

The Artist



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DIRECTED BY: Michel Hazanavicius

CERTIFICATE: PG

RUNNING TIME: 100 mins

COUNTRY: France/Belgium

YEAR: 2011

KEYWORDS: silent film, black and white film, parody and pastiche, awards

SUITABLE FOR: 14–19 media/film studies

SYNOPSIS

In late 1920s Hollywood, George Valentin is the world's biggest silent movie star. His dashing good looks, wit and screen presence ensure his films are huge hits. However, his screen persona masks his dissatisfaction with life – George is trapped in a loveless marriage and such a determined perfectionist that his arrogance can drive away those closest to him. But the arrival of sound in cinema, which George is reluctant to embrace, and beautiful rising star Peppy Miller, who George is desperate to embrace, send him spiralling into ruin and obscurity. George must face up to new possibilities in cinema and in his own life if he is going to return from the depths of despair.

BEFORE SEEING THE FILM

PARODY AND PASTICHE

Michel Hazanavicius was known before *The Artist* as the creator of the OSS 117 films, a series of French spy movies that parodied James Bond films. The protagonist of OSS 117 (played by *The Artist's* Jean Dujardin) was suave and overly confident (much like Austin Powers) yet inept and accident-prone (like Inspector Clouseau). Hazanavicius' subversion of genre codes and conventions is very much present in *The Artist*.

PARODY

Parodies take the codes and conventions of a particular genre and subvert them for comic effect. An audience's knowledge of these codes and conventions is essential for the subversion to work. For instance in *Airplane!* a parody of disaster movies, a stewardess demonstrates how to inflate a safety vest – when she activates it the vest is revealed to be a rubber duck. Examples of parodies (also known as spoofs) include *The Naked Gun*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Fatal Instinct*, *Epic Movie*, *Scary Movie* and *Vampires Suck*.

PASTICHE

Pastiche is less established as a genre because a pastiche is often more affectionate and considerate than a parody. While a parody of a horror (like *Scary Movie*) won't be scary, a pastiche of horror (like *Scream*) will be scary. It embraces, imitates and satirises codes and conventions rather than ridiculing them. A pastiche takes the codes and conventions of a genre and revises, updates or comments on them. A pastiche might be ironic and acknowledge its own genre conventions in a highly stylised way. The horror film *Scream* went a step further and had its characters discuss the 'rules' of the horror genre.

Let us look at the difference. Remember sometimes parody and pastiche can overlap.

Genre	Pastiche	Key moments	Parody	Key moments
WESTERNS	<i>The Quick and the Dead</i> (dir Sam Raimi)	Female protagonist. Extreme camera angles, crash zooms and music. Protagonist recalls her father's death at the hands of the antagonist, a reference to <i>Once Upon A Time In The West</i> .	<i>Blazing Saddles</i> (dir Mel Brooks)	A cowboy punches a horse. Count Basie's swing band is seen on screen performing the film's score. The deputy mayor repeatedly hits his head on a window. Racist cowboys rescue a handcart from sinking in quicksand rather than the slaves sinking in it.
HORROR	<i>Scream</i> (dir Wes Craven)	A girl answers questions about horror movies to save her life. Wes Craven, who also directed <i>Nightmare on Elm Street</i> , is spotted in a cameo wearing the striped jumper and fedora hat of his creation, Freddy Krueger. A movie geek describes the rules of horror movies to his friends whilst they all watch <i>Halloween</i> .	<i>Scary Movie</i> (dir Keenan Ivory Wayans)	A girl escaping from a masked killer runs half-naked in slow motion through some sprinklers. The masked killer smokes drugs and his masks change into a 'wasted' expression. A victim is repeatedly stabbed and takes ages to die in a comically exaggerated fashion.

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Add OSS 117 to this table. You may need to watch the trailer.

Can you find an example of parody and pastiche for the genres listed below:

- detective genre
- fantasy
- science fiction
- action adventure?

Do you think *The Artist* is a parody, or a pastiche?

AFTER VIEWING

Old or new?

When Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez wanted to make a homage to the low budget US exploitation movies of the 1970s in their 2007 film *Grindhouse*, they tried to make it appear as if it was photographed on cheap, scratchy film stock. But it was difficult to shake the feeling that this was a film that clearly had a large budget. After all...

- much of it was filmed digitally
- it had big stars (Bruce Willis, Kurt Russell etc.)
- it used CGI
- it featured 'missing reels', much like the original Grindhouse films, but it was unlikely they were misplaced or damaged as they might have been in the 1970s

So, is it possible to truly replicate the filming conditions and techniques of a particular era, or is part of the pleasure knowing that a film is referencing another era? *The Artist* imitates the style of early silent cinema in order to tell a story about silent cinema. But it clearly used modern filmmaking techniques that would have been impossible, anachronistic or completely revolutionary in the 1920s. Also, whilst reflecting on the transition of cinema from silent cinema, the film raises other issues that are important today in both cinema and wider society.



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Evidence	In what ways does <i>The Artist</i> look like an actual film from the 'silent' era?	How can you tell that <i>The Artist</i> was made in 2011?
camera work		
set design		
costume design		
sound		
dialogue/speech		
music/score		
actors used		
acting style		
editing		
film stock/cameras used		
special effects		
locations		
genre codes and conventions		
themes/subtext		
plot		
add more evidence of your own...		

How does *The Artist* comment on themes such as fame, celebrity and changes and development in technolog

THE DREAM SEQUENCE

One of the most startling sequences in *The Artist* is when George dreams he is in a world full of sound yet he is still silent.

- What does sound symbolise in this sequence?
- How are diegetic and non-diegetic sound used (or not used)?
- In the world of the film, George should be surrounded by sound anyway – it is only the way the film is presented to us that does not allow us to hear it. So why would George dreaming of sound be so troubling for him?
- How does the camerawork change in this scene?

ACADEMY AWARDS

The Artist's domination at many film award events meant that, like *The King's Speech* the year before, it was a huge talking point even with people who didn't normally go to the cinema. *The Artist* was the first non-US financed film ever to win the Best Picture Oscar as well as being the first ever virtually silent film to win.

In what ways is *The Artist* similar thematically and/or culturally to the following Oscar nominee's of the year?

- *Midnight In Paris*
- *Hugo*
- *The Adventures of Tintin*
- *My Week With Marilyn?*

Was *The Artist* expected to win in the categories it was nominated in? Who or what else was in contention?

Why do you think film award ceremonies are important to films and audiences?

ACTIVITIES

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT IS BLACK OR WHITE

Black and white is commonly used in recent films in flashbacks. Some filmmakers mix film stocks and colour and black and white to show different points of view, or just to unsettle the viewer. There are also many reasons why a contemporary film might be filmed entirely in black and white rather than colour.

Explore...

- Watch sequences from Oliver Stone's films *JFK*, *Natural Born Killers* and *U-Turn*. How and why is black and white used and what effect does it have?
- The action packed, blood-soaked ending of Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1* had to be converted to black and white. Why do you think this was?

Research...

The following films were photographed in black and white though they could easily have been made in colour. Using Internet research, find out what financial, aesthetic or thematic reasons the directors may have had for choosing this style:

- *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)
- *Young Frankenstein* (Mel Brooks, 1974)
- *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980)
- *Rumble Fish* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983)
- *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993)
- *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994)
- *The Good German* (Steven Soderbergh, 2006)

Create...

Make a trailer or a short sequence in the style of a particular era or genre, imitating camerawork, acting and editing styles. Will you choose to make a parody or pastiche? A fantastic example to look up is Todd Field's *Far From Heaven* (2002), which imitates the Technicolor Douglas Sirk melodramas of the 1950s whilst commenting on taboo subjects of the day such as interracial love affairs and homosexuality.

Written by Gareth C. Evans