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René Clair

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Page 1 of 1

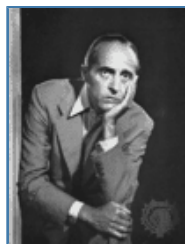
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11, 1898, Paris, France
died March 15, 1981, Neuilly-sur-Seine



René Clair,
photograph by
Yousuf Karsh.
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original name René Chomette French director of silent films and talking pictures, whose productions were noted for humour and burlesque and also often for fantasy or surrealism. Among his major films were *Paris qui dort* (1924), *Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie* (1927), *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), *Le Million* (1931), *À nous la liberté!* (1931), *The Ghost Goes West* (1935), and *Le Silence est d'or* (1947).

Clair was raised in the market quarter of Paris, the memory of which inspired some of his films. During World War I he served with the French ambulance corps, and afterward he worked as a journalist, critic, and songwriter before entering motion pictures as

an actor in 1920, when he adopted the name of Clair. He also wrote film criticism and worked as an assistant director. In 1923 he wrote and directed his first film, *Paris qui dort*, also shown under the title *The Crazy Ray*. His next film, *Entr'acte* (1924), which was created to be shown between acts of a ballet by the modernist French composer [Erik Satie](#), featured in its cast some of the most innovative artists of the day, including Satie and the Dadaist painters [Marcel Duchamp](#), [Francis Picabia](#), and [Man Ray](#). These two films established Clair as a leader of the avant-garde. The great Russian writer [Vladimir Mayakovsky](#) wrote a scenario especially for him, though it was never produced. Subsequently, in such films as *Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie*, based on the farce by Eugène Labiche, he combined the avant-garde and the popular, modernity and tradition, in an original way. During this time he also published a novel, *Adams* (1926), written in a cerebral and elliptical style.

The advent of sound in motion pictures in the late 1920s disoriented Clair until he recognized that sound need not kill the art of the film, as he had predicted it would. He learned to use sound not as a duplicate or substitute for visual representation but rather as a counterpoint to it. His *Sous les toits de Paris*, *Le Million*, and *À nous la liberté!* constituted

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