

Films of 1921



Rules: Given that we are going way back, there are hardly any rules. I might use US release date, I might use the international release date. It is worth point out that wide releases were not much of a thing, so even release dates can be tricky. However, some films that might be considered 1921, and could easily be lumped into 1920, might not have made the cut. I did seek out famous directors (Murnau and DeMille for example) as well famous stars (Valentino and Linder, for example). If anything, the existence of an easily accessible copy of the film was the deciding factor.

That being said, short films were not considered; even though in 1921 some of the greatest shorts ever were made (*The Goat*, for example). I will be defining a feature as a film longer than 40ish minutes.

Tier 7: D.W. Griffith Again Has a Film in the Bottom Tier

- 42. **Dream Street:** The first of two D.W. Griffith films on the list (as he made two films in 1921). The film is classic Griffith: preachy, black face, yellow face; rather cringe. Especially awful is that the girl picks the tall, aggressive, and handsome brother over the kind and meek brother. Conveniently forgetting that the handsome brother all-but assaulted her earlier in the film.
- 41. **The Conquering Power:** The first of a few Valentino films on the list. This is easily the worst of the bunch, with a plot that is both simple and veers into cartoon villainy; Valentino falls in love with his 'cousin' but his evil uncle is against the pairing and attempts to cheat everyone out of their money. Valentino can not save it.
- 40. **A Tale of Two Worlds:** As the title implies, the film is about both China and the United States (and Chinatown). The amount of yellow face is too much, and villain is a cartoon villain. Then of course all of the statements regarding the (wrongness) of interracial marriage.

Tier 6: Completely Mediocre

- 39. **The Love Light:** Starring Mary Pickford and directed by Frances Marion. Pickford is good, and plays an adult woman for once. Marion shot a few nice scenes, one of which could be seen as

inspiration for ‘I’ll never go hungry again’ from *Gone With The Wind*. Yet, the plot is bonkers. Events happen out of nowhere and they are almost always upping crazy (secret weddings, babynappings, etc) that make it difficult to take the film seriously.

38. **The Sheik:** One of the most popular films of the year, it is simple entertainment. The action sequences are inferior to a lot of the other films on the list. The sets and costumes are not as good as the other films on the list. It has its place in film history, but besides that it is nothing special. Valentino simply does not do it for me.
37. **The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse:** This is Rudolph Valentino’s break-out role. However the film is rather long (two hours and fifteen minutes), with a lot of unneeded background. The run time, most of which is spent on the build up to The Great War, is the films down fall. The film has epic qualities, but they do not come though as well as they can. Some of the plot points do not hold up. The film is well-known for a reason, but it is not an all-time great.
36. **Mrs. Dane’s Confession (Frau Dorothys Bekenntnis):** Directed by Michael Curtiz (*Casablanca*, this is an Austrian film with his then-wife, Lucy Doraine, in the starring role. Doraine is nothing special. The plot is nothing special; a woman is haunted by an ex-husband who had also conned her out of money during their marriage. Yet, during the film, there are multiple shots by Curtiz that are great; the viewer can tell Curtiz would go on to make great films.
35. **Labyrinth of Horror (Labyrinth des Grauens):** The second film by Michael Curtiz. It makes sense to rank these back-to-back as the flaws are the same; Lucy Doraine being unable to carry the film and a simply (yet still wacky) plot. Yet here the cinematic elements are much better. The film starts with a great miniature shot of two factories coming together (as the rival families are about to be united in marriage). The train sequence is top-notch (and could rank this film higher); they set a train on fire and filmed the controlled chaos. It is an amazing spectacle. With both of these films, Curtiz was bound to be a star director.
34. **Orphans of the Storm:** Directed by D.W. Griffith, the film has most of his hallmarks: good camera work, mismatched close-ups, Lillian Gish in peril, and dated political/social preaching. The camera moves a little bit, a nice change from the standard fare of the era. The end is simply a reworking of the end to *The Birth of a Nation*; and is less impressive from a *cinematic* view. The sword-fighting scenes are inferior to the other films on the list. Lillian Gish is rather good.
33. **Trailin’:** A standard western starring Tom Mix in the leading role. The plot is simultaneously basic (Mix seeks revenge for his fathers death) yet contains a needless opening sequence and plot twists. The reason to watch is Mix. Though the constant use of ‘tenderfoot’ in the inter-titles gets annoying.
32. **White Oak:** The first of three William S Hart films on the list. The reason it is ranked last as the plot is the most basic (and somehow also overly convoluted) with Hart’s character lacking in development. The villain is obviously a villain, who also semi-randomly pops up at opportune times in the film. The film simply tried to force a lot of connections in the plot, few of which work. Of particular annoyance is the film is ‘set’ in Missouri but is obviously shot in the California mountains.

Tier 5: Decent Films with Bright Spots

31. **Be My Wife:** The first of two Max Linder films on this list (but second in release order). The problems in this film are the same as the next film; the hour-long movie plays more of a collection of shorts and gags, rather than a coherent feature. Characters are not fleshed out, the transitions between gags are iffy, some gags are drawn-out longer than needed (particularly the scene in the dressmaker’s shop). All of that being said, Max Linder was a movie star for a reason and he is comedy is able to prop up the film.

30. **The Sea Lion:** Hobart Bosworth (*Below the Surface*) is rather good as an ornery ship captain, though you do wish his character had a little more to work with (other than be spurned years ago by his wife). The shots on the ship and of the ocean are nice. Though the plot becomes rather predictable half-way through the film.
29. **Little Lord Fauntleroy:** Mary Pickford does double duty here; playing both Mother Dearest and her son, the titular Lord Fauntleroy. Pick is good in both roles, but neither is especially great. The camera work that allowed Pickford to play both roles is good, much better than another film on the list where a star plays two roles. With a simple story, you wish there was more laughs or a less-predictable plot.
28. **The Nut:** The film is entirely held together by Douglas Fairbanks (*The Mark of Zorro*). Fairbanks was a superstar for a reason; great comedic moments and nice stunts. Yet in between the laughs and action is a flimsy plot that still fell short on laughs and action—even with a run time of a little over an hour.
27. **The Word Brand:** William S Hart plays three roles in the film, and because of early film techniques, it can't take full advantage of the premise (Hart plays both a cowboy and the governor of the territory). Hart is good and carries the film, whereas the plot is nothing special. At least it takes a little bit more advantage of Hart's usual morally-ambiguous characters (especially compared to a Tom Mix western).
26. **The Sky Pilot:** The first of two films directed by King Vidor on this list (both in ranking and by release date). Most of the better sequences in *The Sky Pilot* are improved upon in the next Vidor film. The brief use of a miniature set is nice, as well as the river scene (though the river scene pales in comparison to the iconic scene in *Way Down East*). The on-location shots in the Sierra mountains are nice. It showcases Vidor's potential as a director.
25. **Through the Back Door:** The film is pure Mary Pickford in her infamous 'little girl' role. She plays the part perfectly, including a hilarious scene where she cleans the floors by using the brushes as skates. The plot has enough to it and is filled with other comedic moments. This is a star vehicle for Pickford and she crushes it.
24. **The Affairs of Anatol:** Directed by Cecil B. DeMille, the film contains a lot of his trademarks: quality film-making and grandiose moralizing. The film is longer than it needs to be, clocking in a two hours; after the first hours the rest of the film is essentially repeating the plot of the first hour, but in new situations. The film should have made more use of Gloria Swanson as Anatol's wife, as Swanson is a great actress and the character is (mainly) hampered by 1920s morals, despite an effort to provide some ambiguity in the ending.

Tier 4: Solid Films with Various Ways to Improve

23. **The Ace of Hearts:** The film stars Lon Chaney, who is good, but not great; partially because the film has his character as one of two lover interests. No sensible would pick Chaney over the other option. Although the plot is rather fun; a secret society plots to kill a man who has become evil (the film leaves all politics aside; the audience is only told that He Who Has Lived Too Long is 'bad' and must go). There are multiple great shots; overheads, rain storms, moody shadows. Yet the flaw of the film is the instant change of mind after getting married; love changes your views on the world... overnight.
22. **Sappho:** Staring Pola Negri as the titular Sappho, she shines as a classic 20s vamp in this German production. Negri is the reason to watch, although the plot is decent; Sappho spurns a lover, who ends up in the asylum; Sappho then happens to fall in love with his brother. The car scene is good, but not super innovative.

21. **Four Around a Woman (Vier um die Frau):** Directed by Fritz Lang, the plot elements hint at his future films. There are elements of crime, mystery, and multiple identities. The film is not a classic by any means. Its strength lies in a solid plot, that involves multiple flashbacks. There are some cinematic moments, but not many. This film is viewed best as an early work by Lang, and a decent treat for his fans.
20. **Love Never Dies:** The second Vidor film from 1921. The plot is rather basic: man marries woman, and the father disproves so he takes the woman away. The best part of the film is the train wreck; cutting between a miniature set (of the train derailing on a bridge) to the devastation below (now life-sized set) is excellent. Another river scene is more complex than *The Sky Pilot*. Like the *The Sky Pilot*, the romance-driven plot is nothing special, but you see the talent of Vidor and Vidor's talent make both films worth watching if you enjoy quality film direction.
19. **Journey into the Night:** The earliest-known surviving film by F.W. Murnau. The print online is in iffy condition, hopefully the Murnau Society restores this film soon. The film does not have the cinematic qualities of later Murnau (including another film he made in 1921 on this list). The highlight is Conrad Veidt (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and *Casablanca*) in a supporting role as a blind artist.
18. **Johan:** Directed by Mauritz Stiller (*Erotikon*), the film is well-made, but the rapids sequence pales in comparison to a similar sequence in *Way Down East*. There is some character development, especially that of the wife (played by Jenny Hasselqvist). Yet, because the rapids sequence does not seem that entertaining the film is not as well held together as it could be.
17. **Enchantment:** Marion Davies is a delight in the leading role as a young, and untamed, flapper. She absolutely excels in the role and is quite the comedic actress. The plot is a roughly re-doing of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and also features a lengthy staging of *Sleeping Beauty*. The costumes and sets are nice, but the staging of a *Sleeping Beauty* diverts the film.

Tier 3: Worth Watching and Rather Good Films

16. **Forbidden Fruit:** Directed by Cecil B DeMille, the film is classic DeMille (I am going to regurgitate some of the review from *The Affairs of Anatol*): quality film-making and grandiose moralizing. The costumes are good, the Cinderella sequences are a delight. None of the actors are good enough to elevate the film (Agnes Ayres who starred opposite Valentino in *The Sheik* was the female lead). The supporting actors were enjoyable, particularly Theodore Roberts. Yet, despite how much DeMille tries to show a modern marriage, the film is still stuck with 1920s morals; yes Ayres' husband is bad but it is her duty to stay married! Though it should be mentioned that compared to the dated morals in a Griffith film, DeMille's are tolerable and make sense for the era. In fact, for each DeMille film, they could be ranked higher if the 1920s morals do not hamper your viewing.
15. **The Wild Cat (Die Bergkatze):** Directed and co-written by Ernst Lubitsch and starring Pola Negri, the film is surrealist humor. There is a plot, but the film does seem more like a loosely constructed set of surreal gags. The set design only adds the surrealness and when coupled with the eccentric framing of shots the film feels very odd. There could have been more laughs (and more character development). The film boils down to how much you think it worked, otherwise this could be a dull film
14. **Two Wise Wives:** Directed and co-written by Lois Weber, she delivers a solid film about marriage. A simple set-up: a husband thinks about the girl he didn't marry after being married for a few years. The shots are nothing special, and you do wish the cast was more talented. Yet, there is still good character development and that makes for an enjoyable film.

13. **Seven Years Bad Luck:** The second Max Linder film on the list. This film is funnier, and is held together better (albeit slightly). The best scene is the mirror sequence (it is not the first, but perhaps the best—possibly even better than the Marx Brothers' in *Duck Soup*). The sequences around the train stations are fun, so is the scene with the lioness. Yet, again, these feel weakly connected. Yet, again, Linder is great and raises the level of this film.
12. **The Whistle:** The final William S Hart film on the list, and it ranks the highest as it offers a better plot and takes full advantage of Hart's desire to play 'good' characters who do bad things. In this film, after Hart's son dies while working in the mill, he 'steals' the mill owner's son (after saving the son from a car crash). The film makes excellence use of the labor-vs-capital premise to add still timely social commentary with developed characters. This is a fine example of a William S Hart film.
11. **A Sailor-Made Man:** Harold Lloyd's first feature film (at a little over 40 minutes), the film is good enough. It is not spectacularly funny, but it has funny moments. Some of the sequences in 'India' are cringy. The issue is always that Lloyd is inferior to both Keaton and Chaplin.
10. **The Three Musketeers:** The reason to watch is Douglas Fairbanks. The action sequences are not as good as *The Mark of Zorro*, and editing takes the place of more of the stunts. Yet, Fairbanks is great. The costumes are elaborate and the sets are enjoyable. This is a fun blockbuster carried by the biggest star of the day.
9. **Camille:** Honestly, the ranking of the film comes down to how you view Alla Nazimova's performance. If you thought it was over the top, the film ranks around here. If you thought it was amazing, you rank it much higher. Rudolph Valentino was much too stiff, he had not perfected his leading man charm. The sets are amazing, and probably the best part of the film.
8. **The Blot:** Written and directed by Lois Weber, the film is a class-struggle feminist film. With three sets of people: lower-income, upper-middle income, and rich. What the film does get right is that upper-middle class people are often the worst when it comes economic issues. Too many films only aim their arrows at the rich and forget to point out the issues with the upper-middle class. By adding this depth the film is far better than most of the films about class struggle from the era. The film also benefits from focusing on the women character (beyond the standard love-interest), the are fully developed characters. Also, the ending is bittersweet and realistic. Lois Weber is an underrated director.
7. **Shattered (Scherben):** I wonder if I watched a restored version, how much the ranking would improve. There was also no tinting (this could be original to the film) nor was the picture quality good. Yet, what was there is a a wonderfully moving and simple drama; a poor family – father, mother, and daughter – live at the rural train stop checking the tracks. The train company then sends a new man to work there in addition to the father. A family drama unfolds. The title cards are sparse (for practical purposes there is only one). The film is difficult to follow, because of the lack of title cards and the picture quality. It possibly deserves a second watch as so much is going on in this brief hour-long film.
6. **Miss Lulu Bett:** A delightful feminist film written by Clara Beranger (*Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*) and directed by William C. deMille. Lois Wilson is great as the titular Lulu Bett. Wilson showcases Lulu's transformation of meek woman living of the 'kindness' of her sister and rude brother-in-law to an strong independent woman (also mirrored by changes in her dress and hair). The characters are well-developed in what is a great encapsulation of woman's rights. This would make for a great remake as the message still applies and would have lots of juicy roles.

Tier 2: Earlier Work by All-Time Great Directors

5. **The Haunted Castle (Schloß Vogelöd):** The film is directed by F.W. Murnau and is his second-earliest surviving film. Firstly the restoration is amazing. Much of Murnau's classic style is being developed in this film; great use of lighting, set design, and blocking. The camera is still rather stationary though. The miniature of the titular castle is amazing; the 'lights' in the castle turn on-and-off, and not all the lights are always on. The plot could be tighter, but this is still a good watch for any Murnau fan.
4. **Destiny (Der müde Tod):** Directed by Fritz Lang, the effects are rather good. The plot features a nice early personification of Death. The plot is a tad redundant; three opportunities to save a life. By the third attempt, there isn't much there (all three attempts are also similar in the set up). Lang is a great director and this is a solid film.

Tier 1: Classic and Must-Watch Films

3. **Tol'able David:** A classic of silent film for good reason. Richard Barthelmess is perfect, he captures his character's coming-of-age perfectly; starting as an innocent and tolerable teenager to becoming a man. Gladys Hulette as his love interest is also good; together they capture youthful romance. Henry King's outdoor, and on-location, shots are good. The film is a standard of both the coming-of-age and revenge genres.
2. **The Kid:** Classic Charlie Chaplin, although Jackie Coogan is the real star of the film. *The Kid* is, at times, too melodramatic and overly preachy (e.g. the brief image of Christ carrying the cross at the start). Yet, the moving parts (Coogan crying for his dad being at the top of the list) and the better cinematic sequences (rooftop chase, and possibly the dream sequence) make *The Kid* one of the better silents.
1. **The Phantom Carriage (Körkarlen):** Directed, written, and starring Victor Sjöström features amazing special effects. The double exposure to give the dead of ghost-like quality is done impeccably well and is the strength of the film; the effects are great. Both Sjöström and Astrid Holm were rather good in their roles. The script features frequent flashbacks. The only knock on the film is that the morality tale is a tad too on the nose. It is a prime example of the high-quality films being made in the early 1920s and across the globe. It does fall short of *Caligari*, but is still a classic.