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Marseille,
hidden behind
galéjades

TRANSLATED
FROM THE FRENCH BY
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Alfred Hitchcock, commenting on the famous scene

in *North by North West* where a vehicle moves ominously towards a fleeing Cary Grant and then pulls away without anything having taken place, wrote that "a received image had passed by". In order to talk about Marseille or its people, the Marseillais, one needs to know like him how to line up such images and have them pass by. Such images tell us as much about the city as they do about what we think about it. Most of all they describe the strange connection that it maintains with the rest of the world.

The power of images and clichés about the Marseillais is such that they have a central place in books. The very serious and humorous work by the geographer Roger Brunet and his associates, *les Mots de la géographie* (Reclus-La Documentation française, 1992) has given the term a special entry: "Marseillais: a classical and persistent ethno type which has been made worse by Pagnol caricatures and in which there is a mix of the so-called southerner (gift of the gab, exaggeration, lying: telling a Marseille tall story, a *galéjade*) and of the suspect (the underworld and the shady, and more recently a relative economic collapse which in fact is very... exaggerated)." The dictionary continues with a bit of good sense: "There are more Marseillais than those who are fishmongers and pimps; they work, are very serious and come from all over the place."

The Marseillais' tendency towards exaggeration is a cliché (an "ethno type") which is widely spread; even the very serious Littré dictionary of 1957 in the article "Marseillais" speaks of *Fédérés* saying that "they are known for their revolutionary exaltation". In a short text by Michel Peraldi, *Paysage, ville et mémoire: Marseille* (Cerfise, 1988) in connection with the destruction by dynamite of the quarters of the old port ordered by Hitler himself, and which were followed by massive expulsions and deportations, the fascist review *Signal* of April 1943 is quoted: "The swaggering spirit of Marius [in the Pagnol novels and films] should be silenced by scientific rigour." And from *Dico marseillais*, a collection of local linguistic habits (Jeanne Laffitte, 1998): "What one notices, from innocuous babble to legal jousting, and from a Pagnol-inspired actor to a council estate rapper, is a strong propensity for verbal one-upmanship."

Then there are "Les Cacous". The preface to *le Parler de Marseille* (Auberon, 3rd ed. 1996) starts: "A Cacou [a Marseillais] speaks loudly [...] is a bit of a mythomaniac and enjoys it." So, learned books and the public at large, locals or outsiders, say the same thing: the Marseillais are braggarts, that is "people who have the habit of talking a great deal with exaggeration and boastfulness" (dictionary definition in *Robert*).

A good many Marseillais seem determined to confirm this daily. There are no statistics, but experience on the ground reaffirms the diagnosis: a Marseille bar is made of oiled wood, opens onto a terrace, and is the place to discuss things, loudly and emphatically with a strong implication that when one is a Marseillais one is proud of it. Glorious football, rotten politics and the weather are the main subjects which make it possible to evoke the significant matters of the city without saying anything about one's self. Indeed, lots of bragging takes place here. A documentary film-maker would need to be very careful about casting, avoid those who chunter on endlessly but select good talkers. There are plenty of both types; the latter are funny, the former tedious. The latter might exclaim after an electoral campaign: "In politics, one has no choice but to choose"; said at a bar or in front of a camera, this is quite a wise definition of politics.

In phrases of this sort, which flow easily, those who mock are usually not very intelligent. For Marseille humour is made that way, quickly changing direction and light, succeeding in the act of making an exaggeration graceful and always playing delicately on conventions. Basically, what is most amusing for a Marseillais is to be confronted by a stranger to the city, for example a Parisian, who

believes that one believes what one says when one is only having fun putting him at ease with the idea that the Marseillais are braggarts.

This hard core of clichés becomes part of other expressions which find their way into everyday conversations and newspaper articles. For example, that the Marseillais are interested in nothing but football. It is statistically proven that they like the round ball: 40,000 season ticket holders for the Stade Vélodrome which holds 60,000, and the increase in newspaper sales when there are life-changing happenings at the club, Olympique de Marseille. The crowds gathered in front of the giant screen of the Prado, in the cafés or on the terraces of houses during the World Cup confirmed this image. But saying that the Marseillais love football is generally a snobbish way of stating that, in other cities in France, the élite claim to have disdain for it: here all classes, strata, cultures and sub-cultures talk about football, including artists, as in Naples. Football fanatics are braggarts and adept at making fun of themselves; that's why a supporters' club chose to call itself "Marseille trop puissant" ("Marseille too powerful").

All the same, it would be wrong to believe that this love of football isn't an art form, and even more wrong not to understand that discussions concerning this collective art, which has the appearance of a club sport, are part of the whole. Supporters – regular or occasional – use it mainly to express metaphors which say something about how the world is going, how it ought to be going and above all about how to talk to create ties among people. They exercise "the fundamental task of football which consists of being able to discuss uncertainties that define the human condition", as Patrick Mignon put so well (*la Passion du football*, Odile Jacobs, 1998). Moreover, a recent study of security problems in big cities credits the relative calm of Marseille's housing estates to the ability to talk things through.

Almost as much as tall stories, *galéjades*, it's claimed that the Marseillais love their pastis. This false idea conceals a few secrets. The ersatz absinthe was indeed produced here by Paul Ricard before it conquered the rest of the world. But, the statistics of those who sell aniseed aperitives, serious people, show that the penetration of the little yellow stuff is "lower" here than in several other cities: more pastis (all brands combined) is consumed in the north of France than in the south-east, more in Lille than in Marseille! But the image remains and in the eyes of the rest of the world, it has a simple meaning: Marseille is a city of the "people". In *Marseille ou la mauvaise réputation* (Arlea, 1998), Olivier Boura has

this to say about pastis: "There's no question here of grand cru or premier cru, or even dates or red or black labels; its nature is that of the vulgar diminutive – *pastaga* – when it's not simply *le jaune*, 'the yellow'".

So the city smells of aniseed, another way of saying it smells of sweat which is more associated with the masses than is matured armagnac. One should add that the city, bathed by the mistral, smelled for many years of factories, fish, aniseed and garlic – which puts you in the picture.

As for thyme and other magic herbs from the Lure mountains, they can be found in open air markets or supermarkets; in any case, everyone knows that the Mediterranean diet is now a world "must". In effect all the "musts" which originated in the Marseille working classes have returned after their world tours. Take Marius and Jeanette, IAM, Henri Verneil, Jean-Claude Izzo and Zinedine Zidane whose huge photo on the Corniche strikes one as a call to return. Happily, the mistral is still here, sweeping the wall-to-wall sky clean with its freezing winds and removing the city's main odour of modern times, that byproduct of globalisation: car exhaust. All the same there is always the smell of aioli drifting out joyfully every Friday from corner cafés and restaurants. This is real Marseille chic.

Not satisfied with being Marseillais, people here are also "Mediterraneans", that is reputed to be more macho than other people. "Macho?" "A Latin American who shows off his sense of male superiority; by extension, a phallocrate", according to the dictionary. Here, it's more a question of Italy, Corsica and the southern Mediterranean, although the Spaniards are not to be denied some influence.

The café braggarts are often male, but one would have to be half deaf not to hear the ladies: they've also got wagging tongues, as in the films of Pagnol; and the character of Jeanette in the films of Robert Guediguian isn't a figment of his imagination. Macho talk is indeed widespread. *Putain* ("whore") and *enculé* ("buggered") are at the heart of the repertory, gritty words of everyday local life. It's true that the *ho-hisse enculé-é-é!* shouted by the whole stadium when the enemy's goal is open, although invented in the Vélodrome, has been exported effectively to the whole country. Nonetheless, the macho reputation for language and behaviour of the Marseillais has not been totally usurped. Though there is nothing in the court records that indicates a specific number of sex crimes, the sad national record for the highest number of road accidents kept by the region probably shows the aggressiveness of male driving. But we know from the

ethnography of Christian Bromberger (*Match de Football*, Éditions MSH, 1995) that the masters at shouting insults in the stadium betray more of an uneasiness about their virility than anything else when they let loose. And in that, by the way, they're closer to a quite modern crisis of mentalities than to any eternal Mediterranean archaism.

As for the Marseillais of vendettas and drawn knives, leave them where they belong – in films. To be sure, there are more possibilities for illegal practices and probable bad guys around the Joliette than in the countryside of Limousin: that's what ports are about, as in Barcelona, Naples or Beirut. It's probably the reason for preferring making films here rather than in Limoges. Yet, by 1923, the tradition was established: *Coeur fidèle* by Jean Epstein is the first film about Marseille low life, and it's followed by *Justin de Marseille* by Maurice Tourneur which was not allowed to be shown in the city. Yet, in terms of delinquency, white or blue collar, Marseille has no more nor less than other French towns.

Phantasms about dangerous housing estates are popular in political discourse, but not the reality of everyday life. The problem or luck is that Marseille has no segregated housing estates: they are an integral part of a city which didn't wish or manage to chase the poor beyond its walls. Riots like those in Vaulx-en-Velin or Liverpool obsess the élite, but the flames are always coming, never arriving. There were some nasty fights during the World Cup in 1998 when English supporters disembarked into the city shouting "fucking bastards", which hundreds of kids with little knowledge of Shakespeare's language understood perfectly.

But four days later, once the hooligans had been chased away, the matter was forgotten and the kids had a good time with supporters from wherever and of whatever colour. Then they celebrated the victory of "Zizou" (Zidane) and gang by stealing, here as elsewhere, tricolour flags from the façades of public buildings.

While we're at it, another cliché – that the Marseillais are lazy and take siestas. There are indeed at the time of writing 22% of the working population unemployed, which sadly puts it at the top of the table of big French cities; but only a few cruel imbeciles believe that unemployment is connected with laziness. The street demonstrations by the unemployed here came early on and powerfully. That should be enough to put an end to the accusation. And if one needs a rational explanation for the clichés, it should be said that the port starts early in the morning, as do the factories. Offices here open earlier than they do in Paris. The siesta here,

besides being an art, is a summer necessity. People carry on working when the thermometer shows 35 degrees in the shade.

This endless list of clichés leads to a conclusion: the city is working class. The statistics bear this out: the per capita local tax in 1998 was FF 2,930 compared to FF 4,777 in Lyon and FF 6,902 in Bordeaux. As long ago as 1931, Larousse wrote that "Despite its antiquity, Marseille has few well-known monuments. The city itself is thickly populated except in a few neighbourhoods on the east side." So what's basically being poked fun at with these pre-packaged images is a city which shows off its poor.

Making fun of the Marseille accent is the same sort of thing: maybe people suppose that it's impossible to think other than in Parisian French. This accent is about gravel throats and lips which don't pucker to suppress emotion. But there's no evidence that under the flow of words the exigencies of the modern world aren't being met. One can build Euroméditerranée, import rice, pineapples or petrol, export cars to the Maghreb, get German money to renew rue de la République, attract a bureaucratic élite from the north of France or buy the best football players without everyone wearing three-piece suits. Work, which it's sometimes forgotten creates wealth, isn't always carried out in fancy clothes.

What's amusing about these clichés is that they give away those who suggest them more than they do those who are wrapped in them. If Marseille is a world, Marseille is also of the world and knows what's said about it much more than do those devilish foreigners – it's believed here that the north begins at Aix-en-Provence. The Marseillais often amuse themselves by playing: turning around the cliché which has been used on you is child's play. In response to injurious images there is real or pretended anger, but filled with clichés, as well: the Marseillais hold their own in inventing caricatures of others, and their flow of words makes this shortcoming obvious.

First of all, there are the reviled Parisians, summed up by their football team with that tasteless banner of OM supporters: "PSG = Pédés, sados, gays." Then there are "those dangerous Arabs" who are ignored or who are accused of committing all sorts of sins – if they don't use the murder of one adolescent kid by another one with a Moroccan name to accuse them of all the worst crimes. The temptation was given into entire sections of the city in September 1996. But, in the end, only the National Front dared on the day after the murder flaunt the vile phrase "they have killed Nicolas". That sneaky "they" served as a pretext for a racist

demonstration. The burial of the youngster Nicolas Bourgat fortunately remained confined to a procession called for by all of the religious and political authorities of the city. There are still those blacks who are addressed right off with the familiar *tu* when they're spoken to in the street – election candidates do it all the time. Joseph-Antoine Bell, the brilliant goalie who went from Olympique de Marseille to Bordeaux, was sent banana skins (real ones) to humiliate him. Here too, more than elsewhere, people make fun of dumb Belgians, anaemic Swiss, snobbish Brits, lazy Corsicans and posing Italians!

The panoply is complete, gibing at or wounding half of the population of this city which is nothing but a patchwork slowly sewn together and often torn apart of people coming from elsewhere. Armenians tell how many times they heard "Steksenian" or "Odevian" shouted at them in childish mockery when Marseille was, along with Beirut and Los Angeles, one of the three biggest Armenian cities in the world.

Clichés can be turned on their heads. A melting-pot city, a cross-bred city, can be a city where people mix and integrate. The Marseille of today is somehow inured against the trend that a quarter of its electorate is prepared to follow – those won over by the National Front. Writers, musicians, artists, theatre people, cinéasts or poets often suggest as much. The very same artists who portray in their works a baroque world torn apart, who drip their pens in open wounds, are transformed when they defend their great city. Then they quote sacred texts by historians who claim that the identity of Marseille is precisely about welcoming the outsider. They celebrate the arts of daily life here. Proud of their city, they write odes to football, they praise that cultural mix that stirs in Spain and Italy, which welcomes flamenco and jazz, which does business in all languages, in all currencies and which listens to the other shores of the Mediterranean.

They tend to forget that between the two world wars the city was given over to Sabianism, local fascism brandished by deserters from the workers' movement. Such people attached a social radicalism of popular origin to the aspirations of a good part of the local, the political and the economic elites. Politics by clan, municipal clientélism, succeeded in grafting something on which almost killed it and which developed more strongly than in all the other French cities. The Parti Populaire Français (PPF) which carried within it this sickness had its headquarters on the rue de la

République between the old port and the Joliette, where today the National Front has its headquarters.

Marseille never stops erasing its past: run by business people for so long, it lacks the memory of a built environment left to cities governed by princes. The result is that you can't read its history in magnificent palaces or in public sculpture. Puget, for example, the great architect and sculptor of the city, has left almost nothing; he had to find fame and fortune elsewhere. So did the sculptor Richard Baquié, who was awarded a retrospective at the Musée d'art contemporain.

Marseille's legends and its history continue to fascinate scholars. One of the most recent is *les Écrivains et Marseille* edited by Julie Agostini and Yannick Forno (Jeanne Laffitte 1997) which includes an impressive list of famous writers who have described the city. Emile Zola and M^{me} de Sévigné, Casanova and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio, Michel Tournier and Guy de Maupassant, Walter Benjamin and Mark Twain, Gérard de Nerval and Petrarch have all been caught by the spell of this city and loved or hated it and its inhabitants. Such anthologies forget the great Alvaro Mutis who once confided to me that he was a "Marseillais manqué". His heroes Maqrol el Gaviero, the lovely Ilona and the elusive Abdul Bashur lived a tragic and magnificent adventure here connected with the smuggling of valuable carpets (*Abdul Bashur, le rêveur de navires*, Grasset, 1994).

Jean Echenoz's, *Nous Trois* (Éditions de Minuit, 1992) is also forgotten; he depicts a catastrophic earthquake, "7.9 on the Richter scale, that wrecked the western harbour of Marseille" and evokes "those prefabricated town halls". The feminist socialist Flora Tristan came on a militant mission in 1844 and declared: "The more I see of this city of Marseille, the more I dislike it; this city isn't French. It's a heap of all nations." This is a far cry from the praise of Strabon (58 B.C.-28 A.D.) who admired the people of Massalia for "having as a political system the best organized aristocratic constitution of all those having that type" and whose city-state "recently served as a school for the Barbarians." What's permanent is that the Latin historian already mentions Marseille's dry docks.

There is also a fine group of local writers, Pagnol and Giono, of course, but also Roussin, Artaud, Gelu, Suarez, Brauquier and contemporary authors whose predilection is detective stories: legend offers much energy, myth is reborn on every page. All this is made even livelier by films which take the city not only as a frame, but as a subject. *Taxi*, with its car chases and handsome young actors,

was the fashion a few years ago. But it has produced, more significantly, the solid films of Robert Guédiguian, René Allio, Claire Denis or Karim Dridi, and one shouldn't forget the documentary-makers. Along with the Pagnol jokes, the Borsalino gangsters and the *French Connection*, there have been many outstanding films and plenty of duds, making Marseille the most filmed city in France after Paris.

The final stop-off in this tour of Marseille clichés must be its politicians. They're an important element in this city with its small centre, its huge area, its numerous communities, its varied and often obscure activities in which commerce plays only a small part. Politics plays a different role here from other French cities. It's the only real arena of debate, the place where conflicts take place and get resolved; it provides a verbal space in which to create the unity of a city broken up by physical and human geography. You often hear it said that the football stadium is the place where the Marseillais gather together: but one shouldn't forget that through politics networks are strengthened or thrown into conflict and somehow, eventually, learn how to coexist.

Political networks maintain affinities of clan, family or ethnic communities which are often an umbrella for the weak and which perpetuate the old habits, enraging well-meaning reformers and exasperating out-and-out modernists. The political history of the city is marked by traumas. Massalia chose Pompey over Caesar. When the latter won the Battle of Rome, Massalia was punished by a maritime expedition; according to the chronicles, the blue waters of the bay ran red with blood.

Later, Louis XIV sought to revenge himself on the irreverent city; he had just defeated it, breaching its ramparts and disarming the Marseillais. To gain the respect of its rebellious inhabitants, and put the fear of God into them, he built the fort of Saint-Nicolas which still marks the entrance to the old port. To punish the city, its name was taken away, and it suffered the extreme indignity of being called "City without a name" (*Ville sans nom*). Later again it was placed under administrative tutelage following the burning down of the *Nouvelles Galeries* in 1937 and a decree-law two years later confirming the anomaly. Michel Peraldi and others have shown that these episodes should be read as results of the tensions between the central state power and the commercial elites.

Historical events like these have become part of a legend which continues to claim abuses like false accounting, the supposed corruption of all the local élites, and a unique taste for clanism. Yet

rumour has it that Marseille's wars of succession among Socialists slowed down when the 1990 congress in Rennes demonstrated that the party was very good at these practices on the national level. As for advances made by the National Front in the working-class neighbourhoods after 1986, the housing estates of Paris and Strasbourg soon made up for lost time.

At the time of the 1990 census some 800,309 people lived in Marseille itself. To be realistic you have to think in terms of the conurbation and its 1,230,000 inhabitants. Gaston Defferre, whose natural suspicion bore particularly on neighbouring Communists, bears a heavy responsibility for these divisions. There's no real urban community: the Marseille-Provence entity initiated by the former mayor Robert-Paul Vigouroux, 19 communes with 973,000 inhabitants, is still incomplete and fragile, much less extensive than the urban communities of Lyon or Lille.

How can you separate those who live in Marseille and work in Vitrolles, or work near Aix and live in Aubagne, or study in the city but come from Martigues and sleep in Carry? Or what to make of the affluent ladies who live in Cassis throughout the summer whose husbands, top professionals, motor out to join them in the evenings? Audiences for the 26 theatres, at the opera, the two large music halls – as well as the football stadiums – come from all around. Are there 800,000 inhabitants or more than a million? And just who are the Marseillais?

Beyond all this, there's a communal complex. It's expressed awkwardly by the slogan "Marseillais and proud of it" printed on millions of tee shirts and car stickers. It's a sort of 'victimism' or feeling of victimisation. The anthropologist Christian Bromberger says that "it's one of the dominant forms of local culture" and defines it as "the sentiment of belonging to 'a city awaiting demolition' (*ville à abattre*).". The sociologist, Jean-Marc Mariotini, uses another expression which has the advantage of geopolitical terms: 'victimism' is "a way of feeling a bit outside of the French framework and a victim of Parisian centrality." Being Marseillais is being a pariah. Such consciousness forges a bond, and local politicians understand very well that the city's wounded pride demands recognition.

Emile Temime has written about people's need to improve their lot by recounting waves of immigration (*Migrance*, Édisud, 1991). During the twentieth century alone, the communities that settled here, or rather fled here, were indeed victims of a horrible fate in their countries of origin: Armenians fleeing from genocide;

Italians and Spaniards pushed out by poverty or fascism; Jews from many countries searching for safety; Russians fleeing the revolution. There were Vietnamese of Chinese origin, desperate and unwelcome. Europeans from Algeria (pied-noirs); Algerians who had fought in the French army in the war for Algerian independence (harkis) and who later crept into France by night. Starving people from Black Africa, Arabs and Kabyle Berbers and Comorians searching for work. The list of those who arrived here reads like a list of the dramas and catastrophes of the twentieth century.

Such immigrants take root more or less quickly, but there is always temptation for "the last one who arrives to close the door", along with the scorn and fear of yesterday's immigrants towards those coming today. They all share a feeling of having been rejected yet have the need and dynamism to create new futures.

All these clichés represent symbolic exclusions. They reflect a paradox: newcomers often feel like Marseillais before they feel French. This once again reinforces the idea, the cliché, that Marseillais are not like other people. That's why, in taking a tour around the images that stick to the skin of this city, I have perhaps focused on its eccentricity. I almost wrote "its insularity"...

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