***The Artist* Essay**

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Michel Hazanavicius' *The Artist* (2011) is a cinematic masterpiece that goes above and beyond the understanding of modern-day filmmaking. Set in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the film tells the story of George Valentin, a silent film star whose career crumbles as the rise of sound films threatens to destroy his craft. He bumps into Peppy Miller, an eager young woman ready to jump start her career as an actress. Because of Valentin’s help, Peppy kickstarts in the “talkie” era of sound films. Little did George know that this would be the decline of the silent era. Without the aid of dialogue, *The Artist* (2011) relies heavily on visual storytelling to convey its narrative. This essay will explore how the film's objects, motion, cinematography, production design, and symbolism contribute to its powerful and reminiscent storytelling.

One of the most evident aspects of *The Artist* (2011) is its use of objects to convey meaning. The character of George Valentin’s dog, Jack, serves as a symbol of love and loyalty to George; as well as a long-time companion. As Valentin’s career begins to decline, Jack is the only one who remains by his side offering wholehearted, complete love and support. Towards the end of the film we get a glimpse into what objects are most important to Valentin. In the midst of an apartment fire, George reaches for the one thing he wants to never let go of: film stock. Not only is he holding onto the film stock, but he is holding onto the memory of his relationship with Peppy. Making the film stock he reaches for special- holding a pensive, thoughtful memory; symbolizing his unconditional love for Peppy.

Motion plays a key role in *The Artist* (2011) as well. The film has a couple of energetic dance sequences, involving George Valentin and his love interest Peppy Miller. The two characters are full of life and emotion; a true testament of the power of movement to convey emotion. Reflected through these scenes is the lively atmosphere of the silent era. An example we see of Miller’s frantic emotion poured out through her motion is a scene towards the end of the film. Miller had gotten to her home only to realize Valentin was gone. In a panic, Peppy jumps into her car without waiting for her driver and is in pursuit to George’s apartment. She is seen recklessly driving, the motion of the car is all over the place conveying her deep worry, fear and love for Valentin. In contrast, the film also has some slower-paced scenes that display George’s regression into hardship. This is characterized by more subtle movements, placing emphasis on his emotional disturbance.

Cinematography is another important element in *The Artist*’s (2011) visual arena. The film takes on a unique black-and-white aesthetic that not only enhances the visual storytelling, but pays homage to the silent film era; marking the film with a classic, timeless feel. Hazanavicius does a remarkable job using high contrast lighting to dramatize the narrative and add emphasis on the emotions of the characters. Furthermore, I found the film’s camera movements and framing to guide my attention in any particular direction. Being sure that the totality of the narrative is conveyed to the audience.

Production design is also a vital aspect in *The Artist* (2011). In my opinion, the most vital aspect. Although the film was shot in 2011, the film’s sets and costumes were created carefully and diligently to imitate the late 1920s and early 1930s. Valentin's lavish mansion, expensive coats, Miller’s elegant outfits and motion picture sets all aid in immersing the audience into the world of the characters and enhance the storytelling. It is important that Hazanavicius uses these visual elements to give historical context and perspective to fully convey the story that he had in mind. He truly made his film look and feel as though it was really made in the 1920s. Every piece of the film was intricately crafted and put together to create a unique experience for the viewers.

Beyond these technical elements, *The Artist* (2011) also uses symbolism to convey deeper meanings. The film walks through the end of the silent era, transitioning into the “talkie” era of sound films. This can be seen as a metaphor of times that are constantly and inevitably changing knowing there is not a lot we can do but grow with it. The character of Peppy Miller, who rises to fame in the sound era, represents the future and the new possibilities that are emerging. On the other hand, George Valentin, who struggles to adapt to the changing times, represents the past and the nostalgia for an earlier era.

In my own short film, I aim to incorporate elements of *The Artist*’s (2011) visual storytelling. As an example, I plan on using objects to convey a deeper meaning in the overall story but specifically in the lives of my characters. I would also love to experiment and play with different lighting, camera angles, framing and composition to see how I can communicate different emotions with my audience. In addition, production design will be a very important piece of my film. I will pay close attention to how my sets and costumes are designed and how they contribute to the overall narrative.

By studying and analyzing *The Artist* (2011), I have gained a deeper appreciation for the power of visual storytelling. The film's innovative approach to filmmaking has inspired me to explore new ways of expressing myself through cinema. As I continue to develop my own filmmaking style, I will aim to create visually compelling and emotionally rich stories that resonate with audiences on a personal level. I believe that by focusing on the power of images and visual storytelling, I can create narratives that go far beyond language barriers and connect with viewers on a universal level. Additionally, *The Artist* (2011) has taught me the importance of using objects, motion, cinematography, production design, and symbolic imagery to convey complex emotions and ideas. I am excited to incorporate some of these techniques that I have learned into my own work to create films that are both visually appealing and emotionally impactful.

References:

(2011, November 23). *The Artist* (A.-S. Bion, Ed.) [Review of *The Artist*].

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