l'Orphelin, and above all in *Les Enfants du paradis*, between Lacenaire (Marcel Herrand) and Avril (Fabien Loris).

While a Queer reading of the close male relationship in *L'Air de Paris* is supported by knowledge of Carné's sexuality and by the recurrence of such friendships in his other films, this is only one possible articulation of meaning. Situated within other cinematic contexts, *L'Air de Paris* becomes less unequivocally queer. For instance, strong, tense but loving relationships between coach and trainee are recurrent in boxing films as diverse as *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) and *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), where they hardly have any queer connotations. The sports film in general is a very "male" genre in which the relationships between men are explicitly coded as straight. As Lippe (1990: 28) remarks, the sports world "allows for the idealisation of male bonding while masking the romantic and sexual (and misogynist) impulses involved in the bonding". Another cinematic context putting a queer reading in perspective, is the strong tradition of male bonding in French cinema. For instance, Susan Hayward (1993: 148) signals the recurrence of strong (working-class) male friendships in the poetic realist cinema of the thirties. This pattern is repeated in gangster films of the fifties, which often show strong male bonding between a central hero and his protégé or proto-son (ibid.: 170). Finally, the star persona of Jean Gabin playing Victor also diminishes the potential subversiveness of the male relationship in *L'Air de Paris*.

According to Ginette Vincendeau (1993: 190-91), the mature Gabin was an almost universal figure of identification as the prototypical male incorporating feminine values, his undoubted masculinity allowing for his showing a more sensitive side. Gabin, the prototypical straight man, was frequently "coupled" with other male characters (ibid.: 176-77) and he frequently played real or symbolic father figures (ibid.: 196), which again raises doubts concerning the homosexuality in *L'Air de Paris*.

But then again, the same contextual information can also be used in a Queer reading of *L'Air de Paris*, as the film displays small but significant deviations from the above-mentioned genres. For instance, both the sports and boxing film and the gangster film go to greater lengths to confirm the heterosexuality of their characters. In particular, Richard Dyer (2002: 144) shows how the male couple in two French gangster films of the same period, *Le Salaire de la peur* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1952) and *Touchez pas au grisbi* (Jacques Becker, 1954), bears a much greater heterosexual conviction. Similarly, while characters played by Gabin often seduce their symbolic daughters (Vincendeau, 1993: 200), the almost erotic overtone in his relationship with a young man is exceptional. Not only is *L'Air de Paris* significantly different from the above-mentioned counter-examples, but also, ultimately, such extratextual "evidence" is not required for a Queer reading, which above all is related to a particular reading process. In this light, it is significant that hardly any reviewer picked up on the gay potential of *L'Air de Paris* at the time the film came out, as Richard Dyer (2002: 137) remarks. To Dyer, this is due to the homophobic production context and to the closeted expression of homosexuality, for which there is no "place" in the text. One could add that there was also little place for a gay reading due to the lack of discourses about homosexuality.

Gazing at the male

A final element inviting a Queer reading of *L'Air de Paris* is the unabashed glorification of Dédé's physique. He constitutes the visual focus of the film, as most of the other characters persistently look at him admiringly. Already in the first sequence, Dédé looks at Corinne passing in a train, and instead of looking away, she lustfully looks back in surprising reciprocity. Victor, too, almost lovingly looks at Dédé throughout the film, the images sometimes even accompanied by romantic music. That this is not simply a coach looking at a potential champion becomes blatantly clear when Victor compliments Dédé on his beautiful smile. Most clearly, at the climactic moment of Dédé's first big fight, all looks converge on him and the camera accentuates this process of looking by frequently turning away from the spectacle to show Victor, Corinne, Jean-Marc and many others gazing at Dédé with a varying mixture of admiration and lust. The camera, too, is fascinated by his body. We get images of Dédé naked under the shower and walking around in briefs, while he is bare-chested or wearing a singlet most of the remaining time. Dédé is glamorously lit throughout the film, in particular in some remarkable close-ups accentuating his delicate facial features and his slick blond hair. Richard Dyer (2002: 145) points out how this lighting is similar to that for women in heterosexual couples, the only difference being that the lighting on Dédé is not softened. This "glamour" lighting is accentuated by the contrasting dark portrayal of Blanche as an unappealing household drudge with downcast eyes and drooping shoulders. One may have doubts about Lesaffre's acting performance, but he undeniably has a strong on-screen presence, with his well-defined physique, his shiny blond hair and his seductive smile.

For Dyer (2002: 137) the display of Lesaffre's body makes *L'Air de Paris* an obviously gay film. Again, I would rather consider this as one specific reading, which may be related to

Carné's sexuality and is supported by the recurrent fascination with the male physique in Carné's oeuvre. For instance, as Turk (1989: 61) notes, Carné's first film, the documentary *Nogent, Eldorado du dimanche* (1929), glorifies the male body in athletic activity. In *Les Visiteurs du soir*, Gilles (Alain Cuny) is the privileged object of the look, he is portrayed as passive and his beauty is accentuated (ibid.: 210-11). In *Thérèse Raquin* (1953), the sailor's (Roland Lesaffre) "gay" sex appeal is amply played out with images of tattoos, straight razors, torn underwear, leather jackets and motorcycles (ibid.: 384). Finally, in *La Merveilleuse Visite*, the camera seems fascinated by the angel's semi-naked body (ibid.: 421). Moreover, Carné's directorial gaze is not the only one privileging the male body. Carné upsets expectations, as female as well as male characters unequivocally gaze at male characters. In *La Merveilleuse Visite*, the angel is the object of erotically tinged male gazes (Turk, 1989: 421), and in both *Les Enfants du paradis* and *Les Visiteurs du soir*, the Arletty characters are bearers of the aggressive, erotic look (ibid.: 287).

In short, there is much material supporting a reading of the portrayal of Dédé in conjunction with the director's sexuality, both in the film and in the intertextual context of Carné's oeuvre. Again, however, this is only one possible articulation of meaning, and this Queer reading of *L'Air de Paris* becomes less evident when other cinematic contexts are taken into account. To start with, the unashamed gaze on Dédé may be an exception to the gaze dynamics in classical Hollywood cinema as described by Laura Mulvey (1975), but it does not stand alone. For instance, Ginette Vincendeau (1993: 184-90) argues that Jean Gabin has always been a privileged object of male, female and directorial gazes, without losing any of his "real man" qualities. According to Susan Hayward (1993: 167), the French cinema of the 1930s frequently eroticised working-class men, while representing them as unimpeachably straight. Within the context of the sports film, too, the ample display of Lesaffre's body seems less unequivocally gay. As Pam Cook (1982: 42) points out, Hollywood films about sport generally centre on the male body as an object of desire. More broadly speaking, in "male" genre films, male figures are subjected to voyeuristic looking, both by the spectator and by other male characters, as noted by Steve Neale (1983:12). In these films, the display of the body is motivated by action, because the unashamed display of the male body would involve feminisation (ibid: 14-5). In sports films, too, the erotic gaze is disavowed through activity (Drukman, 1995: 81). Bullying and symbolic rites of passage are recurrent, and erotic attention to the male body is allowable only in terms of the demonstration of its qualities of skill and endurance (Kirkham & Thumim, 1993: 13-16).

While this generic context puts a Queer reading into perspective, it is worth noting, again, that *L'Air de Paris* stands out in significant ways. The film does display the male body in action, training, fighting and suffering, but less so than in other boxing films like *Rocky* or *Raging Bull*. Suffering and strained muscles are administered in small doses, so that the boxing theme may easily be read as a pretext for Carné to put Lesaffre's body on display. Moreover, as Neale (1983:12) adds, in male genre films the erotic pleasure involved in looking at the male is refuted and looks are not motivated by desire, but by fear, hatred, or aggression. This imperative of aggressiveness is only partly met by *L'Air de Paris*, where most looks are fond and even frankly admiring. Similarly, Dédé's body is also passively put on display, as in the sequence where he is extensively massaged by Victor. In terms of traditional codes of representation, this implies a feminisation. Dédé's portrayal is unusually passive, not only in terms of the display of his body, but also in terms of characterisation. For instance, Victor is the one who talks him into boxing and Corinne initiates their romance by making an overt erotic proposal. When she invites him up to her apartment and he declines, she asks whether he is stupid, morbidly timid, or whether she looks particularly ugly. Her

response stresses how unusual -- if not queer -- Dédé's lack of interest is, only barely refraining from asking if he is gay.

Conclusion

L'Air de Paris provides ample textual material inviting a Queer reading. The fascination with Dédé's body, his strong relationship with Victor and, to a lesser degree, the presence of an overt homosexual make part of a pattern throughout Carné's work, which may be linked to his homosexuality. However, the proposed model of meaning production implies that queer authorship as a mode of production, queer textual elements as a mode of representation, and a Queer reading as a mode of consumption mutually interact, but that the relationship between them is contingent rather than necessary. Therefore, the fact that Carné was queer does not "explain" his films, but his historically specific experience of sexuality does provide a meaningful context for a reading of his work, bringing out particular textual characteristics.

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