L'Herbier, Marcel (23 April 1888, Paris – 26 November 1979, Paris)

Marcel L’Herbier was a French pioneer avant-garde (impressionist) filmmaker and theorist who made more than forty films from the 1920s to 1950s. In World War I, he learned the basics of filmmaking in the Army Cinematographic Service. He wrote a seminal text, *Hermès et le silence* (1918), where he stated that cinema is not an art but a new language which calls into question the traditional notion of art. One of his best attempts to put into practice his theories was the poetic *Rose-France* (1919). In 1921 he filmed one of his masterworks, *El Dorado*, mainly in Granada (Andalusia, Spain), which anticipated the German *kammerspiel*. He used a range of cinematographic means, including colour tinting of the image, to determine character psychology and the moral atmosphere of the space, defining a kind of “cinematic melodrama” and creating a “visual music”. Other similar films from his silent period were *L’inhumaine* [*The Inhuman Woman*, 1924], a science-fiction drama, and [*L’Argent*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ne_tcxgwNr0)(1928), adapted from Emile Zola’s novel. In the silent *L’Argent*, L’Herbier used sound in an original way, recording real sound effects which were played back in some theatres. When talkies arrived, he renounced the avant-garde, but still made such interesting films as *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* [*The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, 1930] based on Gaston Leroux’s novel, and *La Nuit fantastique* [*The Fantastic Night*, 1942]. L’Herbier was also the founder in 1944 of the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques. In the post-war period he poured his energy into television productions.

References and further reading

Blumer, R. H. (1970) “The Camera as Snowball: France 1918–1927”, in *Cinema Journal* (Evanston), 9, 2: 31-39.

Burch, N. (1973) *Marcel L'Herbier,* París: Seghers (in French).

─── (1980) “Marcel L’Herbier” in Roud, R. (ed.), *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, vol. 2, London: Martin Secker & Warburg.

─── (1991) “Marcel L’Herbier” in *In and Out of Synch: The Awakening of a Cine-dreamer, Aldershot: Scolar Press*: 32.

Cousins, R. F. (1984) “Adapting Zola for the Silent Cinema: The Example of Marcel L'Herbier”, in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 12, 1: 42-49.

Fieschi, J.A., and Siclier, J. (1968) “Autor du cinématographe. Entretien avec Marcel L’Herbier”, in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 202: 26-42.

L’Herbier, M. (1923) *El Dorado*, Paris: Editions de La Lampe Merveilleuse.

─── (1946) *Intelligence de cinématographe*, Paris: Corréa (revised 1977).

Rège, Philippe (2010) “L’Herbier, Marcel” in *Encyclopedia of French Film Directors*, Maryland: Scarecrow Press:638-639.

Filmography

*Rose-France* (1919)

*El Dorado* (1921)

*Résurrection* (1923)

*L’inhumaine* [*The Inhuman Woman*, 1924]

*Feu Mathias Pascal* (1926)

*Le Vertige* (1926)

[*L’Argent*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ne_tcxgwNr0)(1928)

*Le Diable au Coeur* [*The Devil in the Heart,* 1928]

*Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* [*The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, 1930]

*Le Bonheur* (1935)

*La Tragédie impériale* (1938)

*La Nuit fantastique* [*The Fantastic Night*, 1942]

*Au petit Bonheur* [*Queen’s Necklace,* 1946]

*Le Père de mademoiselle* (1953)

*Le Cinéma du Diable* (1967) (doc.)

*La féerie des fantasmes* (1975) (doc.)

Paratextual material

“L'Herbier, Marcel”, in *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers,* 2001. Encyclopedia.com, <http://www.encyclopedia.com>.

<http://www.fashioninfilm.com/festival/marcel-lherbier-fabricating-dreams/>

<https://www.facebook.com/events/581933408492752/>

Marcel L’Herbier: Fabricating Dreams. The 4th Fashion in Film Festival (2013)

<http://filmhistoryinthemaking.com/2014/02/16/a-note-on-early-film-historiography-in-paris-and-marcel-lherbiers-lhomme-du-large-1920/>

A note on 1920s film historiography in Paris and L’Herbier’s *L’Homme du large* (1920) (2014)

<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2008/06/meet-marcel-lherbier/>

A Website by Jonathan Rosenbaum with good photos.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPgOv3z5348>

Fragment from[*Autour de* L’Argent](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPgOv3z5348) (Jean Dréville, 1928), the first making-of in History.

Lorenzo J. Torres Hortelano

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (Madrid, Spain)