The silent treatment: an interview with Michel Hazanavicius
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The story of cinema has always been one of technological progress. No sooner had directors such as F. W. Murnau, Carl Dreyer, and Josef von Sternberg perfected the silent picture than the integration of sound-on-film technology altered their cinematic trajectories with the talkies. Just at the height of film noir's brilliant grayscale palette of deep blacks and contrasting whites, color film became dominant. Now, here we are at what seems to be the pinnacle of cinematic technology, with even art-house directors like Werner Herzog and Wire Wenders venturing into 3-D, and along comes French director Michel Hazanavicius with The Artist, a black-and-white film, shot in the Academy 1.33:1 aspect ratio, and startlingly silent.

The result of these technological choices is an unusual moviegoing experience that has netted the film, its director, and the cast a slew of award nominations and wins from a wide range of critics, festivals, and organizations, including the Hollywood Foreign Press Association and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Sitting in a modern movie theater and watching a silent film (or nearly silent, since The Artist does feature a musical score) that adheres to not just the technological but also the formal and social conventions of the late 1920s and early 1930s, is an experience most people have never had. The implications of such a movie are at the very least intriguing, including its potential to generate a renewed interest in repertory cinema.

Hazanavicius moved from French television and advertising to feature filmmaking in the late 1990s, with his first major release, OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies, a spy-film spoof adapted from Jean Bruce's OSS 117 series of novels, opening in 2006. That film and its followup, OSS 117: Lost in Rio, simultaneously pay homage to spy films of an older era, in particular the James Bond franchise, and critique the colonialist attitudes that typify them. But The Artist is a far more radical departure from contemporary filmmaking precisely because it isn't just a pastiche; it doesn't just parody the era, it mimicks, adapts, and reenvisions it.

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The film stars Jean Dujardin (who also starred in the OSS films) as George Valentin, a successful silent-film star who finds himself out of step with his industry when he rejects the new talkies as a passing fad. Paralleling Valentin's career descent is the rise of ingenue Peppy Miller (Berenice Bejo), who moves from extra to superstar by embracing the new sound era.

While The Artist is most often spoken about in terms of its reproduction of that "coming of sound" era in which the story takes place (1927-1932), in actuality the film has more in common with 1930s filmmaking. There is a charming cleverness to it, as well as an air of glamour that one finds more readily in the 1930s. Indeed, in our interview, Hazanavicius admits he even tried to preserve "the spirit of the Hays Code," which went into effect in 1930, rather than making a pre-Code film of the 1920s. (For example, the lead characters, though clearly in love, never kiss.)

Although snubbed by the Oscars, Uggie, a Jack Russell Terrier, won the 2011 Palm Dog Award for Best Canine Performance in *The Artist.*

The Artist is in some respects a film that could have been made in the late 1930s, with one foot in the image-centric silent past and the other taking full advantage of advances in storytelling that came with the sound era. Hazanavicius essentially gives us his vision of where silent cinema might have ended up--its unrealized potential--had the talkies come later.

What's striking about the film, beyond the novelty of its "silence," is its cinematic strategy, rich in visual storytelling. Stairways, mirrors, windows, doorways--every image has a symbolic meaning embedded in it. In one scene, Valentin, having lost his fame and financial success, looks in a shop window, admiring a tuxedo jacket. His reflection in the window fits into the shirt and tie, revealing the character's desires without stating it in words. In the opening scene of the film, Valentin appears in a film within the film, with a sci-fi-type mechanism covering his head and ears, being tortured with electric shocks. The dialogue card has Valentin's character say, "I won't talk ... I won't say a word," serving both the plot of the film within the film and the theme of the film we are watching. This kind of classical metaphoric imagery requires greater commitment to a purely cinematic language, one clearly distinct from the language of theater or of the books from which so many films are adapted.

While the plot has echoes of Singin' in the Rain or even Sunset Boulevard, here we have something quite different. In those earlier films about the silent era, the stories are told within a contemporary filmmaking style that keeps us in the position of a modern audience looking back on a bygone era with a mixture of nostalgia and arrogance at having surpassed it--at least from a technological standpoint. In The Artist, Hazanavicius's approach puts us in a slightly different position. Our preconceptions about movies quickly fall away and we begin to respond to this silent movie, accepting it as no great aberration from what we are used to.

So accustomed to the silence do we become that when Valentin has a nightmare in which everyday sounds are actually heard, we are absolutely shocked. The mere sound of a glass being placed on a table, the ambiant sound of a room, these become unwelcome interlopers, disrupting our cinematic fantasy. The audience actually jumps at the first sound, and then every sound after it increases in its horrifying inappropriateness. We wonder why it is necessary to hear a glass on the table. Then, as we realize it is a nightmare, we also realize that, throughout the first third of the film, we have not needed to hear anything beyond the wonderful score (by Ludovic Bource). In essence, the crassness of sound reveals itself the way it must have to Rene Clair, who criticized this very type of sound usage in his 1929 essay, "The Art of Sound."

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"We do not need to hear the sound of clapping if we can see the clapping hands," Clair wrote, as he mourned the loss of the silent cinema and decried the talkies for having "conquered the world of voices, but ... lost the world of dreams." With The Artist, Hazanavicius attempts to reclaim that world, if only for a brief moment.--Rebecca M. Alvin

Cineaste: I'm sure everybody's asked you this, but I'm curious why exactly you wanted to make a silent film. Was it for the technical challenge, or to pay homage to that era of filmmaking?

Michel Hazanavicius: Actually, the first attraction was for the format, not the story. The challenging aspects for me as a director were important and I was attracted by them. But also, as a moviegoer, I wanted to share that very specific experience of watching a silent movie. It's very special, very sensorial, to watch a silent movie; it doesn't work the same way that a normal talkie does. So I thought that, by making a modern silent movie, not screening Sunrise or another masterpiece from the silent era, this was something I could share and that people would appreciate. It's a fantasy for a lot of directors to make a silent movie because it's really the purest way to tell a story and it's specific to cinema. This is really what cinema is all about--telling a story with moving images.

Hollywood silent film star George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) encounters autograph seeker Peppy Miller (Bérénice Bejo), soon to become a successful performer herself, in this scene from Michel Hazanavicius's *The Artist*.

Cineaste: Although many people who study film are familiar with the silent era, and love those films, a mainstream audience may not be very familiar with silent cinema. Did you do anything to make things easier for them?

Hazanavicius: Yeah, sure. I had several options for the script but, whenever I discussed my idea of making a silent movie, people always asked me, "Why do you want to make a silent movie?" I realized that people needed a justification for such a radical decision. That's why I decided to tell the story of a silent actor in the silent era, because it's easier to accept a silent movie if the subject is silent movies. If you tell the story of someone today who has nothing to do with silence, people will question themselves all during the movie, "Why is it silent?"

Cineaste: Even though it's "silent," sound conceptually is very important in the film and there are sequences that have sound, so how did you approach the sound design for your film?

Hazanavicius: Well, what makes the big difference here is that this movie knows it's silent. I know I'm making a silent movie when I could technically do something else. The audience knows it. That's a big difference because, during the Twenties, directors didn't make "silent movies," they made movies. They didn't have the option of sound. Sound is the antagonist in this movie, and I had to show it, so that's why there's that nightmare sequence. That sequence is very shocking for people, even though it's such a small thing, something so normal. I put the sound back in the movie in the last sequence, when he says, "With pleasure," because finally, with his feet, with his dancing, he has defeated his antagonist. I liked the idea of that last shot: it is exactly as described in the script. It's not a speech, just the normality of a set, and ending a silent film with the word "action."

Cineaste: When the "talkies" arrived, there were those who were very critical, who felt sound was a negative development, stunting the creative potential of the cinema. What do you think about that?

Hazanavicius: I think if only the talkies could have come about ten years after they did, that would have been great, because the last four years of the silent era produced a lot of really beautiful movies. If we had just had ten more years of silent cinema, we would have some more great masterpieces today, but we don't have them because the talkies arrived. Some directors became a bit lazy about creating images and changed the way they worked* They changed the writing. I think it's good to have talkies. I'm very happy to have dialogue in movies, but something has been lost, and the utopia of using a universal language has been lost, as well. In a sense, I tried to make a movie that silent filmmakers might have made. I mean, it's not exactly that, because I had the benefit of eighty years of increased sophistication of the narrative.

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Cineaste: Music also plays a big role in your film. Instead of using only a piano, however, you chose to use new music as well as music from different eras, like Bernard Hermann's love theme .from Vertigo. What was behind that decision?

Depressed about his fading career, Valentin (Jean Dujardin) spends time at home screening his previous films in this scene from Michel Hazanavicius's *The Artist*.

Hazanavicius: During that period--except for the Charlie Chaplin movies and Murnau's Tabu, because that film was made when sound came in, so Murnau really worked on the soundtrack-there was no music written for the movies themselves. When we see them now, I don't think the music is very good--it just helps to erase the reality of the theater. The way I wanted to use music was to make it much more modern, to emotionally complement the movie. Even when you hear the music for Chaplin's films, the themes are good, but it's not modern. You have perhaps four or five tracks, and they're always the same, a fox trot more or less, but it doesn't address every nuance and variation of the script. It's like wallpaper. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be more precise.

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Cineaste: Writing for a silent film is different than for a modern film in that you cannot get too complicated with the storyline.

Although her own career in the early years of the sound era is on the rise, Peppy Miller (Bérénice Bejo) is concerned about her former costar, George Valentin, in *The Artist*.

Hazanavicius: Yeah, exactly.

Cineaste: And yet, today's audiences expect a certain complexity to film narratives* How did you strike that balance?

Hazanavicius: Well, first of all, I accepted that I had to write a simple story. I didn't try to be too complex or too complicated, but I had to find a balance, because if you look at even Sunrise, which is really a masterpiece, the story itself is very simple. But even if it's a simple story, you have to create some moments where people can experience emotions and pleasure, and to incorporate everything. The confusion, I think, is that even if our story is simple, the script is not simple. The script is actually very complex because it works with images. I tried to be a bit more complex than the simple stories of that era, but I didn't try to be too complex, because at a certain point you need dialogue. I didn't want to be complex just to be complex--that was not the purpose of the movie. I wanted to stay simple, and yet I wanted to respect the movies I was referring to, so I stayed within that kind of framework--a nice story, a happy ending.

Cineaste: What about directing the actors? It was a somewhat different style of acting in the silent era.

Hazanavicius: Not so much, no. People think it was a different style of acting in that era, but I think the acting was different not because of the silent format but because of the period* They were acting like this in the Twenties, but they were acting more or less like this in the early Thirties and the movies were talkies. In each era, the actors change. When we look at Iames Dean now, his codes of acting are very old and that was in the Fifties. So I didn't ask the actors to ape the acting style of the Twenties* I asked them to be very natural, except when they're making the movies within the movie. Then they're doing much more caricature acting. The most challenging thing, when I wrote the script, was to be sure what I asked of the actors was doable without mime.

Our idea of acting is extremely influenced, I think, by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. They were actors, but, before being actors, they were clowns. They were wonderful clowns, but it's not exactly the same thing, because during the same period you had some beautiful movies, like King Vidor's The Crowd, which is just a normal story. It's very modern, but the actors are not clowns, and the way they act is very natural. So, apart from the very difficult tap-dancing scenes, I tried to write a story without too many specific things for the actors. I also helped them by shooting the movie at twenty-two frames per second, so the higher speed would give their actions the flavor of the Twenties. I only asked them to do their job, which is to embody the character, inhabit the character, and respect the situation, which is what they usually do.

Cineaste: The film looks very much like a silent film from the late Twenties, early Thirties. Aside from shooting at twenty-two frames per second, in terms of cinematography what other things did you have to do to get that look?

Hazanavicius: A lot of things. It would take two hours to tell you. [Laughs] It's not too technical; it's in the conception. You conceive things respecting the era--that's how I try to work. Usually, when you make a period movie, people re-create what they are shooting, but they don't re-create the way they shoot, the way they conceive the shooting, but that's what I tried to do. I tried to tell the story with very specific things, like the stairs, for example, which become a motif in the movie. The story is about this man going down and this woman going up, so he spends all the movie on staircases, going downstairs, and at one point they cross on the stairs, because that's the point in the script when they really cross--she's going up and he's going down. It's a very period way to conceive things and that helps create the texture of the movie. Filming in black and white, I tried to make a game with shadows, with mirrors, with his representation in photos, paintings, and posters that's very period. There's also a game with the contrast between being alone and being with other people, and all these things help tell the story in a very period way.

Cineaste: Is there room today for a cinema of older techniques, such as silent films, or is it really something to do just once?

Hazanavicius: I don't know, actually. I'm not sure I will do another one like this soon. I really enjoyed it, but I don't want to make it like a trick or a gimmick. If I have a good story, and if I think there's another good movie like this to make, I would do it, but I'm not sure. It won't be the next one, anyway. I don't want to be pretentious, but if this film can inspire other directors to make a black-and-white movie, for example, or if it can help them to be flee, that would be great. I'm not sure there will be another silent movie soon, but who knows?

The Artist is distributed by the Weinstein Company, www.weinsteinco.com.

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