

EDITORIAL

Silents Are Golden

“Oscar Picture Clears in a Nostalgic Light,” proclaimed *The New York Times* after Michel Hazanavicius’s *The Artist* and Martin Scorsese’s *Hugo* walked away with the majority of Academy Award nominations. The implication seemed to be that two popular, feel-good movies have helped to ignite a resurgence of interest in silent cinema. While this newfound appreciation of movies made before the dawn of sound is an encouraging trend, the awareness of long-entrenched cultural prejudices against silent cinema cannot help but make most seasoned cinephiles only cautiously optimistic. For example, the film historian Kevin Brownlow asserts in *The Parade’s Gone By*, his classic survey of the early years of cinema, that the golden era of silent film spanned from 1916 to 1928. On the other hand, he also acknowledges, in a 2010 interview, that, when trying to find a publisher for the book, many well-meaning individuals betrayed an astounding ignorance of the period’s cinematic riches: the typical editor’s view of early cinema could be summed up by dismissals such as, “Oh, you don’t want to bother about those! They were ludicrously acted, badly photographed, speeded up...”

Anyone who has ever tried teaching silent films to introductory film students—or even dared to suggest seeing a presound film to a friend—is aware that this sort of philistinism is not uncommon. On the other hand, the late film theorist Rudolf Arnheim believed that silent film possessed an “artistic purity” that rarely resurfaced after the invention of talkies. Even if that view seems extreme to most contemporary viewers and critics, it can still serve as a useful corrective to the general public’s historical amnesia concerning the initial decades of film history.

In recent years, much of the spadework needed for reacquainting the world at large with early twentieth-century film has been done by specialized film festivals, particularly Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (The Days of the Silent Cinema), held annually in Pordenone, Italy, and Bologna’s Il Cinema Ritrovato (Cinema Rediscovered), a festival devoted to classic cinema that unearths many unknown treasures from both the silent and sound periods (this issue features an interview with the festival’s director, Peter von Bagh). Just glancing at highlights of the upcoming 2012 editions of these events is enough to whet the appetite of the most jaded film buff. In October, for example, Pordenone will present an exciting series entitled “The Dickens Bicentenary,” devoted to a selection of the approximately one hundred silent films adapted from the work of Charles Dickens. In June, Bologna will feature a sampling of “newly restored and recently discovered” films by Lois Weber, a trail-blazing silent director known for her films exploring topics that reflected a prescient concern with the status of

women in a male-dominated society. For those without the resources or time to travel to Italian film festivals, the DVD label Flicker Alley in recent years has made a significant contribution by making a wide variety of silent films—from the work of Georges Méliès and Charlie Chaplin to landmarks of early Soviet cinema—available to the home viewer.

In this issue of *Cineaste*, James L. Neibaur reports on the upcoming California screening of Kevin Brownlow and Patrick Stanbury’s restoration of *Napoleon*, Abel Gance’s 1927 epic, one of the most ambitious projects in the history of cinematic archival research. Even historians who consider Gance’s film more of a gargantuan folly than an immortal masterpiece concede that its technical innovations were of paramount importance. Anyone familiar with Gance’s employment of multiple screens at the end of *Napoleon*, a process he christened Polyvision, cannot smugly dismiss the silent era as technologically or aesthetically primitive.

Despite the allure of special presentations in Italy and California, most casual filmgoers are likely, for better or worse, to encounter the magic of the silent screen through viewings of *The Artist* (its director, Michel Hazanavicius, is interviewed in this issue) and *Hugo*, the widely distributed Oscar contenders. Although the critical reception of both films has been largely rapturous, there have been, as is always the case with popular movies, a few nay-sayers. Most critics have hailed *The Artist* as “charming” and “delightful”; a vocal minority has spurned this tribute to Hollywood during the transition to sound as cloyingly cute. Even though a large critical contingent has celebrated *Hugo* as a film that brilliantly deploys 3-D to depict the allure of Méliès’s inventive fantasy films (as well as embedding a not-so-covert plea for the importance of film restoration in the body of the narrative), some critics maintain that it’s a long slog until we arrive at the re-creation of the French silent pioneer’s filmmaking process toward the end of the film.

In the final analysis, these quibbles are less important than the realization that a mass audience might be tempted to discover the films of Douglas Fairbanks on DVD after seeing *The Artist* or be inspired to construct links between Méliès’ fantasy and science-fiction films and contemporary equivalents after renting *A Trip to the Moon* on Netflix. Others might be encouraged in a reconsideration of the era by Johnny Depp’s comments in this issue on his high regard for the performances of such legendary silent-screen performers as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Lon Chaney, Sr.)

On another level, film magazines such as *Cineaste*, along with the dwindling number of repertory cinemas, museums, and cinematheques that still screen classic films, can help to ensure that the current nostalgia for the birth of cinema is not merely a passing fad.—**The Editors**

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