Tuesday next, February 11th: "THANKS A MILLION" (1935, Roy Del Ruth) with Dick Powell, Ann Dvorak, Paul Whitehead; and "BROADWAY THROUGH A KEYHOLE" (1933, Lowell Sherman) with Constance Cummings, Russ Columbo, Paul Kelly, Texas Guinan

February 4, 1969

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"LE FANTOME DU MOULIN ROUGE" (France, 1924) Written & directed by Rene Clair. Produced for Films Rene Fernandi; Asst. Director, Georges Lacombe; Camera: Louis Chaix, Jimmy Berlitz; sets, Robert Oys; costumes: Paul Poiret; Released (France) February, 1925; 7 reels

With George Veuillier (Julien); Sandra Milovanov (Yvonne); Albert Prejean (The reporter); Jose Davant (Vincent); Maurice Schutz (Gautier); Paul Oliver (Doctor Renault); Madeleine Rodrigues (Jacqueline).

"I think that the subject of a film should be above all visual .... "Le Fantome du Moulin Rouge" is a fantastic story based on superimposition, a wonderful means of expression thanks to which reality and dreams can be merged" -- Rene Clair, 1924.

The first line of the above quote is unfortunately tinged with irony tonight, since our print is hardly "visual" in the best sense of the word. When I first saw the film in Europe, it was with the advantage of a fine 35mm film. The film does lack the ultimate sparkle of Clair, and a really good print was needed to restore the balance. Unfortunately, our 16mm print, while quite complete, is one of those lack-lustre dupes with lost detail and pale faces that is all the more annoying because it is splice and scratch free, and obviously copied from an excellent original. It is shoddy lab work, not the fact that it is a dupe, that is to blame. We've run many worse prints; the quality is variable and frequently improves to a marked degree; certainly it is not as difficult to watch as was that horrendous print of "Nana" we recently showed. For such a rare subject, we are thankful to have any print. It's just that the film itself has its turgid elements which a sparkling print could help to overcome, but which a print such as this one merely emphasizes. Having prepared you for the worst however, it may well turn out to be a pleasant surprise, and in any event the satisfaction of crossing off such a rare Clair item -- to my knowledge, it has never been released in this country -- should provide ample compensation in itself.

"Phantom....." was Clair's third film as a writer-director, following a brief exploratory career in film as an actor. Preceded by "Paris Qui Dort" ("The Crazy Bay") and the short "Entr'acte", it was his longest and most elaborate film of the three. Like so many of his most successful later films -- "The Ghost Goes West", "It Happened Tomorrow" and "I Married A Witch" being especially apt parallels -- it is a semi-supernatural comic fantasy. One of the comments that Clair made apropos "I Married A Witch" applies equally well to tonight's film: "A scientist is not an appropriate spectator only if its effects are limited. If a witch has so much power that she can destroy her enemies and the world -- there is no plot, and no show".

Although very popular at the time, "Phantom of the Moulin Rouge" has never maintained any kind of a reputation. For one thing, it has never been an easy film to see, and when Rothe et al wrote their standard histories in the 30's, they were undoubtedly basing their unenthusiastic comments on memories of a decade earlier -- and with such masterpieces as "The Italian Straw Hat" and "Le Million" in between, it is easy to see how this hoss subtle and dynamic work could fade into limbo.

Working against the film too are its English titles. Clair after all had no great reputation in 1925, and the British distributors (Wardour) seem to have re-written the titles in a straight melodramatic frame, so that they live up to the promise of the film's title. Since the opening portions of the film are slow anyway, this old-hat melodramatic approach to the titling suggests that this is a serious and somewhat ponderous work, while I imagine that Clair's original titles must have instantly evoked a tongue-in-cheek approach. But no matter, once the film is underway it is an elaborate and fast-paced comedy, its initial science-fiction gagging ultimately turning into bizarre black comedy. The basic plot premise is still valid and full of potential for a contemporary remake. Most of the players are unfamiliar, though Clair's favorite -- and France's own Charlie Chase -- Albert Prejean is as breezy as always, and Maurice Schutz ( alas, one can't even look at that face now without conjuring up his death scene in "Vampyr") gives a good but decidedly non-tongue-in-cheek performance. Even at the time, the film was criticised for its lack of sentiment -- and perhaps the rather cold playing (Prejean apart) also works against the lightness of touch Clair was looking for. But it's still an intriguing early work, and if one can mentally brighten up the print and re-phrase some of the early titles, it can be quite rewarding still.

Wm. K. Everson