

LEONCE PERRET

Léonce Perret was one of Henri Langlois's favourite filmmakers, and Langlois contributed largely to restoring him to favour with post-war film buffs by programming a good number of his films at La Cinémathèque française beginning in 1951, then on a regular basis.

Between 1910 and 1916, Perret made nearly 350 films in all genres for Gaumont. After Louis Feuillade, he was considered a talented director, one of the company's principal authors, before leaving for the United States in 1917.

Henri Langlois wrote¹:

A brilliant anticipator, Léonce Perret turned his back on the analytical photography of his time, being particularly attentive to the spatial value of the image and of the direction. [...] As of 1909, in film after film, Perret sought to thrust the human being into the sensorial ambiance of life, to capture the landscape less in its form than in its light and its relations with the ambient atmosphere. [...] By putting the accent on the expressiveness and sensuality of light, on the colouration and plasticity of matter, and on the lyrical value of the landscape, he gives a psychic significance to the image and transposes his characters' frame of mind on it, addressing not our intelligence but our senses. [...] Léonce Perret shares the merit of these discoveries with Griffith who was long considered the only one to have enriched cinematographic poetry and syntax.

A Child of Paris was the first feature-length film produced by Gaumont. Taking inspiration from current events, Léonce Perret evokes the colonial war that involved France and Germany in the conquest of Morocco, which was aspiring to its independence. The romantic aspect, the moral dimension and the numerous sumptuous settings of this drama filled the public with enthusiasm.

In 1949, in a group of nearly 3,000 negatives ceded by the Gaumont company, Langlois exhumed with stupefaction rare works of inestimable value, which he hastened to safeguard *in extremis*. *A Child of Paris* was one of these finds. He wrote:

*A Child of Paris is, if not the first, at least one of the first feature-length films made in France. In any case, it is the most important. Who, before having seen this work, might suppose that a filmmaker had, in 1913, managed to impose daring technical and directorial innovations that we would attribute, in 1945, to Orson Welles, William Wyler, Hitchcock, or Cukor? How might one imagine that, in 1913, there was a man capable not only of daring to shoot a film of more than two hours, but also managing this without running out of steam and, to boot, daring in this same film, to place his camera in real flats, as the Italian neo-realists would do forty years later, or, even better, playing on half-light and rays of sunlight filtering through closed blinds like the most skilled of our directors of photography. How might one suppose that this same man, in this same film, would, for the first time, play with artificial light to have the action go from a close shot to a lit background, which we discover at the rear of a room plunged in darkness by an open window, thus creating depth of field, successive fields in the same shot, as Wyler was going to do in *The Letter*, and daring to place backlit actors as Orson Welles was going to do in *Citizen Kane*. And so it is that, with *A Child of Paris*, Léonce Perret proves to us that he was one of the first masters of the screen.*

¹ Henri Langlois, *Écrits de cinéma*, texts collected by Bernard Benoliel and Bernard Eisenschitz, Ed. Flammarion / Cinémathèque française, 2014

LEONCE PERRET

A Child of Paris / L'Enfant de Paris

France, 1913 – 120 minutes

Direction and script: Léonce Perret

Production : Société des établissements Léon Gaumont

Cast: Maurice Lagrenée, Louis Leubas, Suzanne Privat, Émile Keppens, Jeanne Marie-Laurent, Henry Duval, Marie Dorly

Marie-Paule de Valen is a young orphan. Her father, a career officer, has just died in Morocco, and her mother succumbs out of grief. Unhappy in boarding school, she flees, falling into the hands of a criminal who entrusts her to a tyrannical, alcoholic cobbler. He mistreats her and makes her live in misery. She finds comfort and brotherly support from the apprentice, Bosco. But Marie-Paule's father, having survived his wounds after all, suddenly reappears.

A *Child of Paris* was restored in 1992 from the nitrate negative held by Gaumont, with the use of two other positive reference elements: a 35mm print from La Cinémathèque française and a print from the Amsterdam Filmmuseum from which comes the blue toning of certain sequences. The insert titles were restored.



L'Enfant de Paris, Léonce Perret, 1913, Gaumont