

Eden Court Cinema
Wednesday, 25
February 2015 at
7.15pm

France/Belgium,
B&W, 100 mins

Director:
Michel Hazanavicius

Cast:
Jean Dujardin,
B erence Bejo and
James Cromwell



The Artist

By Georgina Coburn

The first time I saw *The Artist* it instantly became one of my favourite films. I've watched it many times since both in the cinema and on DVD and it never fails to lift my spirits.

I have always believed that when an artist of any discipline is fully invested in their work, the audience will feel that energy and connect with it. In the Visual Arts this communication is predominantly silent and although mainstream cinema makes us forget, telling the audience the story through dialogue, Film is at its heart a visual medium. Its power lies in the audience's felt

sense of the unspoken narrative within the frame. All great Artists/ Directors regardless of the age understand this as an intuitive part of their creative vision. Perhaps what struck audiences and critics between the eyes with *The Artist* on its release was a language or visual literacy we intuitively know as human beings, but that mainstream TV, Advertising,

Gaming and Studio Film product largely fail to awaken within us. There is a division in Cinema, mostly in the heads of film financiers, producers and studios, between Mainstream Film and Art House; a belief that you either have to make something "entertaining" for the masses, appealing to the lowest common denominator in order to generate as much profit as possible, or something "intellectual" and aesthetically driven that relatively few people will see and even fewer will appreciate. *The Artist* explodes this myth in its making and its global reception by both audiences and critics.

The success of *The Artist* doesn't just lie in over 150 international film awards it has won, including those at Cannes, the Golden Globes, BAFTAS and Academy Awards, or in its box office takings. Almost single handed it has been responsible for a resurgence of public interest in Silent Film. Following its award season success in 2012 LOVEFILM, Europe's largest subscription service, streaming films over the internet and sending DVDs by post, showed that "viewing of the 66 films in its Silent Film Collection significantly increased with as much as a 300 percent increase on some individual titles. Of the ten movies in LOVEFILM's collection that enjoyed the highest growth, four starred Buster Keaton - one of the greatest silent movie actor-directors of all time." From Roaring Twenties chic Fashion Design to DVD rentals and the growth of Silent Film screenings with live accompaniment, *The Artist* has raised awareness about a tradition of seeing the rise of digital technology had almost made us forget. It isn't about nostalgia for an era of cinema long past, but a living Art, tapping into a wellspring of pure visual storytelling.

The late great American Film Critic Roger Ebert wrote; "Is it possible to forget that 'The Artist' is a silent film in black and white, and simply focus on it as a movie? No? That's what people seem to zero in on. They

cannot imagine themselves seeing such a thing. I've seen 'The Artist' three times, and each time it was applauded, perhaps because the audience was surprised at itself for liking it so much..." [It speaks] "to all ages in a universal language. Silent films can weave a unique enchantment. During a good one, I fall into a reverie, an encompassing absorption that drops me out of time. I also love black and white, which some people assume they don't like. For me, it's more stylized and less realistic than color, more dreamlike, more concerned with essences than details."

That sense of "reverie" and "enchantment", the feeling of "dropping out of time" that Ebert describes is the essence of visual storytelling. We imaginatively project ourselves into the flickering illumination between each frame and *The Artist* consciously invokes that experience being shot at 22 frames per second. Before *The Artist* many considered Silent Film an obsolete Art Form; however the ability of filmmakers to silently communicate narrative is the foundation of cinema, originating in ancient shadow play on cave walls. Our need to make sense of ourselves and the world around us in visual terms is timelessly necessary and why we need Art in the first place. I first discovered the world of Silent Film in my childhood, pouring over stills in my Father's movie books. What immediately struck me, even aged 10, was the heightened clarity of black and white, the faces of actors and actresses alive with human expression, every tantalising image with a story to tell. That sense of wonder and immersion has never left me; it's what I hope for every time I go to the cinema and what I found in *The Artist* the first time I saw it.

It's true that it's a charming and highly entertaining film, a winning combination of Comedy, Drama, Romance and a performing dog, but more significant (for me at least) is

the Artist/Director's intention. Above all else it is a film crafted with love - a film it was thought nobody would want to watch. By the Director's own admission, *The Artist* is a love letter to his wife and leading lady Bérénice Bejo and to a Golden Age of Hollywood founded on European artistry. For me it is a film resoundingly about the Art of filmmaking and what it is to be an Artist. There is love invested in every frame, in the meticulous crafting and sensuous attention to detail of Director Michel Hazanavicius' entire creative team. It is seen and felt in the rich textures and tonal qualities of Mark Bridges' costume design, the emotional layers of Ludovic Bource's original musical score, in the extraordinary cinematography of Guillaume Schiffman and the beautifully nuanced performances of actors; Jean Dujardin, as suave, charismatic antihero George Valentin, Bérénice Bejo as the young, effervescent rising star Peppy Miller, James Cromwell as Valentin's loyal chauffeur Clifton and Penelope Ann Miller as Doris, Valentin's long suffering wife.

Modelled on Douglas Fairbanks, Dujardin's George Valentin is both masked, swashbuckling super star and fallible human being, marked by his own pride. Dujardin is an intensely physical actor who conveys all of George's confidence, bravado and vulnerabilities, like Keaton and Chaplin before him. One of the most beautiful and immersive sequences in the film is a series of five takes where we see Valentin fall in love with studio extra Miller, set to Bource's theme music "Peppy's Waltz". We see the character evolve from playing his dashing on-screen persona with intensely focused Silent eyebrow acting to the immense subtlety of expression which mirrors his awakening love for Miller. In cinematic and emotional terms it is a seamless fusion of historic and contemporary sensibilities.

In Dujardin's acting and Bource's music there is growing consciousness, bewilderment, intoxication and desire, evaporating quizzically in the moment. It's an emotionally complex scene, a far cry from a clichéd swooning embrace or consummate screen kiss, which in *The Artist* we never see. Its Romanticism lies in creative possibility, expressed rapturously in the final dance sequence as the real beginning of the relationship between Valentin and Miller. Although this scene signifies the end of Silent Film it remains optimistic in tone, recalling the joy and glamour of big 1930's Hollywood production dance numbers. The visual storytelling allows us to imagine a bright future as our two stars reinvent themselves; Valentin grounded in his craft from his days in Vaudeville and Miller the "It" girl of the moment with boundless energy, enthusiasm and good natured ambition. Miller's rise as America's Sweetheart, Valentin's fall and their reinvention are a wry comment on the nature of fame in a media-dominated age; "Out with the old, in with the new - make way for the young - that's life!" declares Miller in an interview with two eager newshounds.

The Artist isn't just a homage or clever imitation of Silent Era moviemaking but a film very much of Now in its reinvention of the genre. I love the way it visually tips its hat to all the artists of European origin who created Hollywood's Golden Age. Hazanavicius' vision is informed by his understanding of the visual grammar of Silent Directors like Lang, Murnau, Vidor and Chaplin, but he is also very much his own man. *The Artist* was conceived visually and storyboarded in intricate detail by its Director, who went to Art School before working in advertising and then progressing to feature film. When long-time collaborator Ludovic Bource came to compose the music, although he listened extensively to the



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work of film composers of the era; Steiner, Hermann, Korngold and Waxman, what he achieves isn't an imitation of those film composers, but a new voice grounded in their source material from Strauss to Stravinsky. The subtlety of the five take sequence is achieved because, as Hazanavicius has described in interview; "The script is the right hand and the music is the left." Interestingly there have been screenings all over the world of *The Artist* since its initial release accompanied by a full orchestra, an aspect of live performance that was common during the Silent Era. Wonderfully this is becoming more commonplace at contemporary screenings and festivals worldwide as audiences rediscover the excitement of pure visual storytelling with the immediacy of live music.

At the end of *The Artist* George Valentin reveals his French accent and it is a telling moment on multiple levels. The advent of the Talkies extinguished the careers of many actors from abroad and behind the scenes advancement was often hindered by being an immigrant. As a Hollywood outsider, Hazanavicius takes

the visual language of Tinseltown's Golden Age and entirely makes it his own. It is ironic that Hollywood has accepted the film with open arms, most notably at the Oscars, perhaps not realising that its own visual inheritance is actually European in origin and that Hazanavicius is in fact reclaiming his cultural roots. In *The Artist* he takes us back to the early years of Hollywood with its origins in European cinema as a baseline of authenticity. Hazanavicius isn't saluting the American Dream Factory in empty admiration but taking back language. He's a visually literate Director and the fact that the film's most dramatic moment is entirely silent speaks volumes.

The Artist is a film made with love, respect and recognition of the Silent Era and the artists who defined it. Rapid technological change is upon the industry as a whole and the digitalisation of cinema puts us in danger of forgetting the history and crafting of moving images to our collective detriment. *The Artist* asserts the importance of acknowledging that (in the words of the late Scottish composer Martyn Bennett) "to be pioneers we first have to acknowledge that we

are heirs". The visual grammar referenced by *The Artist* is also a rallying point for film conservation and restoration. Of the films that we know of produced during the Silent Era it is estimated that 80% have already been lost. *The Artist* is the story of the rise of young starlet Peppy Miller, the "fresh meat" of a new age of moviemaking and the fall of aging Silent star George Valentin, who cannot accept the technological change sweeping the industry he helped to create. It isn't hard to draw a parallel between this and the transition from film to digital in contemporary Cinema.

It is perhaps for this reason that for me the most moving image in the film is the moment when Valentin is standing in the ruins of his apartment; the windows are smashed and the room has been ravaged by fire, the only movement is a slight breeze coming through the window, the light muted but illuminating - it feels very much like a fragment of very early film. He is literally and metaphorically standing in the celluloid ashes of his career. Everything seems hopeless and the grain of the image suggests that like nitrate, the film could burst into flames any second and be extinguished - much like the life of the central character. In that moment the personal becomes the universal, the mark of a true Artist/Director and in a single frame it says everything about the vulnerability of film as a medium. The texture of the



image reminded me very much of the work of photographers like Steichen and Stieglitz who in the early days of photography were a bridge between painting and the new technology. At the time photography was thought to herald the death of painting. Similarly many have proclaimed the death of film in recent years. *The Artist* is a film about film making in a time of great change and upheaval - that is what elevates it above and beyond mere entertainment. It speaks powerfully and resoundingly of Now, of the choices made by both Artists and audiences and the timeless need to visually make sense of ourselves. In years to come it will become source material of our age.

What I love about this film is the breath-taking eloquence of its visual communication; the fanciful mime of the empty suit, the Surrealist cloud screen and dancing legs, the studio

staircase sequence where Schiffman balances tone, movement and architecture in a composition that feels like pure music, the shadows of rain that fall down George's face as he's inwardly crying, George's heightened dream sequence infiltrated by sound, his confrontation with his own shadow self and his world reduced to a pile of burning celluloid. I love *The Artist* for its intelligence, humour and unshamed Romance, for the exquisite camerawork and its impeccable performances. I love that it has a brain and a heart - it makes me think, laugh and cry. But above all it makes me value those Artists who are told their film is one that nobody will want to watch, but toil to make it anyway and change the way we see as a result. It's the reason I feel renewed and invigorated every time I watch it.

*Georgina Coburn
December 2014*



**Eden Court Cinema
Tuesday 10 March 2015
at 7.15pm**

**Our next screening...
Tim Burton's**

Ed Wood

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Director Tim Burton's loving homage to Movie Director, screenwriter, actor, and producer Edward Davis Wood, Jr. whose 1950's Horror, Western and Science Fiction films earned him a celebrated reputation as one of the worst but most exuberant directors of all time. Johnny Depp is perfectly cast as the ambitious Hollywood outsider alongside the wonderful Martin Landau as Bela Lugosi, a role that earned him an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor. A story of unbridled creativity shot in glorious black and white, Ed Wood is an upbeat comedy biopic made in the spirit of Wood's cult B Films, described by many as Tim Burton's best film.