



“MARSEILLE VIEUX PORT” (1929)

von László Moholy-Nagy

Musik: Bill Dobbins

Following the opening title sequence, which concludes with a section of a map being cut out to reveal a street scene in the old port of Marseille, I experienced the film as unfolding in four episodes. The first is a series of slice of life scenes from the streets, parks, balconies and outdoor restaurants near the harbor. The second provides both stationary and moving perspectives of the transporter bridge, an eye-catching sight in an old European port city in the late 1920s. The third focuses on the lazy after lunch period, with young and old relaxing in various locations or nodding off for a short nap. It also reveals some signs of poverty and the criminal element that can easily be missed by a visiting tourist. The final episode returns to slice of life scenes as work is resumed later in the day, and includes a last glimpse of the transporter bridge. The film concludes with a boat motoring from the shore and a brief scene of sea gulls in flight, landing on or taking off from the water; a sight that can be enjoyed by all, regardless of social or economic class.

My references in terms of the music were European composers of the first quarter of the twentieth century (especially Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Eric Satie and Maurice Ravel) and early jazz (especially Duke Ellington compositions of the late 1920s). Although jazz was still in its infancy at the time Moholy-Nagy made this film, the earliest recordings of Louis Armstrong and Ellington were already making a considerable impact on European listeners, and the French were among the most enthusiastic. Of course, I drew from this vocabulary in a personal manner that, hopefully, conveys my impressions of the film in musical terms. As most scenes include the physical movement, or repose, of human beings, a rhythmic musical idiom that was making itself felt at the time of the film seemed appropriate. As for the scenes of the bridge, the waltz rhythm (more a French café waltz than a jazz waltz) seemed to convey the free-spirited, soaring feeling shown in the film sequence. The musical quote from the French national anthem (La Marseillaise) in the final episode was intended as a gesture of admiration for the working class depicted in the film, without whom no city can operate at its best.

Bill Dobbins