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Cliff Thompson

PARIS BLUES, VISITED

FOUR FACTS DETERMINE the kind of escapism I often seek: (1) I love cities; (2) I love films; (3) I often fantasize—and probably that is the right word—about living in an America less characterized by violent crime, a thing so common that it has come to seem less an outrage than a fine exacted for being too naive or careless; and (4) being black and, more important, possessing a grain or two of social awareness, I am sensitive to the ways in which different groups of people are portrayed in the media. The combination of these four apparently disconnected and possibly even contradictory phenomena sometimes leads me to watch certain films made circa 1960, particularly those set in large cities. For diversion-hunters of my persuasion, such films, among them *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *La Dolce Vita*, and *Sweet Smell of Success*, have it all. They serve almost as strainers for the city in which I live, getting rid of the stray bullets and carjackings but leaving intact the cosmopolitan flavor; I feel that if I could but step past the screen and into one of these films, I would inhabit a world where it's possible to find a cup of coffee or listen to a jazz quartet at any hour of the night and then walk home, in the pleasantly cool night air of these films' eternal late spring, in safety. Forget a home where the buffalo roam: give me an apartment like the one in *The Apartment*, where Jack Lemmon paid \$87 a month to live alone (on Manhattan's Upper West Side!) in a space big enough for a family of three. Better still, give me a city where the Jimmy Stewart character in *Rope* (okay, so it came out in '48) could attract the attention of the police by stepping onto the balcony and firing two or three shots into the air from a *re-volver*. The civil rights movement had gained momentum by 1960 and was leaving its mark on everything, so that the black actors who (with admitted infrequency) appeared in these films were not called upon to shuffle, wear headrags, or grin until their cheeks hurt. And the beginnings of a modern sensibility were evident in another way: male/female relationships on the screen had come to resemble, at least somewhat, those in my own life. By 1960—three years, incidentally, before I was born,

which may help explain my romantic view of that year—by 1960, a kiss was just a kiss, not a signpost on a one-lane road to either marriage (à la *It's a Wonderful Life*) or murder (see *Double Indemnity*). When Piper Laurie used the words “make love” in *The Hustler* (1961), she meant precisely what we mean by them today. At the same time, there was a restraint in that and other films of the period that has been largely—and purposely—absent in more recent decades. Back then, one could see two people in bed together without having to watch every act they performed there. Films from around 1960 represent, for me, a happy overlapping of old and new, the best of a number of worlds.

No surprise, then, that I was excited to discover in my neighborhood video store Martin Ritt's *Paris Blues* (1961), a story of two expatriate American jazz musicians set in the City of Lights, filmed in black and white, and starring Paul Newman and the tall-walking, ground-breaking black actor Sidney Poitier. But I found that the escape which the film provided was not pure: my visit to the world of *Paris Blues* was like a visit to a real place in that what I encountered left me entertained but also glad I had a home to come back to. I have called the film a story of two jazz musicians; more precisely, it is the story of their relationships with a pair of vacationing American women, played by the white actress Joanne Woodward and the black actress Diahann Carroll. The women meet Newman and Poitier for the first time after stepping off a train in Paris, where they intend to spend a carefree week. The way in which the inevitable romantic pairings play out can be viewed, depending on a number of things, as either emblematic of the changing attitudes of the time or as the same old stuff dressed in new clothes.

What could tip one toward the more cynical view is the presence in the film of the jazz giant Louis Armstrong—in two scenes that at first appear to be merely superfluous but, on reflection, seem intended to lend the film some sort of legitimacy. And in some people's minds it needs just that, since, to the extent that it is the story of jazz musicians, it is the white actor Newman's movie: his composer/trombonist is the leader of the band in which Sidney Poitier's tenor saxophonist is a sideman. That much is okay with me. If a white musician has the skill, knowledge, and heart to do justice to the African-American art form in question, then my only response is, Play on. But the makers of *Paris Blues* didn't see it that way, or, more likely, weren't confident that we would. Why

bring in Armstrong otherwise? Not to sell tickets—Newman and, for that matter, Poitier were established leading men by then. No, Armstrong is on hand, grinning and blowing, for purposes of legitimacy. The result is an interesting bit of layering: on the bottom there is Poitier's black jazzman; above him, both in terms of the film's focus and the hierarchy that exists within the story, and therefore negating whatever authenticity Poitier's blackness brings to this movie about jazz, is Newman's character; above *him* (at least in the hierarchy within the story), vouching for this white guy and so restoring authenticity, is the world-famous black trumpeter portrayed by Armstrong, the world-famous black trumpeter. The question then becomes: Who will vouch for Armstrong, a man who by 1961 had come to be perceived—wrongly or not—as Uncle Tom himself? (And in film, is perception not everything?) To the black nationalists who would burst onto the scene a few years later, Louis Armstrong would be no more appropriate a focus for a movie about black people's art than would Paul Newman.

The filmmakers' little game, unsuccessfully played, reveals itself to be a game, and puts us on our guard for others. And so we come back to the aforementioned romantic pairings. Although, as we expect, the black man ends up with the black woman and the white woman with the white man, the film goes out of its way to let us know—or think—that it ain't *necessarily* so: Newman initially tries to pick up Diahann Carroll, because it is she whom he meets first, but the upright Carroll prefers Poitier's even temper to Newman's surliness. Having thus given the appearance of breaking the color barrier without actually having done so, *Paris Blues* then has two characters, Joanne Woodward's and Poitier's, discuss two new, nonracial categories of humanity: "day" people, or the world's practical, sensible nine-to-fivers (represented here by Carroll and Woodward), and "night" people—hip, fast-living jazz musicians and their hangers-on (Newman and Poitier). (This allows Poitier to deliver the irresistible line about how he wouldn't mind living next-door to a day person but wouldn't want one to marry his sister.) These new categories don't hold, however, and since the old, race-based ones have not been truly done away with, they continue to assert themselves. As soon as the film has established which guy goes with which gal, *bam*, we see Joanne Woodward, compliments of the new 1960s cinematic frankness, in Paul Newman's bed. Where does that leave Poitier and Carroll? Literally out on the street: their romance

seems to be carried on entirely outdoors, where they are at all times fully clothed and surrounded by Parisians. Alas, it may be nineteen sixty-one in Newman's bedroom, but for these dark-feathered lovebirds it is about nineteen *forty-one*, and, as a movie actually made around that time informs us, a kiss is still a kiss. Whether because Ritt and company didn't consider these characters to be real human beings, complete with sex drives, or because they thought white viewers wouldn't want to watch two half-naked blacks prancing around, the film is half over before Poitier and Carroll—out in public and dressed from neck to toe—get to *kiss*, and not only is this bit of high-school business the only physical affection in which they are allowed to indulge, it is followed immediately by their declarations of love for one another. If this is the life of a night person, Lord have mercy on the day shift!

Ritt and his collaborators on *Paris Blues* could have dealt with their apparent insecurities in far better ways—for example, by *honestly* taking on the issue of a white man playing jazz, instead of pulling in Armstrong, whose famously wide grin is not quite wide enough to obscure the issue. Or they could've simplified things by making a different movie—one focusing on a black musician—and shown courage by investing him (or her) with some complexity, as happens, for instance, in Clint Eastwood's movie *Bird* (1988) or Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (1990). *Bird* is not a great film, and *Mo' Better Blues* is not even a particularly good one, but they are signs of their time: stories in which fully human blacks are the main characters in stories about black people's art. As such, they form part of the landscape to which I was happy to return after my visit to the world of *Paris Blues*.

All that said, I'm glad I went there. *Paris Blues* at least attempts, however naively, to say some positive things, and in that way it is as representative as anything else of the tragic, glorious period of the 1960s. Would that I could bring that aspect of the film back to my world. From the perspective of the faction-obsessed mid-1990s, it is heartbreaking to hear Diahann Carroll trying to persuade Poitier to go with her back to the United States by telling him that things are changing there, that *blacks and whites are working together* to change things. And the film evokes another quaint notion from the period in which it was made—the idea that our all coming together not only was the right thing to do, but might even be *fun*. One of the opening shots says it all: a pan of Newman's

jazz club, showing the patrons, black and white alike, grooving to the cool Duke Ellington score, not appearing to think about much, just relaxing and having some serious fun. Those people, the film seems to be saying, are us, the viewers, if we will only do as they do. And in truth, theirs is probably the best way to enjoy *Paris Blues*.