

Graduate School Review Competition

The Artist

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Recent treatments of cinematic silence are becoming more reverential. Alongside deliberate efforts by producers like Guy Maddin and Philippe Garrel to remake silent films, Michaelangelo Frammartino's tracking of a solitary Italian goatherd, *Le Quattro Volte* (2011), is almost dialogue-free, forcing us to attend to sound in new ways. Such attention is salutary not least because talkies have habitually condescended to silence as an absence synonymous with retirement and failure. In *Singing in the Rain* (1952) silence masks the 'real' (as well as the really talented), as elocution lessons cannot save screen icon Lina Lamont from her inherent vulgarity. In *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) the young, insistent screenwriter Betty Buckley sums up an attitude to silent film, with tart dismissal: 'I just think a picture should *say* a little something'.

Michel Hazanavicius' redemptive comedy, 'The Artist' (2011), cherishes silence in ways that go beyond mere eulogy. It is 1927 in Hollywood, and the narcissistic yet charming George Valentin, (played by Jean DuGardin with swashbuckling, toothy echoes of Douglas Fairbanks and Clark Gable), is the idol of the still-silent motion pictures. The end of an era is marked by Valentin's collision with the aptly named Peppy Miller, a bright young fan, aspiring actress, and the courageous face (and voice) of the future. It is commonplace to talk about a director's 'love-affair with cinema', but here the application is literal, since Valentin and Miller's relationship represents a tender, hopeful regard of modern for early film. Memorable filchings include a breakfast-room montage in homage to *Citizen*

Kane (1941), the score to *Vertigo* (1958), and clips from Fairbanks' *Mask of Zorro* (1920).

More significantly, George and Peppy's love story benignly reworks the attachment between impoverished screenwriter Joe Gillis and ageing silent movie star Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. When George discovers a room full of his belongings in Peppy's mansion, his eyes fall on a kitsch statuette of the Three Wise Monkeys, whose covered mouths, eyes and ears portend the traumatic advent of sound. The moment recalls that of Gillis' first encounter with Desmond in her self-dedicated mausoleum in Beverly Hills as she arranges a funeral for her trained chimpanzee, furiously renouncing spoken cinema: 'There was a time in this business when they had the eyes of the whole wide world. But that wasn't good enough for them! [...] They had to have the ears of the world too. So they opened their big mouths and out came talk, talk, talk!'

George too has a faithful pet, a Jack Russell reminiscent of 'Nipper', and careful guardian of 'His Master's Voice', as speakers and gramophones loom menacingly in the foreground. But while Norma's ritual mourns the demise of motion pictures in which animals formed comedic duos, George's dog saves his life. And whereas Desmond's consuming ego and Gillis' mercenary ambitions are alike fed by a deleterious co-dependence, which ends in tragedy, 'The Artist' glimpses the possibility of a mutually supportive double-act.

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