

The 19th British Silent Film Festival



L'Hirondelle et la Mésange/The Swallow and the Tit mouse (1920)

France 1920

Sunday 17 September, 5.30pm

This film has been restored by La Cinémathèque Française



80mins, France, Silent, original footage shot in 1920

Director: Andre Antoine

Original story: Gustave Grillet

Post production La Cinémathèque Française, 1984:

Editor: Henri Colpi

Assistant: Sophie Durand

Historical advisor: Philippe Esnault

Cast: George Denola, Pierre Alcover, Jane Maylianes

Extracts from *Variety*, 25 July 1984, p.14

Director Andre Antoine, one of the pioneers of modern stage naturalism, who moved fluently to the film medium in 1915 (at age 57), perfected his aesthetic ideas with *L'Hirondelle et la Mésange*, shot entirely on location on the waterways of Flanders. An intransigent but inspired theoretician, Antoine was obsessed by *verism* in dramatic representation, and was naturally fascinated by photography and cinema. *L'Hirondelle et la Mésange*, his penultimate film, and his only picture made from an original screenplay, so disconcerted Charles Pathe that he refused to release it.

Set on twin barges (the Hirondelle and the Mesange), the film describes the increasingly tense and finally tragic relationship between the barge family and the taciturn young pilot hired to steer the vessels on their bi-annual transport of coal and building goods to regions

of France devastated by The Great War. This is the stuff of melodrama, but filmed with an insidious restraint and subtle realism that jarred with the conventions of the time. Antoine refused the cosy falseness of the studio, took his actors out on real barges, shooting even his interiors on location. The film's quiet naturalism, and the use of landscape and lighting, rather than dramatic overstatement, gives this film much of its breath taking modernity. It's not surprising that Pathe saw the film as an overextended travelogue with minimal story interest.

Obviously much of the credit for the film's movement and rhythm must go to Henri Colpi, the brilliant editor (*Last Year at Marienbad* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*) who selected and shaped six hours of rushes into a sinuous 79-minute film. Though Colpi had the original screenplay and most of the intertitles to work with, the action at times departed from the original story, and the editor was often faced with odd shots that didn't seem to fit in anywhere. Colpi (who was born a year after the film was shot) seems to have cut the film that Antoine himself might have completed.

Extracts from Richard Rudd, *Guardian*, 07 February 1985, p21:

It was supposed to be a fiction film, but this story of a bargee and his two barges turned out to be more documentary than fiction, and its producers refused to let Antoine even edit the material.

Although Antoine died in 1945, he was never able to do anything with the remarkably neo-realistic material he had shot on the canals of Belgium. It was in 1982 that the Cinematheque discovered six hours of perfectly preserved rushes of this film in its archives, and someone had the bright idea of asking the famous French editor and director, Henri Colpi to put this material together. Antoine had left a kind of script and even the inter-titles were there, so Colpi set to work to make a film that had never been made. . . . it is a film of great visual beauty and documentary interest.

Programme notes from le Giornate del Cinema Muto catalogue 2005:

Luciano De Giusti

(warning: plot spoilers)

Uncompleted and unreleased for more than 60 years, *L'Hirondelle et la Mésange* is one of the great casualties of cinema history. It is possible that its author was never able to see it. Antoine recalled, 'I had had the idea of making a film on the life of the canal boatmen of Flanders (....) We left Antwerp with a barge and reached L'Escaut. Magnificent... Since we filmed everything in movement, the photography had a splendid relief. The story was rough, a very simple drama: just a man who, one night, sinks into the mud, and the next day the barge continues on its way, peacefully, in the light and the silence. It was very beautiful.' (Cited by Philippe Esnault in *Cinéma* 58, no. 25, March 1958.)

André Antoine directed this, his penultimate film, at the end of the summer of 1920, from the scenario of his friend Gustave Grillet, a writer and dramatist who lived by farming. Assisted by the faithful Georges Denola, on this occasion Antoine mixed professionals with actors taken from life, authentic people of the river, recruited together with their barge. Under his direction all perform with discretion and simplicity. He sees the action from varied viewpoints of their life, using different cameras. Much material is shot in the environment encountered in the course of the journey of this "river movie". Often Antoine diverts his view from the people to regard the river, its banks, the landscape which passes in lateral tracking shots until it becomes itself a character, a silent witness to the drama: a diversion of the attention which serves to extinguish the incandescent dramatic matter. How Antoine unfolds events, removing from them dramatization, is very eloquent in the finale: the crime committed, the intruder drowns in the muddy waters of the river, while the barge resumes its journey, and the regard again turns to the landscape, which absorbs the crime and metabolizes the death in the natural biological cycle of the struggle for life.

When Pathé saw the material Antoine had shot they would have had the impression (not entirely mistaken) of a film of documentary character which would not be commercially profitable. They decided to suspend shooting (probably not much more remained to be done) and not to proceed to the editing stage. It is known that there was a unique screening of some material, organized by the Club Français du Cinéma at the Colisée cinema in Paris on 5 June 1924 (see 1958, no.8-9, pp. 172-173), but there are no details as to what exactly was shown; it was most certainly an unfinished work-in-progress, and did not resurface.

Six hours of film remained in the archives until they were exhumed by the Cinémathèque Française in 1982. Henri Colpi, who was entrusted with the task of editing, sought to do so with the maximum respect for the author's intentions. The historical consultant was Philippe Esnault, who found Grillet's scenario and endeavoured to follow it faithfully, guided by the dialogue and the written intertitles, for the most part by Antoine himself, even to the cinematic punctuation marks – iris, curtains, dissolves – all realized on the rediscovered negative. Of course we do not know how the editing would have been had it been completed by the director. Perhaps it would not have achieved the rhythmic perfection of Colpi's cutting, but the already very fluid montage of *Mademoiselle de la Seiglière* shows us that Antoine perfectly understood the expressive power of editing. Speculation on how much of the fascination of this film, which flows as calmly as the river on which it is shot, depends on the inventions of Colpi is destined to remain an open question. The musical score by Raymond Alessandrini, using three themes from Maurice Jaubert, certainly contributed to the enthusiasm which greeted its presentation in 1984. For Bertrand Tavernier the film was a true revelation: "There are few films which espouse to the limit the sentiments of their characters, without concessions either to them or to the spectator. *L'Hirondelle et la Mésange*,

which rejects theatrical effects, facile dramatization, everything that might spoil, in an arbitrary way, the telling of the story, seems to be born (or reborn) in each shot of the interior movement of the characters." (Positif no. 279, May 1984)

In September 1934, discussing *L'Atalante* in his role as a cinema critic, Antoine also referred to his own uncompleted film, which in some respects anticipated that of Jean Vigo. Modestly, without mentioning his own role, he wrote simply: "In this genre I recall only Marcel Achard's *La belle marinière*, and another story, from many years ago, Gustave Grillet's *L'Hirondelle et la Mésange*, which was also set on a barge, on the journey to L'Escaut, between Antwerp and Bruges. At the time the work was judged too new, and consequently not commercial." – Luciano De Giusti

Programme note compiled by Jenny Stewart

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