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"LES VISITEURS DU SOIR" ("The Evening Visitors")

(Produced in 1942, during the German Occupation of France)

Producer	Andre Paulve
Director	Marcel Carne
Script	Jacques Prevert and Pierre Laroche
Photography	Rogert Hubert
Sets	Trauner and Wakhevitch
Music	Kosma and Maurice Thiriet
Editing	Henri Rust

The Premier at the Madeleine Cinema, Paris, December 5, 1942

CAST

Gilles (The Troubador) . . .	Alain Cluny
Dominique (His Sister) . . .	Arletty
Anne (The Fiancee)	Maria Dea
Renaud (The Fiance)	Marcel Herrand
Baron Hugues (Anne's Father)	Fernand Ledoux
The Devil (In Person). . . .	Jules Berry
Others	Jean d'Yd
	Pierre Labry
	Roger Blin
	Gabriel Gabrio

In a medieval castle on a bleak plain there is much merrymaking, raucous conversation, unrestrained laughter. The time is May, 1485. The scene is a banquet given by the Baron Hugues in honor of his daughter, Anne, and her fiance, the Chevalier Renaud. The occasion is a celebration of their forthcoming wedding. But a pair of unknown minstrels enter the castle and banquet hall--Gilles and Dominique. Their singing and dancing captivate the festive crowd.

They have been sent to earth by their master, the Devil, to disturb and distort this beautiful relationship of human love between Anne and Renaud. Exercising their craft, the minstrels hypnotize the dancing couples into a sleep-like trance, Gilles seduces Anne, and Dominique wins the passionate adoration of both the Chevalier Renaud and the Baron Hugues. But the Devil's plans are staggeringly confounded when Gilles falls genuinely in love with Anne, requiring a personal visit of the Devil to the castle.

He immediately causes Gilles to be chained in prison, and the Chevalier and the Baron are piqued into a duel over Dominique. Anne, however, is not impressed with the Devil's manly charm or godly power; she loves Gilles. The Devil, now wanting Anne for himself, puts her in chains alongside Gilles. In the meantime the Chevalier kills the Baron. The distraught Devil compromises, and bargains with Anne to free Gilles and take away his memory of her, if she will accompany the Devil. So that her lover might be freed, she agrees, and Gilles is released.

But Anne cannot overcome her own love for Gilles. When she finds him beside the fountain at which they first declared their love for each other, his memory returns. While they are in a lover's embrace, the Devil, enraged, turns them to stone. However, he is unable to wield power over true love itself, and their hearts continue to beat throughout eternity.

IMPORTANCE OF THE FILM

One of the most important comments to note in understanding this film is that it was conceived and produced during the Occupation. What could a French writer or director say in a film? In this instance, Marcel Carne and his writer, Jacques Prevert, re-told a medieval legend. But when the hearts of the two lovers, now turned to stone, continue to beat, was there a patriotic rallying cry sounded to all loyal Frenchmen? Did the two minstrels bear a striking similarity to the Occupation forces, or to the Gestapo? And was the Devil a representation of Hitler? In the jealous irritation, then growing animosity, and then the duel to the death between these two members of old, friendly families, do we see Frenchmen, now confused, turning against each other? Is it not strange that Carne, who had become known as the master of contemporary realism should now turn to fantasy in text and formality in style?

The rigorous circumstances under which this film are produced are evidenced by the absence of two names in the original credit titles. Trauner, who had been designing Carne's sets, and Kosma, who had been writing his music, were both of Jewish descent, and had been forced underground. Supposedly they had disappeared from society. While in hiding, Trauner worked on the sets and costumes, while Kosma composed much of the music for Les Visiteurs. But their names could not appear with the finished product--it would have been a dead giveaway.

Roger Manville, renowned British critic, wrote in 1946:

> "It is regrettable that the circumstances of the Occupation forced a director as important as Carne to leave the world of contemporary France in order to recreate an artificial world of the past with an artificial theme . . . ."

But is this an artificial theme? Is this not the horrifying picture of the slow, hypnotic power of evil creeping over the dancers, holding them entranced--the inherent evil in men that overcomes their intentions of goodness and beauty and joy? Is it artificial to say that there is only one conquering power: man's love which alone can overpower his own fateful perverseness, his own lust and egomania, his own hateful evil?

Roy Alexander Fowler insists that Les Visiteurs should be considered as "an allegory, not a fantasy--a social document."

Gavin Lambert, writing in Sequence, spring of 1948, said:

> "The script starts with an exciting conception, admirably developed. . . . After the initial situation, however, . . . the excitement has been lost, and not even Carne's remarkably sustained direction with its many incidental beauties, the Devil's brilliant sinister wit, the intelligent playing and well-written scenes of Arletty and Ledoux, can really persuade us otherwise."

Jean Queval, in a brief life of Carne, said of Les Visiteurs:

> "Since this was a first attempt by Carne and Prevert at portraying victorious, perennial love, one may wonder if such a grand, fascinating ornamental piece of film is more, considering its ambitious theme, than a highly distinguished failure. Les Visiteurs du Soir never succeeds in touching the heart."

MARCEL CARNE

Men of success are made, mostly, by their opportunities--providing they make the most of their opportunities. Then, again, it is said that the successful man makes his opportunities. In trying to probe into this problem, we find good illustrative material in the biography of Marcel Carne.

His first milestone of opportunity came in 1928, when he was invited to become assistant to Jacques Feyder who was directing Les Nouveaux Messieurs. Carne was 25 years old. His father had previously secured for him a job with a respectable insurance company. But Marcel dreamed of another career; he attended night school and became a qualified assistant cameraman. He thought it discreet not to tell his father and, as Carne writes, "When we met again, I was behind a camera." Jacques Feyder had become "the father of my new life as a film-maker." Speaking of Feyder recently, he said: "I owe him everything."

Les Nouveaux Messieurs was based on a rather ineffectual little Parisian "boulevard play"--but Carne watched the masterful hands of Feyder mould this insipid thing into a delightful and rather stirring satire on the French Parliament. After the film's release, Feyder left for Hollywood, and in the following year (1929), Carne acted as assistant cameraman in the shooting of Richard Oswald's Cagliostro. Carne's intimate knowledge of the camera--its possibilities, its limitations--became a telling characteristic in his later career as a director.

The second milestone of opportunity came in 1929, when the French weekly, Cinemagazine, offered a prize of 2,000 francs for the best film criticism--plus an invitation to become a regular contributor. Carne made an extremely careful study of not one, but four current films, and submitted his entries. He won the first prize, and all four entries were published. Becoming a film critic, now, he made exacting analyses of many films, thereby increasing his own knowledge and elevating his own standards of perfection.

In that same year Carne, with the help of Michel Sanvoisin, a reputable clockmaker by trade and film-maker by heart, made an interesting filmic venture, Nogent, Eldorado de Dimanche. The film had no inclusive narrative line, the photography was only spasmodically good, and the editing was clumsy--but there was exhibited here an unusually effective portrayal of character and a striking pictorial quality.

In 1930, Carne became assistant to Rene Clair in producing Sous les Toits de Paris, and then resumed his career as a film critic, even briefly becoming editor of the weekly, Hebdo-film.

Jacques Feyder returned, disillusioned, from Hollywood in 1932, and invited Carne to become his permanent assistant. Together they produced Le Grand Jeu, Pension Mimosas, and La Kermesse Heroique.

The third milestone of opportunity would not normally be so phrased. In 1936, Feyder went to London to make a film for Korda, leaving Carne in Paris with time and restlessness on his hands. With considerable trepidation and with Francoise Rosay, he plunged into his first feature film: Jenny. The film was successful. Marcel Carne had now been established as a director worthy of respect. But there were intimations of things to come revealed in this film. Its director had established a definite style of on-location shooting that made for scenics that were both beautiful and dramatic--and they depicted a haunting realism. He also showed an unusual ability for casting actors, or for casting actors of unusual ability.

But, most important, here was begun one of the most unusual collaborations between director and writer in the history of film. Up until 1949, Jacques Prevert wrote all of Carne's scripts, except for Hotel du Nord in 1938. Prevert's literary skill as well as Prevert's powerful influence over Carne are seen even in Jenny, their first mutual undertaking. In succeeding films the domination of Prevert becomes increasingly apparent. After the release of their Les Enfants du Paradis in 1945, Jean Mitry wrote concerning this unusual team:

> "In the past, though their scenarios had always been the result of close collaboration, Carne had the upper hand in the breakdown into shooting script and in the cinematographic construction of the film. After Carne had made a suitable adaptation of the subject chosen, Prevert was content to write the dialogue and to fit this into the limited and pre-arranged framework which had already been predetermined by Carne. . .
>
> "Now the jobs have been reversed. It is Prevert who conceives the subject of the film, who develops it, writes the continuity and often breaks it down into an extremely detailed form. Carne's job is then confined to writing into the script the necessary technical notes and to planning the changes of film angles. They are no longer Carne's films with dialogue by Prevert, but Prevert's films directed by Carne."

However (and we are dwelling on this point because of its importance to our understanding and appreciating films), Jean Mitry bemoans this turn of events.

> "Where Carne makes a point visually, Prevert makes his point in words. He allows the visuals the sole purpose of showing, presenting and placing the characters in situations cleverly contrived, but controlled by his text. Hence, the visuals emptily serve only to identify outwardly characters of whom we know nothing except from what they say; the visuals serve only to illustrate a story whose development is never indicated except in words. Thus . . . in spite of the intelligence of the subject and however ingenious the direction, it is no longer, it cannot be any longer, cinema."

Carne brought to his films two of the most brilliant French contemporary composers, Joseph Kosma and Maurice Jaubert, and perhaps the most outstanding art director in Europe, Trauner. Thus, he gathered around himself for continued collaboration an extremely unusual crew of technicians, artists and actors.

Marcel Carne: "a director of the finest and most accurate realism and observations. . ., and artist observing contemporary life with its many faults and few beauties, a poet whose tools were celluloid, people, light, movement, and scissors." (Roy Alexander Fowler in The Film in France.)

MARCEL CARNE'S FILMOGRAPHY

1936 - "Jenny"

1937 - "Drole de Drame"

1938 - "Quai des Brumes"

1938 - "Hotel du Nord"

1939 - "Le Jour se Leve"

1942 - "Les Visiteurs du Soir"

1945 - "Les Enfants du Paradis"

1946 - "Les Portes de la Nuit"

1949 - "La Marie du Port"

1950 - "Julliette ou la Clef des Songes"

-- Notes prepared by John Clayton