

A CRITICAL FILMOGRAPHY OF FRENCH CINEMA 1929–1939

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Sous les toits de Paris

Under the Roofs of Paris

France–Germany, 1930, 96' (most current copies are approximately 80'), b+w

Dir and scr René Clair (1898–1981) *Asst dir* Georges Lacombe, Marcel Carné and Jacques Houssin *Prod* Tobis *Cinematog* Georges Périnal *Mus* René Clair, in conjunction with the conductor Armand Bernard *Songs* Raoul Moretti, René Nazelles and André Gailhard *Art dir* Lazare Meerson *Sound* Hermann Storr and W. Morhenn *Edit* René Le Hénaff *Act* Pola Illéry (Pola), Albert Préjean (Albert), Gaston Modot (Fred), Edmond Gréville (Louis), Bill Bocket (Émile the thief), Aimos (a crook), Paul Olivier (drunken café client), Jane Pierson

René Clair has become by far the best-known of early sound directors, which is a little surprising given that more than any other he had spoken out against the introduction of sound. He had been a journalist, writer and film actor before making his name as a director, notably with two art films (*Paris qui dort* [1923] and *Entr'acte* [1924]) and two adaptations of popular comedies by Labiche (*Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* [1927] and *Les Deux timides* [1928]). He was responsible for both the script and direction of his first five sound films, all made in France. The first of these was *Sous les toits de Paris*. Both here and later in *Le Million* (1931) and *Quatorze juillet* (1932) he appealed to a particular mythic view of Paris and of 'the little people' who are seen as essential to its vitality—not professionals or the rich, who are consistently mocked and ridiculed, but working-class people whose hardships are never dwelt upon and whose joie de vivre is irrepressible.

René Clair's art director, Lazare Meerson, produced an unforgettable representation of the poorer quarters, featuring narrow streets and tall apartment buildings with steep stairwells and austere but well-lit rooms, aesthetically worn and stained, looking out over endless tiled rooftops. The male characters tend towards the artistic (street singers, accordionists, sculptors) or the mechanical (taxi drivers) while the women are usually associated with flowers or with laundering—purity or nature. *Sous les toits de Paris* and its 'sequels' follow the entanglements of such characters from bedroom to bar to dancehall. There is always one exotic capricious girl (often Eastern European) who plays male friends off against each other, and this invariably leads the narrative towards the

margins of the law, where amiable crooks and colourful fences, casually accepted as pals, confuse the borderline between the poor and the underworld. No stigma attaches to criminality, only to wealth, and no stigma attaches to sexuality or inconstancy: the characters' entanglements are presented as moves in an elaborate game, with momentary winners and losers, where moralising is irrelevant.

In *Sous les toits de Paris* Albert is a street-singer¹ who sees Pepe the pickpocket at work on the rich amongst his circle of listeners and gets paid off for holding his tongue. Fred is a 'blind' beggar, pretending blindness to con the wealthy. Albert introduces himself to the flirtatious Pola by 'finding' her purse, and from then on she gives the narrative such direction as it has by being the object of desire of Albert, Fred, and Albert's friend Louis. In Albert's absence, Louis wins her; when they break up, she goes off with Fred. Consolation is never far away for the 'losers'. Towards the end she attempts to play them all off against each other, but in a Clair film the women can never be taken too seriously: their main function is to clarify and ratify the relationships between the men. Friendship will always triumph over desire. Here the men finally throw dice for Pola and Albert cheats to allow her to go off with Fred. This foregrounding of the game-like patterning of relationships is confirmed in the final circular sequence in which Albert is back singing in the street and flirting with someone else: another day, another girl; so it goes.

If the film is, then, sentimental about the settings and atmosphere it is far from sentimental about the characters. No real attempt is made to exploit identification mechanisms which might invite the viewer to take seriously the characters' losses, confusions and infidelities. For Clair at this time, individuals were clearly less important than atmosphere and milieu. This disavowal of drama in favour of a sort of ballet-like set of advances and retreats is only heightened by the foregrounding of sound-image relationships. Much of the action is patterned on the verses of the songs, or a record-player, or the dancehall orchestra. Elsewhere non-diegetic music comments comically on the action, with a death march for instance, or raindrops, or with 'cat-like tread'. Conversations which risk turning dramatic are totally drowned in orchestral sound, leaving nothing but frenetic gestures, and any threatening intimacy is distanced by being unheard—witnessed, for instance, through a glass door. There is in fact little synchronised dialogue. The first example is well into the film. Partly this is because sound mixing was not yet available, and all dialogue had to be filmed directly; but also Clair professed nostalgia (already!) for the silent film, and such was his dislike of the constant chatter that had resulted from the introduction of sound that he strove here to produce essentially a silent film, with just a little supporting dialogue to avoid cumbersome sub-titles. 'People use dialogue', Clair

said, 'when they can't figure out how to carry off a scene visually'.² 'The sonorised film is the last hope for partisans of the silent film'.³ Indeed in all these early sound films he considered dialogue so secondary that he merely gave his actors general indications, allowing them to improvise the precise phrases 'as in Commedia dell'arte'.⁴

Perhaps because of the resultant somewhat sardonic tone, *Sous les toits de Paris* experienced a desultory general release in Paris, only gradually over the following years acquiring the audience that it deserved. Outside France, however, and particularly in Germany, where it was lauded as the most beautiful film ever made, it was immensely popular. The studio boss of the French arm of Tobis, Henckel, was so delighted with its triumph in his home land that he renewed Clair's contract on very favourable terms, giving him a free hand to make his next three films with them. All were at least moderately successful, especially *Le Million* (1931) and *Quatorze juillet* (1932), which represented the poor quarters of Paris and the modest but joyous characters who lived there in the same light as here. They too were largely devoid of dramatic plot, employing analogous formal patterns. Each of these three films is a musical of a sort, expressing Clair's affection for popular ballads and his conviction that their musicality was a manifestation of the working class's vitality, sincerity and integrity. It is one of the more interesting aspects of Clair's films that high culture and wealthy businessmen should be so mocked by an author wedded to that very culture and born into a wealthy business family.

One final point worth noting is that motorised cameras were only now being introduced into France, and this was Clair's first such film. They permitted more fluid camera work than in his earlier films, despite the cumbersome sound-proofing, because the operator was no longer preoccupied with hand-cranking.

Colin Crisp

1. This opening sequence had originally been written for *Prix de beauté* (Billard, 153) and had been conceived while Clair was shooting *Le Fantôme du Moulin Rouge* in 1924 (Dale, *The Films of René Clair*, vol. 1, 137).

2. Quoted in Dale, vol. 1, 141.

3. Clair, *Cinéma d'hier, cinéma d'aujourd'hui*, 197.

4. Georges Charensol and Roger Régent, *Un maître de cinéma: René Clair* (Paris: La Table ronde, 1952), 97–98.