The Artist: An amiable gimmick

Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Michel Hazanavicius

Michel Hazanavicius's new movie, *The Artist*, is set in the years 1927 to 1933 when American cinema underwent a profound transformation from silent to sound films. The near-silent, black-and-white film recounts the demise of a fictitious silent screen icon.

The French filmmaker previously achieved recognition with his *OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies* and a sequel, *OSS 117: Lost in Rio*, spoofy homages to the 1960s' James Bond films.

As hinted at in Hazanavicius's latest work, the transition to the "talkies" produced instability, panic and confusion in the industry. In the short term, in the opinion of many, the advent of sound films resulted in an artistic decline.

Legendary director King Vidor (1894-1982), for example, once commented: "Naturally, I believe in progress, and it's hard to say that movies were better in the silent days. But I can remember a distinct feeling I had in the late '20s, along with directors like Clarence Brown and Henry King, that we had achieved an art form that was unique. We felt we were bursting forth with a fresh channel of expression in each new movie. Silent techniques constituted a universal language; Chaplin, after all, was the best known man in the world. Then, bang, we were hit with this sound thing, and the technicians began to dominate the scene. 'You can't do that, you can't move there, you can't speak with your head down.' "

In the longer term, of course, the emergence of talking films led to a groundswell of creativity, as technological advancements generated and enhanced artistic experimentation and social representation. Hollywood produced some of its finest work in the 1930s, through the efforts of John Ford, Frank Borzage, Raoul Walsh, Ernst Lubitsch, Josef von Sternberg, Michael Curtiz, George Cukor, Howard Hawks, Leo McCarey, George Stevens, Gregory La Cava, Chaplin, Vidor and many others.

On the economic front, the impact of sound was titanic. According to the *Oxford History of World Cinema*, until the Depression caught up with the highly lucrative American motion picture industry in 1931, "The talkie boom was so strong, in fact, that Hollywood was touting itself as 'Depression-proof' in the wake of Wall Street's momentous collapse in October 1929, and the American movie industry enjoyed its best year ever in 1930 as theatre admissions, gross revenues, and studio profits reached record levels."

Unfortunately, the mostly silent film format of *The Artist* is more of a gimmick than anything else. The movie's narrative is painfully predictable and simplistic.

Jean Dujardin plays George Valentin, who, despite the name, has more in common with John Gilbert (American actor of the silent era who famously failed to make the transition to talking films, in large part as the result of studio connivance) and his tragic decline than Rudolf Valentino. George is a silent screen icon with a bigger-than-life ego, symbolized by the bigger-than-life portrait of himself he salutes every morning in the mansion he shares with his surly wife Doris (Penelope Ann Miller). He is chauffeured by his devotee, Clifton (James Cromwell—whose talented father, John, began directing sound films in Hollywood in 1930). Life is opulent and secure.

But his place in the Hollywood firmament is undermined as talking pictures take hold. Studio boss (John Goodman) is prepared to make the transition as an array of new stars are stampeding onto the sound stages. Foremost among them is Peppy Miller

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(Bérénice Béjo), once an extra in one of George's films and with whom he shared a more-than-mild flirtation. At warp speed, Peppy replaces George as box office gold, much to her own lovelorn chagrin.

Up to this point in *The Artist*, Valentin and his sidekick dog (who bears more than a passing resemblance to Asta of the *Thin Man* series) are fun attention retainers, while Peppy delightfully lives up to her name. But as George gets pushed out of his spot, telegraphed by the final image of his last film—a swashbuckling protagonist devoured by quicksand—the film's light touch disappears. Even George's own shadow gets disgusted with his irritating self-pity. The movie exhaustedly winds up, h[s]appy ending and all.

That the film is a lost opportunity makes itself felt in its visually lush and tightly constructed aesthetic. Much care has been given to the look of the film. But its originality and effort stop there. A good deal of *The Artist*'s playbook has been lifted from other works. For example, Hazanavicius appropriates many minutes of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* score. This feels especially odd because Hitchcock's 1958 masterpiece has no relationship to silent cinema or the period in question.

A considerable percentage of the work's self-consciously cute moments are clichéd and timeworn, as if the filmmakers were banking on an audience unfamiliar with the originals. A good deal is thrown in (*Singin' in the Rain*, *A Star is Born*, etc.) to relatively little effect. The film does feature an adorable canine, and Hazanavicius has organized several charming stunts, such as the one where George's shadow chides him and an early segment, in which Peppy threads her arm into George's empty suit jacket, creating the illusion of being made love to by her idol. And the hardworking Dujardin and Béjo have impeccable timing and expressive physical movement.

However, unlike the antics of a Chaplin or a Buster Keaton, Hazanavicius's bits have *relatively little*, social or psychological, *behind them*. They remain at the level of formal tour de force, and once they conclude, tedium tends to set in.

In short, talent and laziness coexist in *The Artist*, with the latter somewhat masked by significant production values.

Why make an audacious effort so undemanding and shallow? Director Hazanavicius states in the movie's production notes: "At the very beginning, I watched [silent] movies from all over: America, Germany, Russia, France, England. I observed that as soon as the story starts to grow unclear, too many new developments, too many characters, you lose interest."

Considering the filmmaker is speaking about the middle to end of the 1920s, when in certain aspects cinema reached a hitherto unsurpassed artistic peak, as Vidor's comment indicates, these are revealing words.

In the face of contemporary economic and social realities, *The Artist* fails to make anything but a fleeting reference to the Great Depression. It certainly does not satirize or ironize over the lives of the idle rich, as much of cinema of that era did, particularly in comedic form.

Films such as Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) spoke to the concerns of millions of people over unemployment, poverty and hunger and the harsh demands of capitalist industry. Many other movies and performers displayed a socially subversive style, obliquely or otherwise.

The Artist, however, suggests that a film need only be a pleasant and amusing novelty. It is understandable why audiences would be drawn to a work devoid of the prevailing cheap violence and technical bombast. But to overpraise Hazanavicius's film would be to thank heaven for awfully small mercies.

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