

# Martin Scorsese's Hugo: A rather drab and disjointed fairytale

Robert Fowler  
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*Directed by Martin Scorsese, written by John Logan, based on the book by Brian Selznick*

“Happy endings only happen in the movies,” declares Ben Kingsley’s character to Hugo, the eponymous hero in the closing section of Martin Scorsese’s latest big budget picture. Fear not, this reviewer will not divulge if a happy ending is indeed provided by the veteran filmmaker. But, frankly, the ending, happy or otherwise, has ultimately little to do with the quality and impact of Scorsese’s latest work.

The filmmaker’s recent efforts have not been enticing, including a relatively sycophantic study of a Beatle, *George Harrison: Living in a Material World*, preceded by a meaningless documentary about New York author and social commentator Fran Lebowitz, entitled *Public Speaking*.

As a “family film,” *Hugo* is a change of pace for Mr. Scorsese, but on the evidence of this outing, not a change for the better. In this unfamiliar territory, he seems unsure of himself, constantly doubting and second guessing his extreme impulses and natural penchant for gratuitous behavior. Yes, despite *Hugo*’s being aimed at the “whole family,” Scorsese can’t resist the urge to resort to grotesque shock tactics when the opportunity presents itself within the framework of John Logan’s screenplay.

Based on a children’s book, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007), by Brian Selznick, and set in 1930s’ Paris, the film revolves around a recently orphaned young boy who scours the streets, apparently doing anything he can to make ends meet. Most of Hugo’s days are spent observing quotidian life in a vibrant train station, in which he also lives. More specifically his home lies within the station’s clock. This gimmick allows Scorsese to show off on more than one occasion with some beautiful aerial

shots.

However, the characters Hugo encounters are anything but appealing, they are most often oddballs of varying degrees of eccentricity: most strikingly, a deranged, oafish station inspector played by Sacha Baron Cohen and a mysterious, aloof librarian, charmingly portrayed by Christopher Lee.

We discover early on that Hugo has quite a fondness for thieving. His attention is focused on a little toy store in the station, owned by Kingsley’s grumpy old man. We later learn that the old man is a former filmmaker, the real-life character Georges Méliès. Screenwriter Logan introduces the character as washed-up and embittered, in the vein of Dickens’ Scrooge. This decision comes across as clichéd and fails to ring true.

Méliès (1861-1938) began his career as a stage magician, but fell in love with the cinema after viewing the work of the Lumière brothers (among the first filmmakers in history) at the Grand Café in Paris. And it was in this art form that he put his love of magic to good use. Méliès is credited as the first to develop the “stop trick,” or substitution, effect on film. This occurs when an object is moved while the camera is turned off. When the camera is turned back on it appears to the viewer that the object has disappeared or been replaced.

Méliès’ best known work is *Le voyage dans la lune* (A trip to the moon, 1902 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JDaOOw0MEE>), famous for a scene where a spaceship lands in the eye of the man in the moon. One of Méliès’ most amusing films, however, is *Un homme de têtes* (*The Four Troublesome Heads*, 1898 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=646GBVOTgzs>),

which consists of the filmmaker removing his own head several times, placing the various noggins on two tables and apparently attempting (and failing) to harmonize with them while he plays the banjo.

Unfortunately, such inventiveness and humor are largely missing from Mr. Scorsese's *Hugo*. Instead he reverts to tried and true techniques. In the first scene, for instance, the camera follows Hugo (Asa Butterfield) venturing up and down several sets of stairs and hallways, through the train station, until he reaches his humble abode within its clock. This cinematography will be familiar to anyone who has seen *Goodfellas*, for example.

Upon meeting Hugo, at the end of the drawn-out opening sequence, Méliès (Kingsley) lets the young boy know in no uncertain terms he doesn't take too kindly to his thieving, and in the process does a little stealing of his own. He takes one of the young boy's few precious possessions, a notebook, which contains sketches of an automaton that his now deceased father (Jude Law) was in the process of creating. Indeed, the obsession to fulfill his father's dream is at the center of Hugo's journey.

Butterfield gives an earnest performance as Hugo. Flashback scenes with his father, as they try to create the automaton together, whilst threatening to tumble into sentimentality, are amongst the most sincere in the film. However, the death of Hugo's father is dealt with rather callously by Scorsese. Hugo is then forced to live with his oppressive, alcoholic uncle (a heavy-handed performance from Ray Winstone.) Not pleased one bit with these living arrangements, Hugo abandons his relative almost as soon as he moves in.

In his desire to regain what is rightfully his, Hugo follows Méliès home after work one night, where he strikes up a friendship with Méliès granddaughter, Isabelle (Chloe Martinez). After some initial tension, they share some touching moments reminiscing about lost parents, as the bookish Isabelle attempts to educate Hugo in the train station's library. Hugo convinces Isabelle to aid him in his search for the missing parts of his father's automaton. She does so, and during their search they discover the true identity of Isabelle's grandfather.

This gives Scorsese an excuse to indulge in cinematic trivia, which for the most part comes across as self-indulgent and pedantic. One suddenly feels that an

entirely new film has begun. No one would argue with Scorsese's encyclopedic knowledge of cinema history. However, this passion for film history essentially turns the second half of *Hugo* into another of the director's relatively timid documentaries.

Scorsese argues that Méliès' films became dated after the First World War as audiences simply wanted more "realism." He ignores the harsh fact that Méliès' film company was forced into bankruptcy in 1913 by the French and American studios; his company was then bought out of receivership by Pathé Frères. The French army seized many of his films, recorded on cellulose, and made boot heels out of them during the imperialist slaughter. Essentially driven out of the film industry, Méliès did become a toy salesman in a train station.

Kingsley's bland portrayal as Méliès is trite and sentimental. The "forgotten man" theme here proves to be as boring for children as it is for an adult audience. And Kingsley's sudden switch from an austere old man to a lovable legendary film creator is unconvincing.

A subplot involves a romantic liaison between Cohen's law enforcement officer and Emily Mortimer, who sells flowers in the train station. These scenes are painful to watch for anyone who has witnessed such interactions dozens and dozens of times in all the second-rate romantic comedies one can think of.

*Hugo* has been largely praised as the "feel good" film of the year. This reviewer would argue it is more likely to fall into the category of the "telling your audience what to feel" film of the year. Surely, regardless of its age, an audience deserves to be challenged and provoked by so-called "masters" of their craft. Instead, in this reviewer's humble opinion, a disjointed and confused narrative prevails in *Hugo* from virtually the first frame to last.



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