

Films of 1923



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. I did seek out famous directors (Keaton, Lloyd, Chaplin for example) as well famous stars (Mabel Normand, Lon Chaney, Lillian Gish, 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 1923 some of the greatest shorts ever were made, I will be defining a feature as a film longer than 40ish minutes.

Tier 8: Avoid

48. **Let's Go:** Richard Talmadge is the leading man, and that is only the start of the films issues. He was a former stuntman to Douglas Fairbanks. Fairbanks is an all-time great, Richard Talmadge, not so much. There are enough stunts to keep the viewer's attention, and too often the stunts pale in comparison to other films. To make matters worse the plot is rather basic, with some cartoon villains the predictable happy ending.
47. **Slow as Lightning:** An unfunny comedy in the spirit of Harold Lloyd. After the main character jumps around for the fifth time in the first minute, you are already lost. The plot is beyond stupid; a fortune tellers says he can make money in the stock market by his hunches, and then boom he is rich. Whenever the main character is trapped a simple fight will get him out of the jam, regardless of how many people he has to fight at once. The entire thing is absurd and to be avoided.

46. **The West~Bound Limited:** I like trains. Trains are cool. This movie has trains but is not cool. The film is melodramatic with predictable twists and turns. The villain is a cartoon villain (lets assault my boss' daughter and try to kill my boss!). The low point is easily when a toy horse and rider are thrown down a model cliff, cut to the horse and rider surviving the fall.

Tier 7: Boring and Predictable

45. **The Song of Love:** Norma Talmadge plays a character named Noorma-hal. That is really all you need to know. As the film is nonsensical and silly. The film is also an obvious ripoff of *The Shiek*, yet lacks a male lead with the charisma to carry the film. Some of the costumes are silly. And, as to be expected with a film set in Northern Africa/Arab land, there are a lot of cringe title cards. Sadly the existing print has a lot of nitrate decomposition already.
44. **Struggling Hearts (Lasse Månsson fra Skaane):** Part of the issue is that this Danish film does assume the viewer knows a bit about Danish history (though the viewer is quickly able to piece together that Denmark is at war with Sweden). The plot is rather basic and over-explained with detailed title cards. The explicit title cards are easily the worst part of the film and drag it down. There are a few good outdoor shots, and some decent work with lighting ('hiding' a light behind a table centerpiece). But it is a boring Danish-specific slog.
43. **The White Sister:** The only reason the film ranks here is Lillian Gish is rather good. In an over-the-top melodrama, she brings restraint and subtlety. The film is far too religious (nuns are 'married' to Jesus) and long (two-hours-fifteen) and melodramatic (evil sister burns the will to cut out Gish!). Both times when a portrait is presented to Gish's character she responds admirably. But can not elevate the film any higher.
42. **A Chapter in Her Life:** Written and Directed by Lois Weber (*Two Wise Wives*), the film is not up to her regular standard. The film is sappy and predictable; a young girl goes to live with her rich grandpa while her parents travel to Europe in an attempt to find a job. Plenty of other crotchety people live at Grandpa's. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what happens over the next hour. The social commentary is bare bones; rich and poor people should get along. The restored Kino print does look amazing.
41. **Tiger Rose:** The film starts off strong with gorgeous shots of the 'Canadian Wilderness' (actually Yosemite). These outdoor on-location shots are great and look amazing (despite the quality of the print). There are also a few well-framed shots and close-ups of objects. Yet once the film moves indoors (partially due to being adapted from a stage play), it all goes down hill. Lenore Ulric, who was in the stage play, overacts to the point of annoyance. The film suffers from a lot of plot holes and poor decision making from characters. Lastly the existing print has 20 minutes missing (a reel or two is missing). And yet, that doesn't detract from the film. If anything it helps, because unless the 20 minutes are landscapes it will only hurt the film.
40. **The Silent Command:** An international spy 'thriller', except most of the international shots are B-roll. The vamp character, played by Martha Mansfield is not good enough to be believable. The film suffers from going off the rails, only to be explained by a twist. Bela Lugosi makes his American debut in this film and is decent. He has one brief scene that shows some talent. Yet the film doesn't have much to offer.

Tier 6: There was a Good Idea Here

39. **Haldane of the Secret Service:** The final film written, directed, and starring Harry Houdini. The film is an improvement over *The Man From Beyond*. Though for the most part the film is a standard

international crime caper (an early attempt at the James Bond franchise is the easy comparison); the Statue of Liberty, Big Ben, and the Eiffel Tower all make cameos. Houdini doesn't bring much besides one escape sequence. There is also a lot of racism towards China, that could easily bump the ranking down.

38. **Adam's Rib:** The first fifty minutes are rather enjoyable (partially because the film was an influence on *Bringing Up Baby*; a nerdy paleontologist meets a young woman is insistent on dating him). Yet once the lengthy caveman sequence starts, everything goes downhill and lasts for another forty minutes. Cecil B DeMille directed a lot of these early comedies of remarriage (though this is more drama than comedy). As to be expected in a DeMille film, the morals are rather outdated. And unlike his previous films of the genre, it did not have a young woman to carry the film. The daughter is simply outclassed. The other actors are DeMille regulars and perform quite well. One last item to note, the film has nothing to do with the 1949 film of the same name.
37. **The White Rose:** D.W. Griffith finally goes a year without being the worst tier! (*The Love Flower*, *Dream Street*, *One Exciting Night*). The film has a few of Griffith's hallmarks, particularly the Victorian morals (and the racism). Yet at least in this film the racism isn't that bad (relative to other films of the era and his previous work). But the reason the film can rank here is that Mae Marsh is rather good; her character must be the innocent virgin, the vamp, and the down-on-her-luck mother. I do wish the print quality was better (but given it is a Griffith who knows if it will receive a restoration) as it would be easier to appreciate the quality of the acting.
36. **The Man Without Desire:** A film about a man who after seeing his loved one die is 'frozen' and re-animated 200 years later, only to fall in love again. Except he is now impotent. Yet sadly the film wastes much of the runtime on the 1700s scenes (with costumes and such). The interesting part is the how the characters will interact after he awakes. Trimming the first half (to two-thirds) would improve the film greatly. However, it is an amazement the film made it past censors, so perhaps the lack of time spent on his lack of sexual desire can be forgiven.
35. **The White Shadow:** Only three of the six reels exist, with the final two reels both missing. It makes it rather difficult to judge the entire film (apparently the plot goes bananas in the final two reels and would almost certainly move the ranking down). The film notable for being one of the first films Alfred Hitchcock worked on. He was the Assistant Director, the Set Designer, and the Editor. The film does have a few of his trademarks, particularly mistaken identity. Betty Compson steals the show playing both sisters (with the aid of nice double exposure shots). Except as the film is about to get going it ends due to the missing reels.
34. **Crime and Punishment (Raskolnikow):** A difficult film to rank given the poor quality of the existing available copy. The film is in desperate need of a restoration (and then I'll happily re-watch and re-rank). Directed by Robert Wiene (*Caligari*) the sets look like they could be good, but again the print quality is poor you can not exactly tell. It is probably best to skip the film as of now, but if it is ever restored.
33. **The Old Baron of Rautakylä (Rautakylän vanha paroni):** Described as the first Finnish horror film, it certainly sets the bar for horror rather low (Germany had been doing far better for years). The titular Baron is the best character, dying and nearly helpless but with a little fight left him. The biggest issue with the film is a twenty-plus minute flashback to explain how the characters who have gathered at the Baron's estate knew each other fifty years ago. It simply eats up too much time without adding much (unless you enjoy the costumes). The lighting could have been moodier, again not exactly a horror.
32. **Little Old New York:** Marion Davies (*When Knighthood Was in Flower*) carries the film and is excellent (even if obviously not the boy she is playing for most of the film). The historic New York

can be of interest to others. The issue is the film is all but wrapped up after fifty minutes, sans discovering Davies character is not a boy, but a girl, and therefore can get together romantically with the leading man. Except to expose she is a girl, the film takes a needlessly long path. Watch for Marion Davies being great.

31. **The Spanish Dancer:** The strength of the film is the cinematography of James (Wong) Howe. One of the better shots puts a lit candle behind the characters, and uses the candle to flood the scene with light (making it look a lot better). Pola Negri is in the film, but is not given as much room to shine (there is a brief dance sequence).
30. **The Hill Park Mystery (Nedbrudte Nerver):** A Danish comedy-mystery that is funny enough. At seventy-five minutes it does not exactly overstay its welcome, though it does come close at times. The jokes are decent, and at times a level of meta that is appreciated ('if [he dialed the correct number] the film would be over now!'). Except, as the plot involves the main character believing his new-found love has committed a murder, the viewer knows the mix-up will be resolved by the end credit which takes away a lot of the mystery.

Tier 5: Decent Normie Movies of the Year

29. **Zaza:** One's opinion will come down to if you believe Gloria Swanson overacts. The titular Zaza is a character, and over-the-top. The way the character is written makes it difficult to stay in touch with the film (even if you think Swanson does a good job in the role). There are a few well-directed sequences in the dance hall that could rank the film higher.
28. **Where the North Beings:** One's ranking of the film will come down entirely to how much of a good boy they found Rin-tin-tin to be. The plot is basic and predictable. Yet Rinty is the bestest boy. He is an adorable dog, who preforms a few great stunts (the climbing in the house is the best), does ordable things (sneaks around without really getting up), and goes everything one likes to see dog's do. And he goes it all perfectly. If you get swelled up, the film can rank here. If Rinty doesn't do it for you, the film belongs a tier lower.
27. **Within the Law:** The film starts as unapologetically pro-worker pro-criminal justice reform and slightly feminist. Yet sadly, after about thirty minutes it forgets where it came from and veers into a silly love story with an awkward subplot about the criminal underground. Norma Talmadge is rather good in the leading role and helps to carry the film.
26. **Ashes of Vengeance:** The primary issue with this film is that it is not *Scaramouche* (which will be featured further down on the list). Both are French costume melodramas with sword fighting. Yet everything with *Ashes* are inferior; the acting, the acting, the plot, and the sets. The costumes might be as good though. Yet this film needs a proper restoration and score. Doing so might let the film rank a little higher. It was one of the big-budget releases of the year, and it should be restored to its original glory (and would allow the sets and costumes to be better appreciated).
25. **The Ten Commandments:** Easily the hardest film to rank on the list. The film has two parts: Moses and the Egyptians, followed by a Modern sequence. The Moses sequence has amazing special effects; flame wall, the lightning, the giving of the commandments, and the parting of the Red Sea. All of which are amazing. It also has some amazing sets; the Egyptian city and the Israelite's 'cave'. And the sheer scale of the extras are outstanding. Yet the modern sequence is an in-your-face boring religious tale with multiple face-palm moments. Although the modern sequence still contains a few well-constructed shots and call-backs (the initial stealing of food and then the later leaving of flowers), the plot is horrible and extends the film out to over two hours and fifteen minutes. Watch the Moses sequence. Then turn your tv off.

24. **White Tiger:** The first of two Tod Browning directed films on the list (both also star Priscilla Dean, Wallace Beery, and Matt Moore). Dean plays her classic bad-girl-turned-good (ala William S Hart). The film eventually becomes similar to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* with everyone in a cabin and the stolen goods and distrust on the rise. The acting quality of the above-mentioned stars keeps the film going during these sequences. Browning has a few good shots, my favorite being the inside of the house, but seeing people move about the street thru the glass front door.
23. **Broken Hearts of Broadway:** The film is a standard girl-moves-to-the-big-city-to-try-and-make-it movie. The film does excel by being a tad more risqué regarding what aspiring chorus girls might need to do to make it big when partying with ‘bloated bondholders’ (and the ethics of it). The film also excels as it stars Colleen Moore. Moore does a great job embodying the flapper era, while giving the character a lot of emotional depth.

Tier 4: Better Big Budgets and Quality Foreign Films

22. **The Covered Wagon:** The restored version does look amazing, even if the plot is more-than-lacking. A good plot point is the wagon guide who ‘looks’ like the traditional villain of the plot, ends up being a supportive friend. The plot finds a way to shoe-in an Abe Lincoln reference. And of course all the misconceptions are sorted out by the end credits. Enjoy the grandeur of the hundreds of covered wagons moving across western landscapes.
21. **The Pilgrim:** Written and directed by Charlie Chaplin (*The Kid*). Unfortunately, the version on HBO is the re-released one. The re-release contains the song ‘Texas Bound’ and has slight editing differences (Chaplin also did this with *The Gold Rush*). Luckily the print looks good. There are a few good sequences in the 40-ish minute film; the sermon and lost hat are probably the best. It is inferior to the Chaplin features of the era, but that says more about the quality of his other work than this one.
20. **Souls for Sale:** Plot be damned, the film is a (partially) behind-the-scenes look at 1920s Hollywood. There is a brief scene of Stroheim directing *Greed* and Chaplin directing *A Woman In Paris*. Move aside *Babylon*, this film is what the 1920s were like in Hollywood! It even has a director forcing the cameramen to keep filming during a thunderstorm and the subsequent fire started by lightening. The film is fun, brisk, and the right amount of bonkers.
19. **The Shock:** I think I have a soft spot for Lon Chaney. Even if the film is middling, he does such great work that it elevates the film. Chaney plays a crippled-but-well-meaning gangster. Chaney is able to give the character such depth with his facial expressions, and the physicality of the performance is great as always. The ending is rather sappy with a heaping of deus ex machina, but again Chaney is too good.
18. **Why Worry?:** The first of two Harold Lloyd films on the list. There is some solid camera work. Lloyd’s films have a much more active camera than most and there are a few effects. Some of the gags are funny, particularly the bowling gag (and its remnants are seen later in the film). The film makes great use of John Aasen’s imposing 7-foot-plus frame for comedy. Yet, and I can’t stress it enough, I do not find Lloyd that funny. Those that like his style more can probably move this film up a tier.
17. **Mälar Pirates (Mälarpirater):** Swedish films make excellent use of on-location shooting and bodies of water. Director Gustaf Molander makes great use of the the lake and boats in the film. Many shots are well composed. The plot itself is a bit standard coming-of-age story; neglected kids steal a boat, float around for part of the summer and get into hijinks. Yet, there isn’t enough character growth to justify ranking the film higher.

16. **The Extra Girl:** Mabel Normand is the star of the show here. She is hilarious, with amazing eye-rolls. The camera moves a bit, and a sequence with a lion is rather funny. The film does retread a lot of girl-moves-to-the-big-city-to-try-and-make-it movie tropes (and most are not done in an interesting manner).
15. **East and West:** The oldest known surviving Yiddish film (the title cards are in both English and Yiddish). There are some decent shots (all of which involve characters thinking about the person the love). The film is almost a comedy of remarriage, though there is an impractical five-year time jump that makes it slightly harder to believe. Molly Picon is rather good and her charisma helps to carry the early portion of the film.
14. **A Woman of Paris:** Written and directed by Charlie Chaplin, though not starring Chaplin. The film is also a drama. Chaplin does bring is quality film-making. An example of a nice shot is the beginning of seeing the angry father in the window while his daughter sneaks out at night. The main issue with the film is that Edna Purviance is not up to the task of carrying the film (Adolphe Menjou is rather good). The film is risqué for the time. And it is really buoyed by the ending, saying how the ending helps the film risks spoilers, but with a more ‘traditional’ ending the film would easily be a tier lower.
13. **Anna Christie:** The strength of the film is the the source material of the play. The first two acts do seem standard and follow a lot of conventions, but the viewer must hold on til the bomb drops in the third act. The third act saves (and elevates) the film, the film is semi-explicit (and more explicit than one might expect). None of the cast are particularly great, but they do a solid job. I do wish the print was in better condition, a nice restoration could easily elevate the film.
12. **Scaramouche:** The big budget action-romance of the day. The costumes are great, and the sets even more impressive. Roman Navarro is rather good in the lead. There could have been sword fights (the sequences pale in comparison to *Zorro* or other by Fairbanks). Even at two hours, the film never drags. Except the multiple aristocratic characters become difficult to tell apart at times.
11. **The Hunchback of Notre Dame:** Go back and read the review of *Scaramouche*, and it almost applies word-for-word. The sets are amazing, probably the best of the year. The reconstruction of Notre Dame looks realistic to this day (sadly the only surviving prints are 16mm, one can only imagine how great a 35mm restoration would end up looking). Lon Chaney then absolutely steals the show; his make-up is amazing, his subtle facial expressions convey such depth, add in the physicality Chaney brings (climbing Notre Dame, ringing of the bells, etc) elevate the film. Yet besides the sets and Chaney the film does not offer much. The plot can get stale and has too many characters
10. **Drifting:** The second Tod Browning film on the list. The film, set in China, does feature a lot of yellowface. Yet, compared to the other films of the era this had one of the better portrayals of the Chinese people. Part of the quality portrayal is the character played by Anna Mae Wong. She is a great actress and she provides the moral center of the film (and a character come the end is not a ‘useless’ woman). Also, although the film is about opium farmers, it also has the local townspeople rise up to fight back against the farming of opium. Browning’s direction is rather good with great sets, and vivid images. The color tinting is exquisite and adds a lot to the film.
9. **The Smiling Madame Beudet (La Souriante Madame Beudet):** A brief-but-quality piece of French Impressionism. There are better examples farther down the list, as this film mainly excels with double exposures to show the inner thoughts of the characters (whereas the other films have this aspect plus quality editing and other innovations). The strength is the character of Madame Buedet and her portrayal by Germaine Dermoz. The titular Madame Beudet is a great character, and an early feminist film showing the struggles of woman in a dead-end marriage.

Tier 3: Experimental Films (and Keaton)

8. **Merry-Go-Round:** Although Stroheim was fired as the director midway thru production, his hands are all over the film (he did write a detailed script). The script has some taboos (but not as many as his earlier work), and a few nice shots (especially those that make use of windows and looking down them. The acting is rather good, especially Mary Philbin as the female lead.
7. **The Faithful Heart (Cœur fidèle):** Written and directed by Jean Epstein, the film is an early example of innovative editing and shot-making. One can't help but see the ideas in the film getting their full due in a few years with the editing work of the Soviets. The editing for the almost-fight in the bar is amazing. There are multiple great (super-imposed) shots along the water. The plot of the film is the main drag (admittedly the director sought to make a more artful melodrama). The gossipy neighbor detracts from the film, as they act beyond maliciously without explanation. That character needed a little more development. The plot also stalls out a bit (it obvious you should leave the abusive partner, but the characters agonize over the decision). There are multiple great shots; everything at the fair and the final shot of the baby in the cradle.
6. **Warning Shadows (Schatten – Eine nächtliche Halluzination):** A film I wish I had a better print of. The film is semi-experimental, and the title suggests, makes great use of shadows (and mirrors). In the film, few things are as they seem. The plot is solid, and semi-inventive; most of the film is told as a 'dream' sequence. And it is all told without the use of title cards (beyond character introductions).
5. **Three Ages:** Buster Keaton's first feature film (that we helped write and direct), and it has all the hallmarks of Keaton. Zany sequences (the chariot race is a delight, the lion in the dungeon is great), amazing stunts (leaping across a building, and then falling thru canopies, down firepoles, and onto a fire truck is a great, but brief sequence). Multiple times we see Keaton's classic dumbfoundedness at events out of his control. The practical effects of a figure riding a dinosaur are great for 1923. The film is great, and a showcase for the great things to come from Buster.
4. **Salomé:** Starring and produced by Alla Nazimova, the film is an avant-garde delight. It is the closest American thing I've seen to some of the experimental German Expressionist films. Although there are only two set pieces, they are both amazing, with great detail. The costumes are something to be seen. Outlandish is barely doing them justice. The acting is over-the-top, and the dance sequences are even more over-the-top. This is an early art film.

Tier 2: Two Kings of Comedy

3. **Safety Last!** Harold Lloyd's classic is a classic for a reason. Admittedly, I find Lloyd's comedies inferior to those of Keaton and Chaplin. There are a fair bit of funny moments, but not as much compared to the other leading comedians of the day. The standout of the film is the production quality. There are multiple great shots (the disappearing food, the opening shot, and of course the climbing sequence). The film uses the camera for comedic effect; often requiring nice cinematic touches. As the film looks better, more modern, more inventive, than most of the films on the list.
2. **Our Hospitality:** Buster Keaton's first single-story feature. Admittedly the prologue is a little slow and adds little. Yet once the train leaves the station, the film kicks into gear. Keaton always works best with trains and here he makes use of multiple gags related to the early trains (a few gags that are then perfected a few years later in *The General*). The waterfall scene is a classic of cinema for a reason (even if that was filmed on a set, vs the earlier river shots being on-location). What separates *Hospitality* from *Safety* is that Keaton's gags are often shorter and are a natural response to the world around him (the top hat in train car), which can come with consequences.

Tier 1: Abel Gance

1. **La Roue (The Wheel):** Abel Gance created a nearly-seven-hour masterpiece. Almost all of the new items that helped put films in tier 3, are on full display in *La Roue*. And *La Roue* came out in the beginning of the year. Editing: many sequences feature easily the best editing the of the year. The entire prologue is a masterclass in editing. Background action: We see trains coming in-and-out of the station, characters moving outside thru windows. Shadows: shadows are incorporated perfectly, the best being the baring of the cross. Tinting: the color tinting is pristine and adds depth, which is then made even better by the fact that some scenes feature amazing hand-stenciled color. Perhaps the only complaints are there are a few too many iris-framed close-ups and some overacting. The runtime is long, but is nicely broken into a prologue and four parts (I watched the first two parts, and the final to the next day; each part could be watched on its own). Part I is so good, it would have ranked first on its own. The film still continues on, adding depth to the main characters, and have supporting characters weave in and out of their lives. It is near perfection. I can't imagine seeing the full cut in 1923, as it is heads and shoulders above anything else made this year. Also it features a lot of trains, and trains are cool.