Chapter 13

Carousels and Carnivals

In 1949, Max Ophuls, Jewish German director of international acclaim, ended his eight-year exile in Hollywood and returned to Europe, specifically to France, where he had lived, also in exile, from 1936 to 1940. His first film project in postwar France was an adaptation of a play by Arthur Schnitzler, the renowned Viennese playwright and novelist, whose views on the world of eros coincided with those of his contemporary Sigmund Freud. In 1933, Ophuls had successfully adapted Schnitzler’s play Liebelei, but the challenge of adapting Schnitzler’s Reigen (1897) was unique. Often translated as La Ronde (and this is the title of Ophuls’s film), a Reigen is a round dance. For Schnitzler, the round dance was a metaphor for a cycle of sexual encounters involving five men and five women, beginning and ending with a prostitute, and including the transmission of syphilis. Roundly censored for obscenity in Germany and Austria, it was the perfect vehicle for Ophuls to explore the mechanics of love and sexual attraction with his customary blend of cynicism and compassion.

Schnitzler’s play consists of a series of rendezvous between the men and women who by dint of their routine promiscuity form nine pairs of lovers, one partner of which always advances to form the next pair with a new partner in the manner of a round dance. Obviously, the metaphor of the round was immensely appealing to Ophuls, who was well known for the “circling” motion of his moving camera as well as his sardonic view of the viability of love. La Ronde afforded him an opportunity to accomplish “perfectly the vision of circularity that had haunted [him] from his earliest days as a filmmaker” (White, 239). His major innovation for the film adaptation was the introduction of a meneur de jeu—a “ringmaster,” so to speak—who self-consciously
leads the audience from a theatrical stage, to a sound set, to the city of Vienna, and finally to an old mechanical carousel, all the while speaking about his role as author, director, and representative of an audience desirous of knowledge about the things of love. In a word, Ophuls shifts the meaning of la ronde from the dance to the carousel: from the realm of ritualized if libidinal social interaction to the mechanical motion of the merry-go-round. This extraordinary stroll from stage to set to city is accomplished in a single take of five minutes that required fifty meters of track for the camera and became a legend in its own right. Between scenes of sexual encounter and shattered illusions, carnal euphoria and melancholy failure, verbal fencing and crass negotiation, Ophuls returns to the carousel and its master for commentary and transition. The carousel is a metaphor not only for the transitive power of eros but also for cinema as the mechanics of projection. We are not to overlook the circumstance that the revolving carousel resembles the turning reel of the movie projector. At one point, we even see the meunier de jeu peering at strips of celluloid, scissors in hand, as he edits the film for moral decency, “a humorous commentary on Ophuls’ problems in the United States with the Production Code” (White, 240).

The connection between the carousel, cinema, and sexuality begins early. The famous expressionist film classic The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919) features a fairground with revolving canopies indicative of carousels. In the early days of cinema, a hint of scurrility readily allowed film to be associated with the seedy nature of carnival and fair as opposed to metropolitan theater. The appearance of the androgynous and mysterious somnambulist Cesare in a sideshow tent replicates early cinema experience and is imbued with sexual wonder. This connection survived Hitler and the Nazis’ assumption of power in 1933. In the first movement film Hitler Youth Quex from the same year, the carousel was used to represent both the chaotic and sexually charged ethos of communism as well as Weimar-era film aesthetics. A communist youth leader leaps onto a revolving carousel after inviting the impressionable Heini to come to a youth event. Later in the film, the proper mealtime conversation of three Nazi youths is intercut with scenes of a young communist woman Gerda rocking back and forth on a carousel horse. The camera even ventures a lingering close up of her thighs straddling the horse, reminding us of Sternberg’s close-up shot of Dietrich’s legs. By this time, it would have been clear to Goebbels that his efforts to lure her back to Berlin were in vain.

A parallel process occurred in the United States. The three Coney Island amusement parks established amid the dance halls, the