

**The Re-emergence of the Silent Film in Contemporary  
Cinema and Culture**

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**Abstract**

This essay looks at the ways in which silent film conventions have been re-employed in modern movies. It is particularly concerned with the ways in which directors manipulate the audience's preconceived ideas as to what to expect from silent films. This point is exemplified through a case-study of Martin Scorsese's film *Hugo* (2011).

**Keywords**

Silent film, Oscars, Martin Scorsese, Méliès, *Hugo*

The past few years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in films of the pre-sound era. Movies like Martin Scorsese's Oscar-winning *Hugo* and Michel Hazanavicius's Best Picture-winner *The Artist*, both released in 2011, testify to a reawakening interest in so-called "silent" films of the early twentieth century. The term "silent," a misnomer since live music and occasionally speaking actors or narrators accompanied those works when originally presented, reveals the modern audience's overall unfamiliarity with the genre. Of course, institutions around the world like New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Bologna's *Fondazione Cineteca*, and Turin's *Museo Nazionale del Cinema* have long screened early films. Today, however, audiences can regularly enjoy those works in more and more venues, such as L.A.'s Silent Movie Theatre, Palo Alto's Stanford Theatre, and Fremont Niles Essanay's [sic] Silent Film Museum, just to mention a few in California. Interest in early cinema has spread beyond the movies themselves, however. For its 2014 season, the Los Angeles Opera presented a Buster Keaton-themed production of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Magic Flute* by Berlin's *Komische Oper*. In

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London, David Watts's on-stage "Silent Movie Experience" explores the mysteries of early cinema comedy, and BBC One produced a silent sit-com entitled *Pompidou* starring Matt Lucas for the 2014-5 season ("BBC One"). *Hugo*, directed by Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*), with its focus on the early French filmmaker George Méliès, contributed to this newfound fascination with silent film.

*Hugo* tells the story of a young boy, Hugo Cabret (Asa Butterfield), who spends time with his father fixing clocks and repairing a broken automaton. Hugo cherishes the notebook left behind after his father's death and continues to repair the mechanical man, using parts stolen from the toy shop of George Méliès (Ben Kingsley). Caught stealing, Méliès takes the notebook and threatens to burn it. Hugo befriends Méliès young niece, Isabelle (Chloë Grace Moretz), asking her help in retrieving the book. She calls him a "reprobate," and their vocabularies improve as their relationship deepens, a friendship based on much on literature as cinema. Isabella enables Hugo's reading by introducing him to a local bookseller a local bookseller, and Hugo sneaks Isabella into a silent theatre to see her first film. He eventually repairs the automaton, and together, the youngsters activate the mechanical man, which draws a signed image from Méliès most famous film, the 1902 *Trip to the Moon*. They recognize Isabelle's uncle as the filmmaker George Méliès, and the film ends with him acknowledged by a film association and Hugo, adopted by George, gaining a new family.

*Hugo* opens with metallic sounds as the gears of a clock dissolve into the spokes of traffic on Paris's boulevards centered on the Arc de Triomphe, visually delineating the film's connections between the social and the technological. The camera moves from a panoramic winter scene to a long tracking shot across the Paris skyline to the Gare Montparnasse train station. Inside, the camera stops on the face of the clock whose gears opened the sequence and reveals the face of a boy – Hugo – peering out from behind the numbers. This stunning opening, like so many of the film's visual compositions, comes directly from the illustrations of the book it adapted, Brian Selznick's 2008 Caldecott-winning book, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*.

Instead of the customary conflict between nature and culture, *Hugo* transvalues technology; here the mechanical enhances, rather than detracts from, the characters' humanity. Since Hugo's loving father teaches him

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how to repair the automaton, machines, instead of causing alienation, actually bring parent and child together. Following his father's death, the mechanical man and the memories he stirs reestablish the human bond between Hugo and his parent, in time allowing Hugo and his adopted father Méliès to create a similar bond. In an episode of adolescent *angst*, Hugo ponders his place in the world and takes solace in realizing that, if machines have no extra parts, and the universe functions as a grand Cartesian machine, then each person within it – including himself – must have purposes essential to the universe's proper functioning.

When the camera focuses on gears and pistons, it often mimics the movements of those engine parts, moving at right angles to the frame. In this way, clockworks form the film's overriding visual and thematic motif, playing a role even in cultivating domestic space in a narrative with women largely absent. If gears turning inside clocks bring people together, so can sprockets inside film projectors. The film extends the significance of the mechanical through references to similar images from classic films. Scenes of the boy inside the station architecture and clock tower call to mind Harold Lloyd's encounter with a clock while scaling a downtown Los Angeles department store building in *Safety Last* (1923), the industrial workers in Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, and Charlie Chaplin's adventures trapped in a factory's giant gears in *Modern Times* (1936).

The screenplay by John Logan differs in unfortunate ways from Selznick's novel, largely by expanding the role of the Station Inspector (Sacha Baron Cohen), painting him alternately as sentimental lover and cartoon villain, making slapstick jokes at the expense of his war injury. The Inspector, an orphan himself, takes pleasure in consigning orphans to the terrible asylums where he grew up. Love changes him in the end, but overall his characterization proves too broad and distracts from the film's tone, which attempts to blend the serious with the comedic, the nostalgic with the heart-warming.

In one scene, the Station Inspector chases Hugo through a mass of people, among them James Joyce (Robert Gill) and Salvador Dali (Ben Addis), until finally crashing through a band led by Django Reinhardt (Emil Lager). The historical cameos flash by too quickly, but set the period nicely; still, since historical figures do not form a continuing motif throughout the film, they fail to contribute to its overall theme. True, the film turns

on the historical character of Méliès, but more must link the almost-too-quick-to-notice appearances of Dali, Joyce, and Reinhardt early in the film and the silent filmmaker at the end. Django reappears for an instant in a party scene, but the film does not use historical figures frequently enough to establish an effective pattern. A famous historical image does appear during Hugo's dream in which a locomotive engine crashes through the train station wall and hangs off the side of the building, a real accident captured in the 1895 photograph "Train Wreck at Gar Montparnasse."

*Hugo* won Oscars for Cinematography, Sound Editing, and Sound Mixing. In addition, the Academy gave awards for the Production Design by Dante Ferretti and the Art Direction supervised by David Warren. Their work resulted in a visually stunning film, with sequences in the station calling to mind William Powell Frith's 1862 painting *The Railway Station*, as well as incorporating many cinema images. Those images serve more than a narrative purpose, however. Scorsese, remarried in 1999 and again a father, joked that he made *Hugo* because he wanted to create something different from his usual mature material that children could see (Scorsese, LucasFilm). Still, he has a long history of activism in film preservation, and *Hugo*'s visual references and clips contribute to the film's didactic effect of introducing – or re-introducing – viewers to the joys of early cinema.

Today's audiences generally remain unfamiliar with silent films and few who have seen them experienced these works projected on large screens with live music, as original audiences did. Watching these movies on television or computer screens all but eliminates the power of the films' carefully composed images captured with extraordinarily rich and detailed photography. Scorsese, working from Selznick's novel, structured the story of the orphan Hugo and filmmaker Méliès by incorporating clips of many silent films along the way. This approach enables *Hugo*, with its "films within a film" structure, to show today's audiences – some for the first time – high-quality, beautifully orchestrated clips from many early films. *Hugo* includes segments of and references to many pre-sound films, including two Lumière shorts, *Exiting the Factory*, an 1895 clip showing workers leaving a plant, and 1897's *The Arrival of the Train*, which legend has it sent audiences scurrying as the on-screen train sped toward them. Incorporating these film clips approximates for twenty-first century viewers an authentic early film experience and shows to audiences these pre-sound films full size and in their original colors, whose tinted portions Scorsese

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preserved. *Hugo*, despite the tonal flaws of its comic interludes, offers an entertaining lesson in the art and delights of pre-sound cinema.

How do today's audiences, accustomed to sophisticated special effects and computer generated imagery, respond to images in silent films? According to University of Southern California researcher Kaspar Meyer, brain scans indicate that viewers of silent films add sound based on memories while watching, thus making engagement with non-sound films more active and intense than with sound cinema ("24 Frames"). As for special effects, early filmmakers like Méliès developed and worked with in-camera "tricks" like rolling back and re-exposing undeveloped film, and post-production matte techniques similar to "blue screen," which facilitates the superimposition of two scenes to create a single visual. Still, many of Méliès greatest film effects – visual "tricks" – reflect his experiences as a magician. These films present real images organized in fantastic ways.

In the most appealing episodes of *Hugo*, Scorsese recreates Méliès studio, mostly glass to admit sunlight, and demonstrates how camera and costumes, set design and props contributed to his masterpieces. When a devil disappears, a reference to F.W. Murnau's 1926's *Faust*, the actor – a real person in costume – disappears down into a trap door, a variant of a theatrical stage effect. The film's "trick" involves no postproduction; audiences see the actor's actual image. Then, with a puff of smoke, he's gone! Later, Scorsese shows how Méliès shot through a fish tank to create the illusion of an undersea world in his 1904 *Voyage across the Impossible*. The scenes explain the creation of this illusion in which the audience sees real water, fish, and actors together in the same moment, not photographed or created separately and fused together by the film lab. The end result: a visceral visual experience, reality, yes, but as never seen before in the everyday real world.

While stratospheric box office returns prove that viewers greatly enjoy computer generated imagery, the visual quality of these early film "real" tricks also pleases the eye, though in different ways. While CGI creates for viewers – with extreme realism – impossible settings, the pleasure experienced by early cinema more closely resembles that of music hall magic acts. Traditional magicians like Méliès used real people and props in front of live audiences to manipulate reality and to trick his paying customers. The special effects in many of Méliès films work in the

same way, presenting to audiences reality manipulated in ways that fool the eye, rather than technologically altered film. The pleasure they give resembles a live magic show, not better or worse than, but different from a CGI extravaganza.

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