

HIPPODROME
silent film festival
celebrating film with live music
WEDNESDAY 16 - SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2022
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The Unknown © 1927 WBEI

L'Homme du Large (1920)

Closing Night Gala: Sunday 20 March 2022

Performing Live: Paul McGann, Neil Brand, Frank Bockius

Marcel L'Herbier was an unashamed aesthete, who thought of his movies as beautiful objects at least as much as stories. His works include a Frankensteinian mad science romance, *L'Inhumaine* (1924), the epic melodrama of high finance, *L'Argent* (1928), and two pioneering early sound thrillers, *The Mystery of the Yellow Chamber* (1930) and *The Perfume of the Lady in Black* (1931), which show a sense of jollity you wouldn't always suspect him of possessing. All of them, however, display his love of elaborate modernist design applied to costumes, sets and intertitles. Occasionally, style would be allowed to overwhelm dramatic, narrative ones, but always the experience was sumptuous and visually dazzling.

L'Homme du Large (1920) is an early work, very loosely adapted from Balzac's 1834 short story *Un Drame au Borde de la Mer*, and it perfectly balances narrative with its stunning visual style, while dealing with a subject that particularly fascinated French filmmakers of the silent era: the sea.

L'Herbier always liked to work with artists, designers, sculptors, men and women who could decorate his films with striking objects. In this film, largely deprived of such opportunities, he raises his game to make the very world itself into a dazzling *objet d'art*, using composition, split screens, light and shadow, and remarkable title cards whose text dances around his images with idiosyncratic grace. The result is a powerfully atmospheric film with the tang of sea salt and a lot of local flavour.

Set in Finistere on the westernmost tip of France, the simple story deals with an unhappy family, with a dominant but enabling father, sickly mother and spoiled, pleasure-seeking son. Only the daughter seems both healthy and well-balanced. The brattish lad is played by L'Herbier's regular leading man, a male muse, Jaque Catelain. His best friend, "the Mole," is Charles Boyer, before his Hollywood career began, strikingly gaunt and still with his own hair. Utterly assured even at this early stage, he gives the film's most restrained, modern performance. A sly, manipulative figure, placed into the story to lead the lad astray. Not that he needs much leading. The relationship between the two is so suggestive of homosexuality that a Bad Girl has to be slipped into the story so that all that sinful glowering can be directed in a more socially acceptable direction.



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I've always rather assumed that L'Herbier and Catelain were gay lovers (maybe it's those rather natty tinted spectacles the director always seemed to wear). But of course it's possible to have a "gay" sensibility without being gay. Both men married women and had kids. L'Herbier was even in a bit of a scandal in his youth, when his lover Marcelle Rahna shot him. This cost him the use of a finger and kept him out of combat in WWI (and so may have saved his life). He spent the war making uniforms, and then films. His first, *Rose-France* (1919), is one of the oddest propaganda films ever made, since it eschews both flag-waving and drama for symbolism and experimental cinematography. God knows what the army made of it. Throughout his career, L'Herbier would strive to balance a sensibility that was more about images and music than story, with the demands of commercial cinema.

L'Herbier was also a theorist, and his visual experimentation was always firmly grounded in intellectual ideas. And he took on administrative roles in the film industry, and it is partly through his efforts that French directors enjoy more creative control of their works than filmmakers anywhere else in the world. This only happened because L'Herbier himself had such a strong belief that films should be governed by a singular artistic vision.

Were the bars of Penmarch really as exciting as L'Herbier depicts? In short order he offers up girl-on-girl snogging; a pet rat; Chinese lanterns; snuff-snorting (if it *is* snuff); and all manner of spangly dancing. A prodigal son, it appears, has no shortage of opportunities to ruin himself in entertaining ways, even in a little provincial town.

It's a very moral film, on the surface anyway, and very Catholic in its faith in redemption. But it also imparts a healing power to nature and especially the sea. It's the son's fear and rejection of the sea that starts him on the wrong path, and for all the father's errors, he apparently has an instinctive understanding that his son has to come to terms with the water before everything can be all right.

L'Herbier was a peculiar mixture of the decadent – everything he loved was beautiful and exotic and probably bad for you – and the arch-conservative. So *L'Homme du Large* wallows in sin in order to condemn it. It has its gateau and eats it too.

But this kind of analysis doesn't lessen the film's power, which you simply have to experience for yourself, and surrender to. To attempt to resist via scepticism is like trying to pick holes in a giant wave that's about to crash down on you...

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By **David Cairns**. *David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at Shadowplay dcairns.wordpress.com*

Director. and Screenwriter. Marcel L'Herbier | Editor. Jaque Catelain and Marcel L'Herbier | Cinematography. Georges Lucas | France | 1920 | French inter-titles with live English translation | 1h 24m

With: Roger Karl, Jaque Catelain, Marcelle Pradot, Charles Boyer, Claire Prélia, Suzanne Doris, and Philippe Hériat

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