

Richard Jacob
Professor Harris
World Cinema – COM-261-6
October 10, 2022

The French Revolution of Sound: *Le Million*

The French sparked the movie revolution with the creation of the first film. On October 14, 1888, Louis Le Prince, a French inventor and artist created the first film called *Roundhay Garden Scene* using his invention, the single lens camera (Howells 180). On December 28, 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière hosted “the first public display of a moving picture” (Nochimson 28). French cinema catapulted into cinema history as “the birthplace of movies” (Nochimson 23). In the 1930s, the technological advancement of synchronized sound burst into the cinematic film industry further throwing the French silent film industry into a bit of an upheaval following World War I (1914-18). Synchronized sound allowed “the sound of speech and other effects to be integrated with the images of the characters in action” (Nochimson 31). The words spoken by the characters matched their lip movements. French cinema found itself behind in the sound revolution. But, keeping with French tradition, French cinema confronted the challenge, creatively annexed sound into their films, and produced wonderful works of cinema. René Clair, a French artist and filmmaker experimented with sound and created a whimsical, musical comedy called *Le Million*. A true artist, Clair's triumphant blending of sound and music within *Le Million* demonstrates a revolutionary implementation of synchronized sound where sound and music enhance and articulate the narrative, creating an entertaining artistic masterpiece.

Le Million is about Michel, a flat broke artist living in Paris bombarded by creditors, who learns he has the winning lottery ticket and has become a millionaire. Unfortunately, the winning lottery ticket is in Michel's jacket. Beatrice, Michel's fiancée, gave the jacket to a shady figure

(Grandpa Tulip) to escape a police pursuit. The quest to locate the jacket begins. Grandpa Tulip sells the jacket to Ambrosio Sopraneli, an opera singer in search of a costume. During the quest, Michel is suspected of being Grandpa Tulip and is arrested. Michel endures many devious actions from his neighbor and friend, Prosper, who wishes to retrieve the winning lottery ticket for himself. Michel's creditors exonerate Michel. Michel races to the opera house to retrieve the winning lottery ticket. Michel encounters many challenges attempting to retrieve the jacket. Grandpa Tulip winds up with the jacket and returns the jacket to Beatrice as a special favor. In the end, the winning lottery ticket is returned to Michel. Clair unfolds the story by cleverly constructing a series of unbelievable coincidences enhanced by sound and music generating humor and suspense.

Clair cleverly employs singing and music as a technique to introduce and interrelate the characters creating the connections to set up and reveal the incredible coincidences within the narrative. In the opening scene, Clair visually introduces the main characters. First, the camera pans the rooftops while the clock strikes midnight. In the distance, the faint sound of music and singing can be heard through the still night. As the camera pans further, the sound of music and singing grows louder. The camera stops when it encounters two men on the roof looking through the skylight. The two men observe people singing and dancing. Suddenly, the two men are spotted, and the music stops. One of the men ask, "I don't mind being kept awake, but at least tell why you're all so merry" (Le Million). The frame of the camera contains all the main characters (Michel, Beatrice, Prosper, Wanda, and Grandpa Tulip). The main characters and the crowd happily respond with song, "They haven't heard the events, so we'll tell you. You may think it all nonsense. Though every word is true" (Le Million). Before the story unfolds, through song, Clair introduces the main characters and organizes the frame showcasing the character connections.

Grandpa Tulip leads the crowd in song flanked by Michel and Prosper. Beatrice appears behind Michel and Wanda appears behind Prosper. Later, Clair officially introduces Grandpa Tulip playing lively music during a police chase scene; associating the lively music to Grandpa Tulip's character. In the scene, Michel's creditors have gathered at the entrance of the apartment building complaining about collecting money from Michel. The front door to the building is open. Lively chase music begins to play, a man (Grandpa Tulip) appears in the doorway and ducks back out. The creditors' stop complaining and watch the man run into another building while being pursued by police. The music continues to play while Grandpa Tulip leads the police on a chase atop the building's roof. Grandpa Tulip ducks into an open skylight of Michel's building. Eventually, Grandpa Tulip ducks into Beatrice's apartment to elude the police; setting up the first coincidental mishap that sends the coat and lottery ticket on a journey. Clair finishes the character introductions with the introduction of the opera singer, Ambrosio Sopraneli. Sopraneli enters Grandpa Tulip's pawn shop. Grandpa Tulip and one of his henchmen confront Sopraneli with guns drawn. Grandpa Tulip demands Sopraneli identify himself as an opera singer by singing. Sopraneli begins singing an Aria (opera song). His singing rattles the chandelier above and causes the chandelier to fall to the ground. A satisfied Grandpa Tulip sells Michel's jacket to the opera singer; finishing the character connections. Clair's enlistment of singing and music to introduce and interrelate the characters allows Clair to lay the groundwork for the incredible coincidences and articulate the narrative.

Clair ingeniously utilizes non-diegetic and diegetic singing and music as a technique to represent a character's internal thoughts and intentions. The first non-diegetic occurrence happens when Michel is mistaken for Grandpa Tulip and arrested by the police. While sitting between two policemen in the backseat of a taxi heading to the police station, music and singing

expose Michel's internal thoughts. The somewhat upbeat music presents Michel's lamenting recollections, "Michel, Michel, how can you sit there? When will you be a millionaire? You won't stop the clock by whining. The meter's running and the price is climbing! Victory was there for you to hold. Somewhere your jackets flying with a pocket full of gold" (Le Million). The next non-diegetic occurrence happens when Prosper refuses to correctly identify Michel at the police station. Prosper walks out of the police station and stops to lament his latest decision not to help his friend. Music and singing reveal Prosper's inner thoughts. Slow, dreary music begins playing while the singing expresses Prosper's true internal thoughts and motives, "Prosper, what have you done? As a friend, you're no paragon. Let your conscience confess that your friend is in distress. Prosper, what have you done? Best not to give another thought to the remorse your acts brought. Don't let it get the better of you. Instead of trying to make amends go spend a moment or two with a charming lady friend" (Le Million). In the scene, while the music and singing play, Prosper's initial facial expression conveys guilt, then changes to deep thinking about what to do next and ends with a smirk and a confident look. Prosper moves on to visit Wanda. The Love Duet scene during the opera serves as Clair's finest utilization of music and singing representing a character's inner thoughts. Here Clair utilizes diegetic sound to convey the internal thoughts of Michel and Beatrice. In pursuit of the jacket at the opera house, Michel and Beatrice find themselves hiding behind scenery on stage while the opera singers sing the love duet. Closeups of Michel coincide with Sopraneli's voice and closeups of Beatrice coincide with Madame Ravelina's voice. The synchronized facial expressions and body language of both Michel and Beatrice with the music and song portrays their inner thoughts and appears as if they are singing the love duet even though their lips never move in the scene. Clair's installation of

music and singing representing a character's inner thoughts allow Clair the ability to convey the narrative without employing dialogue; enhancing the narrative through music and singing.

Throughout the film, Clair skillfully switches between synching and not synchronizing the singing with character actions as a technique to articulate the narrative and enhance the dialogue of the narrative. Unsynchronized singing appears to emerge at points of friction and synchronized singing appears to occur at points of harmony and agreement. In the beginning of the film, a confrontation between Michel and his creditors results in the creditors chasing Michel up the stairwell. Fast-paced, chase music plays while Michel and the creditors run up the stairs. Singing ensues and repeats with "Stop! Thief! He's on the run!" (Le Million) The singing comes from a non-diegetic chorus and not the creditors. One would believe the singing comes from the creditors. Next Clair switches to synchronized singing. The instance of synchronized singing occurs after Michel learns he picked the winning numbers in the Dutch lottery. The creditors request to see the lottery ticket. Michel cheerfully invites the creditors to his apartment. Victory-like music with a marching cadence begins to play and the marching of the characters occurs with the rhythm of the music. The creditors sing, "Upwards, Upwards, to the light up there. We'll see if his claim is true. If the painter is really a millionaire. We shall bear witness to his virtue" (Le Million). Clair employs synchronized singing again when Grandpa Tulip's henchmen arrive for a meeting with Grandpa Tulip. Triumphant music begins to play as the henchmen march into the room and line up in front of Grandpa Tulip. As they march into the room, the henchmen sing their anthem to a rhythmic marching cadence, "We are the foot soldiers of inequality. We take the spoils of social injustice...We redistribute wealth and private property" (Le Million). In a subsequent scene, Clair reuses the same triumphant music as the police mistakenly arrest Michel; accusing Michel of being Grandpa Tulip. The policemen march out of

the shop marching and singing their anthem, “We are the foot soldiers of legality. No bandit can escape the police. Our arm upholds the scale of justice in the name of public virtue and private property” (*Le Million*). Clair switches back to unsynchronized sound in the scene where a rugby-style scramble over the jacket ensues between Michel, Prosper, and Grandpa Tulip’s henchman backstage at the opera. Clair mixes the non-diegetic roar of sports fans with quick melee-type music during the scramble for the jacket. The characters’ actions resemble rugby players in a scrum passing the football. Clair’s brilliant and skillful collage of synchronized and unsynchronized sounds emulates trailblazing techniques. The music and singing complement the narrative and enhance the dialogue of the narrative.

René Clair triumphantly blended sound and music within *Le Million* pioneering a revolutionary implementation of synchronized sound where singing and music enhanced and articulated the narrative, creating a whimsical, artistic masterpiece. Clair loved music and enjoyed composing films into works of art. Clair excelled at producing silent films because it gave him artistic autonomy to create an atmosphere of imagination for the audience. At first, Clair opposed the sound revolution because Clair felt dialogue would kill his artistic autonomy AND everything about producing film would need to change. But Clair stepped up to the challenge and used sound and music as a substitution for dialogue (Fisher). A *London Cinema Chatter* critique from 1931 sums up the success of Clair in *Le Million*: “...Clair has shown Hollywood the way to real sound films, and that the production technique of “Le Million” will cause a stir in cinema circles “not excluding Hollywood” (*London Cinema Chatter*). The critique continues: “The music which accompanies and is woven into the development of the story is attractive and vivacious, and altogether “Le Million” is a highly notable attempt toward making of the perfect screen musical comedy” (*London Cinema Chatter*).

Works Cited:

Fisher, Lucy. "René Clair, *Le Million*, and the Coming of Sound." *Cinema Journal*, Volume 16,

Number 2, Spring 1977, Pages 34-50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225383>

Howells, Richard. "Louis Le Prince: the body of evidence." *Screen*, Volume 47, Issue 2,

Summer 2006, Pages 179-200, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjl015>.

Le Million. Directed by René Clair, Tobis Sound Company, 1931.

LONDON CINEMA CHATTER: RENE CLAIR'S NEW FILM, "LE MILLION"--DREYFUS
AFFAIR PICTURED--OTHER ITEMS SYNOPSIS OF THE STORY. THE DREYFUS
AFFAIR. LESLIE HEUSON'S FILM. (1931, May 10). *New York Times* (1923-)

Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.esearch.ut.edu/historical-newspapers/london-cinema-chatter/docview/99355827/se-2>

Nochimson, Martha P. *World on Film*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

"René Clair." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 31 Mar. 2011. academic-eb-com.esearch.ut.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Ren%C3%A9-Clair/82781. Accessed 8 Oct. 2022.