



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Man about Town

(Le Silence est d'or)

René Clair excelled at clever filmmaking at a time when the film industry needed it most, during the transition to sound. He was also a thoughtful director who liked film history – liked looking backwards and forwards across the sweep of this relatively young art. Born in 1898, he lived through major transitions, from the heroic pioneer days to the coming of sound, and survived well into the age of television. He even predicted the demise of the cinema as he knew it: 'Before cinema is 100 years old things will have changed completely – we are unable to know today what it will be.' The digital revolution that is affecting cinema so profoundly was just beginning at its centenary in 1995.

Clair loved the exuberance and promise of the earliest days of film – it is this era he revisits in *Man about Town*. He was working in the days of the surrealist films of the 1920s, and students of cinema these days will know him best for the Dadaist comedy *Entr'acte* (1924), made with the composer Erik Satie and the artist Francis Picabia and intended as an interlude in an avant-garde ballet. But though he was interested in the film essay – as he put it in a TV interview later in life, 'the little film that tries to find something new' – he preferred to make films for the masses. He cites Chaplin, Stroheim, Griffith and Eisenstein: 'They were not working for cine-clubs.'

Having dazzled audiences with the midsummer afternoon's dream of *Paris qui dort* (1925), Clair struck gold with *The Italian Straw Hat* (1928). He followed that imbroglio farce with another, *Two Timid Souls*. At this point, his precious world of silent film was threatened by the arrival of the talkies. Like Hitchcock, Clair saw the changes coming and set out to put late silent film through its paces with a virtuoso display of technique. The result is part parody (there is an affectionate split-screen spoof of Abel Gance's 1927 *Napoleon* – the ultimate decisive man, by contrast with the Mittyesque hero of *Two Timid Souls*), part a demonstration of the visual storytelling that could only be done in silent film.

In 'The Art of Sound', an article published in London in 1929, Clair decried the commercial juggernaut of the sound film: 'The screen has lost more than it has gained. It has conquered the world of voices, but it has lost the world of dreams. I have observed people leaving the cinema after seeing a talking film. They might have been leaving a music hall, for they showed no sign of the delightful numbness which used to overcome us after a passage through the silent land of pure images. They talked and laughed, and hummed the tunes they had just heard. They had not lost their sense of reality.' But after seeing *The Broadway Melody* (1929) he realised that American filmmakers were moving on from just matching sounds to images: 'Its makers have worked

with the precision of engineers, and their achievement is a lesson to those who still imagine that the creation of a film can take place under conditions of chaos known as inspiration.’ He gives an example of this precision: ‘For instance, we hear the noise of a door being slammed and a car driving off while we are shown Bessie Love’s anguished face watching from a window the departure which we do not see. This short scene in which the whole effect is concentrated on the actress’s face, and which the silent cinema would have had to break up in several visual fragments, owes its excellence to the “unity of place” achieved through sound.’

Clair went on to write and direct three films that made famously clever use of non-diegetic sound without sacrificing his elegant filmmaking style: *Under the Roofs of Paris* (*Sous les toits de Paris*, 1930), *Le Million* and *A nous la liberté!* (1931). In this last, a factory worker ‘conducts’, to the sound of a far-off gramophone, a flower in a field, giving the momentary impression it is singing. The fact that the flower is shaped like a gramophone horn just makes me smile.

Years later, when Clair returned to France from Hollywood after the trauma of World War II, his first film, full of nostalgia for his beloved pre-war Paris, was another to make you smile. *Man about Town* is a more conventional studio movie than Clair’s earlier French films, focusing on a love triangle (older man, ingénue actress, young actor). It is set in a ‘factory of dreams’ in 1906 Paris but doesn’t engage particularly closely with the world of silent film – it is a background, rather as the Paris created by Léon Barsacq’s sets is; still, Clair’s depiction of the world in which the fledgling film business was beginning to spread its wings is enchanting. We first encounter the fairground film show – a desultory suburban version, which the characters only enter to shelter from the rain; for the film enthusiast who has tried to imagine what a Bioscope tent might have been like this must be very close; with its ‘barker’ and ornate frontage, its bench seats, cranking projectionist, roll-down screen, lecturer and lady pianist. It’s even better when we arrive at the studio, run by Maurice Chevalier’s character, Emile. He thinks he’s the big studio boss, but in fact he’s a pushover for the terminally idle crew, his permanently depressed leading man and the ingénue with whom he falls in love – despite having had an affair with her mother (!). The sets and working methods lovingly recreate the anarchic Pathé films of the 1900s made in the studio at the Paris suburb of Joinville-le-Pont: Arabian fantasies, melodramas, fairy pantomimes and chase comedies. My favourite detail is a huge prop spoon – presumably from a pantomime story about a giant’s kitchen – leaning casually against a dressing-room wall, eliciting no comment whatever. Catch this rarely seen Clair gem if you can.

Bryony Dixon, *Sight & Sound*, September 2018

MAN ABOUT TOWN (LE SILENCE EST D'OR)

Director: René Clair
Production Companies: Pathé, RKO Radio Pictures
Screenplay and dialogue: René Clair
Photography: Armand Thirard
Editors: Louisette Hautecoeur, Henri Taverna
Art Directors: Léon Barsacq, Guy de Gastyne
Music: Georges Van Parys

Cast

Maurice Chevalier (Emile)
François Périer (Jacques)
Marcelle Derrien (Madaleine)
Dany Robin (Lucette)
Robert Pizani (Dupervier)
Raymond Cordy (Curly)
Paul Olivier (the cashier)
Roland Armontel (Celestin)

France/USA 1947
100 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Thu 1 Jul 14:30; Thu 15 Jul 18:00; Sat 24 Jul 11:50

Hope and Glory

Thu 1 Jul 17:30; Mon 5 Jul 14:30; Fri 23 Jul 18:00

Casablanca

Fri 2 Jul 14:30; Sat 17 Jul 13:00; Sat 24 Jul 14:40; Thu 29 Jul 18:00

All about My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)

Fri 2 Jul 20:40; Tue 6 Jul 20:45; Sat 10 Jul 21:00; Thu 22 Jul 14:30

How Green Was My Valley

Sat 3 Jul 11:30; Thu 8 Jul 14:15; Fri 16 Jul 17:50

Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Sat 3 Jul 18:10; Mon 5 Jul 20:45; Sun 11 Jul 12:50; Wed 21 Jul 18:00
(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Tue 27 Jul 14:30

All the President's Men

Sun 4 Jul 11:50; Tue 20 Jul 14:15; Sat 31 Jul 20:20

Rear Window

Sun 4 Jul 15:40; Fri 9 Jul 14:30; Tue 20 Jul 17:50; Mon 26 Jul 18:00; Sat 31 Jul 11:10

The Magnificent Ambersons

Mon 5 Jul 20:50; Wed 14 Jul 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sun 25 Jul 15:00

Distant Voices, Still Lives

Wed 7 Jul 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Thirza Wakefield); Sun 18 Jul 12:45; Mon 19 Jul 20:50; Fri 30 Jul 14:30

35 Shots of Rum (35 Rhums)

Mon 12 Jul 20:45; Wed 28 Jul 17:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by Be Manzini, poet and director of Caramel Film Club)

Man About Town (Le Silence est d'or)

Tue 13 Jul 14:15; Sun 18 Jul 12:30; Mon 26 Jul 14:20

WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI

As Tears Go By (Wong Gok ka moon)

Wed 7 Jul 14:30; Sat 17 Jul 20:30; Mon 19 Jul 20:45

Days of Being Wild (Ah Fei jing juen)

Thu 8 Jul 20:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by season programmer Ann Lee); Mon 12 Jul 14:30; Mon 19 Jul 18:00

Fallen Angels (Do lok tin si)

Fri 9 Jul 20:50; Tue 13 Jul 21:00; Wed 14 Jul 14:30; Sun 25 Jul 18:30

Ashes of Time Redux (Dung che sai duk)

Sat 10 Jul 11:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by season programmer Ann Lee); Wed 21 Jul 20:45; Fri 30 Jul 20:45

Chungking Express (Chung Hing sam lam)

Sat 10 Jul 18:15; Mon 12 Jul 20:50; Tue 20 Jul 20:45; Thu 29 Jul 14:30

Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Sun 11 Jul 15:40; Fri 16 Jul 14:30; Fri 23 Jul 18:10

In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Wed 14 Jul 20:45; Sat 17 Jul 13:30; Wed 21 Jul 14:30; Thu 29 Jul 20:45

2046

Thu 15 Jul 20:20; Sat 17 Jul 16:10; Sat 31 Jul 14:30

The Grandmaster (Yi dai zong shi)

Tue 20 Jul 18:00; Thu 22 Jul 20:50; Mon 26 Jul 20:50

The Hand (Extended Cut)

Thu 22 Jul 18:30; Fri 30 Jul 18:20

My Blueberry Nights

Fri 23 Jul 20:50; Wed 28 Jul 20:40

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