**Restoring a Lost Art**

*by*[*Gary Jason*](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/382)  |  Posted January 11, 2012

Most contemporary filmgoers do not well understand — much less appreciate — that early, unique cinematic art form known as the silent movie or silent film. The silent era in cinema lasted roughly from the mid-1890s to the early 1930s. It created thousands of films. It created the film industry, both in America and worldwide. That era is the focus of a fine little art flick called *The Artist*, playing now at selected locations.

Silent films were made, not because filmmakers didn’t want to incorporate sound (dialogue, music, and sound effects) into their productions, but simply because of the formidable technological challenge of coordinating (“synchronizing”) the sound to the rapidly moving frames. So while the first primitive moving pictures appeared in the late 1870s, and the first narrative film in 1888, and movies were popular throughout the industrialized world from the late 1890s on, sound took a generation more to develop.

The first attempt to create sound pictures began at the Edison Company in 1896, but really viable film-sound technology only emerged during the period from 1921 to 1929. (To be precise, there were a number of competing sound technologies during this time.) *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was the first movie that included sound and was a commercial success, but most movies in 1928 and 1929 were still silent. Only in the early 1930s did silent films essentially disappear. A few movies were specifically made as silent films by the artistic choice of the producers. Especially notable was the choice of Charlie Chaplin to make *City Lights*(1931) and *Modern Times*(1936) as silent flicks.

The earnings of the top silent films show how popular they could be, despite their limitations. My figures may be a little off — I had to convert early-20th-century dollar earnings into 2011 dollars — but the top ten American silent films earned big dollars. The top grossing silent movie was *The Birth of a Nation*(1915)at $217 million, followed by $81 million for *The Big Parade*(1925), $70 million for *Ben-Hur*(1925), $58 million for*Way Down East*(1920), $54 million for *The Gold Rush*(1925), $49 million for *The Covered Wagon*(1923), $48 million for *The Circus*(1928), $45 million for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*(1921), $45 million for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*(1923), and $44 million for *The Ten Commandments*(1923).

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These are very impressive gross earnings, especially when you remember that the nation had a much smaller population back then — about 100 million in 1915 and maybe 120 million in 1928, which is only about 30% to 40% of our present population. The nation was also much poorer. The average household had dramatically less money for entertainment than today’s household. Finally, the distribution channel was much smaller, with many rural communities not having any theaters at all.

Despite the accomplishments, artistic as well as commercial, of the silent era, it is difficult for modern audiences to appreciate them. The reasons arise from the nature of the medium.

Begin with acting. Obviously, silent movies had to convey their stories by pantomime. True, the pantomime was aided by “title cards” (also called “intertitles,” key lines of dialogue or commentary about the action, printed out on screen) and typically a musical score. The score was played on piano, organ, or (in larger setttings) a pit orchestra. At the peak of their popularity, silent film theaters were the largest source of employment for instrumental musicians.

But music — while a vital tool in conveying tone and enhancing emotion — can’t supply much if any narrative detail. Indeed, to try to do so — as did some early scores, by, say, using an ascending scale to mirror a movie character's ascending a stair — is apt to create a cartoonish effect. And the title cards were inherently limited. If producers *had* tried to put any appreciable amount of dialog text on screen, the audience would have spent most of the evening reading.

So pantomime bore the brunt of conveying the narrative. And in many cases (early on, at least), directors encouraged actors to accentuate their gestures, facial expressions, and other body language in the hope of amplifying communication. Unfortunately, this led to a kind of acting that strikes modern viewers as “mugging,” and at best a kind of campy comedy. There was a gem of a TV comedy series that played in 1963–64 that exploited the hamminess of some of the silent films: *Fractured Flickers*, produced by Jay Scott and hosted by Hans Conried. The series would take classic silent films and do funny voiceovers.

But it is fair to observe that the movie-going public in the silent era increasingly preferred more naturalistic acting, and major actors such as Greta Garbo, Lillian Gish, Sessue Hayakawa, and Mary Pickford accommodated their work to a more restrained style. Still, silent film acting does take some time to get used to.

Another problem is that during the silent era, film shooting and projection speeds were not standardized. Projection speed became so only early in the sound era. Silent films were shot at speeds (“frame rates”) ranging from 12 to 26 frames per second (fps), depending on the country or even studio of origin. Complicating things even further is the practice of some directors who consciously intended their films to be projected at variable speeds and gave instructions to projectionists accordingly. (They did this because playing chase sequences, for example, at higher rates of speed seemed to enhance the suspense.) Also, projecting cellulose nitrate film (the standard medium of the silent era) too slowly dramatically increased the risk of fire.

As a consequence, when early TV showed silent movies, they were often played at incorrect speeds. Add to this the fact that the films were by then often severely deteriorated, and the unintended consequence was to make audiences simply dismiss as inferior an artistic medium that was in fact quite powerful.

Film directors, critics, and historians long have tried to combat that sorry consequence. Many university film departments worldwide have worked to preserve and restore silent films, and the Turner Classic Movie channel shows some of the best of them.

Moreover, directors throughout the sound era have occasionally produced homages to the silent era. Need I mention the great film *Sunset Boulevard*, in which actual silent era movie star Gloria Swanson plays fictional movie star Norma Desmond, a woman unable to come to grips with her eclipse by talking pictures? Or perhaps the greatest of musicals, *Singin’ in the Rain*, which was based on the transition of cinema from the silent to the sound era?

It is in light of all these factors that we should consider the film under review. *The Artist* is a joint French-American production, and it is a well-written comedy-drama. It is mainly silent, though sound enters toward the end. It is therefore reminiscent of some 1940s films — such as *The Moon and Sixpence*and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* — that were shot in black and white, but shifted to color to accentuate an effect; and the 1939 classic, *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the scenes that take place in presumably dull, real-life rural Kansas are done in black and white, while the scenes that happen in the magical, imaginary world of Oz are shot in color.

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The protagonist of *The Artist* is George Valentin (Jean Dujardin), a popular “leading man” in silent films. We see clips of his (fictional) movies, in which he comes across as a combination of Rudolf Valentino (hence his name) and a Douglas Fairbanks type of screen action hero. While he is meeting the press after the screening of his new movie, a very beautiful young admirer, Peppy Miller (Berenice Bejo) literally bumps into him. She is photographed with him and winds up on the front page of *Variety*with the headline, “Who’s That Girl?”

A short time later, George runs into Peppy on the lot as she stands in line for an audition to be part of a chorus line in a musical. He pushes the studio head Al Zimmer (John Goodman) to give her a minor part in his new film.

This sets up the story's central dynamic. Peppy’s career rapidly rises, but two years later, when talkies take over the industry, George's plummets. He can’t make the transition — for reasons initially unclear — and takes to drink, hitting bottom when he sets fire to his own home.

He is rescued in the short term by his exceptional dog, and in the long term by Peppy’s exceptional love. She not only saves him — she works to save his career.

Now, it is historically true that some silent film stars wouldn’t or couldn’t make the transition to sound flicks. There were a variety of reasons. Some actors (especially those who directed their own films) were disdainful of the new technology, thinking it inherently less aesthetically powerful than the old. Some had pronounced foreign accents, which audiences didn’t expect, at a time — like our own — when anti-immigrant feelings were running high among the general public. Others, especially actors without extensive stage experience, had diction and grammar problems. And some had weak or — in the case of a few male action leads — effeminate voices.

When George finally does speak at the end of the film, we get a clue as to why he had problems making the transition. I won't spoil the film by telling you what it is.

How is the acting in this film about actors? It's outstanding, with strong performances by Dujardin as George and Bejo as Peppy. Bejo is particularly appealing. To me, she is very reminiscent of the marvelous French actress and dancer Leslie Caron, and that's saying a lot.

Absolutely delightful in support — doing silent acting as if it were their first careers — are veteran American actors John Goodman as studio head Zimmer, and James Cromwell as Clifton, George’s faithful chauffeur and valet. And I simply must mention Uggie, who plays Dog, George’s dog. I can’t recall a better performance by a, yes, again, dog in any recent film.

Michel Hazanavicius has done a marvelous job of directing, eliciting robust but still restrained performances from actors none of whom — including the canine! — had ever done a silent film. He also wrote the script, aiming to fulfill a long-standing desire to create a contemporary silent film. (He is also married to the beautiful Bejo.) It's a risky and exciting enterprise, and Hazanavicius succeeded. He clearly spent a good deal of time studying silent film, and profiting from his studies. He performs with panache the difficult task of writing melodrama with comedic touches — and using few title cards.

The film has already won Dujardin a Best Actor award at Cannes, Hazanavicius a nomination for a Palme d’Or, and Uggie a Palm Dog award. The New York Film Critics Circle just awarded Hazanavicius the Best Director award, and gave the film the Best Picture.award. I have no doubt that many more awards are in store.

I recommend seeing this picture with young people if possible. I brought my daughter and her two friends, all young women in their twenties. None had ever seen a silent film before. All of them were entranced by this film, and had no trouble following the action or keeping their interest.

**Editor's Note:***Review of "The Artist," directed by Michel Hazanavicius. La Petite Reine-La Classe Americaine, 2011, 100 minutes.*

**About this Author**

Gary Jason is an academic philosopher and a senior editor of *Liberty*. His recent books, *Disturbing Thoughts: Unorthodox Writings on Timely Issues*and *Philosophic Thoughts: Essays on Logic and Philosophy*are both available through Amazon.