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Richard Copans, director. *Paris Périph (Paris Ring)* 54 minutes. DVD. (Les Films d'Ici/Arte Éditions/Icarus Films, 2004). \$398 U.S.

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Drawing on the works of Jean-Louis Cohen, André Lortie, and the Tomato group of architects, Richard Copans has created a film on the history and lived experience of the Boulevard périphérique, the ring road surrounding Paris.[1] In 1937, the architect and town planner Georges Sébille proposed a circular expressway in place of the *zone*. The latter was an area of shantytowns that had grown up on open space beyond Paris's old fortifications, which the city had begun demolishing in the 1920s. The Vichy government adopted the idea of a ring road in 1943. Intense debate on new plans for Paris and its suburbs followed World War II, although comprehensive programs were not adopted until the 1960s.[2] Construction of the *périphérique* nonetheless began in 1957. In subsequent years, the highway opened in progressive stages, with final completion in 1973.

Copans begins the film with the sights and sounds of snarled traffic. The auditory noise, in particular, is one of the major themes of the film. Copans repeatedly exposes the viewer to the clatter of the expressway, from which the camera rarely departs more than a few meters. Only two groups are relatively unaffected by the reverberations of cars and trucks: three individuals with hearing impairments, who are shown signing to each other on a small grassy knoll situated between two overpasses, and the occupants of the cemeteries in Saint-Mandé, Gentilly, and Batignolles. The *périphérique* actually crosses over part of the cemetery in Batignolles. Just beyond the shadow of this overpass is André Breton's tomb, inscribed with the phrase, "Je cherche l'or du temps." One doubts that Breton has found it next to the expressway.

Like many scholars, Copans criticizes the *périphérique* as a frontier—a wall, in effect—between the city and the suburbs. Expansive though it is, the road technically is not an autoroute but a boulevard. It is nonetheless singular among Parisian streets. The expressway handles approximately 1,000,000 vehicles per day. It has no sidewalks, and pedestrians are prohibited from using it. They can only cross over or under the *périphérique* on footbridges or via tunnels. These passageways have done little, however, to overcome the divide between city and suburb. One example is the Cité universitaire's church in Gentilly. Attendance plummeted after the construction of the highway left a footbridge as the only access. When the footpath fell into disrepair, the city blocked it rather than fix it.

Copans nonetheless weaves into his story a more positive theme. Years after the closure of the footbridge, a Portuguese community in Gentilly reinvigorated the church. The city since has repaired the footpath, and Copans has filmed three members of the community playing music on the bridge in spite of the traffic below them. In another instance, Gérard Charron, a homeless man, appropriated an unused storage room in the base of an expressway pillar and transformed it into his residence. Charron claims that he "lives like a king," and Copans provides evidence that others who inhabit more regular lodgings have found a positive side to life near the highway. Walls along the *périphérique* block Tea-Hwan Park's view from his window, but they do dampen the noise enough for him to play his flute in peace. In contrast, "Mme. B.," who lives near the Porte de Clichy, believes that the striking view of Montmartre from her high-rise apartment outweighs the noise of the vehicles.

Copans also interviews professionals who do not live beside the highway, but who find pluses in it. One is photographer Patrick Tourneboeuf, who discovers beauty in the curves and lighting of an exit ramp at night. Another is businessman Oliver Pelat, who sees profit for a hotel venture in the road and rail connections near the Porte de la Chapelle. The last is architect Dominique Perrault, who designed the Hôtel Industriel Berlier five meters from the *périphérique* at the Porte d'Ivry. Rather than attempting to shut out the expressway, Perrault opened his glass-walled building to it. He sees the road as an avenue for exchange, not an impenetrable wall, and he is using his building to encourage others to do the same. Copans' film thus is not simply a diatribe against the *périphérique*. He presents the negative aspects of the expressway, but he also highlights some subtle positives, thereby encouraging the viewer to come to his own conclusions.

The film's sound effects are good, as is most of the cinematography. However, Copans has one of his narrators, Nicolas Duron, sing the history of the *périphérique's* construction. Duron performs in front of a Habitation à bon marché, and he uses hand-held photographs of the fortifications and the *zone* as reference points. Duron has a fine voice, but the songs and illustrations are poorly crafted. This detracts from the overall quality of the film. The almost constant road noise also renders *Paris Périph* problematic for classroom use. For fifty-four minutes, Copans exposes the audience to the din that people near the highway must tolerate on a daily basis. Copans point is valid and his method so basic that it is, in fact, innovative. One suspects, however, that university students would tire of the clatter rather quickly. In Copans' short documentary, he nevertheless provides a powerful and holistic image of the Boulevard périphérique and of those who live, work, and rest eternally in its presence.

#### NOTES

[1] Jean-Louis Cohen and André Lortie, *Des fortifiées au périf: Paris, les seuils de la ville* (Paris, 1991); Le groupe Tomato, *Paris, la ville du périphérique* (Paris: Picard, 1991).

[2] Rosemary Wakeman, "Nostalgic Modernism and the Invention of Paris in the Twentieth Century," *French Historical Studies* 27 (Winter 2004): 128, 132-133, 136-144.

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