

Films of 1920



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 1920, and could easily be lumped into 1919, might not have made the cut. I did seek out famous directors (Fritz Lang, Cecil B. DeMille, Ernst Lubitsch, Robert Weine, for example) as well famous stars (Douglas Fairbanks, Lon Chaney, Mary Pickford, William S. Hart, 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 1920 some of the greatest shorts ever were made (*One Week* and *Haunted Spooks*, for example). I will be defining a feature as a film longer than 40ish minutes.

It is worth noting that 10 films are from Germany. Three are from Sweden. An overlooked benefit of silent films is how accessible they are across language; only the title cards needed to be swapped out!

I realize silent films might be difficult to get into. However everything labeled a 'Must Watch' or higher is exactly that, a must watch. Those films are amazing. If you like silent film, then venture into the worth watching films. Expand your horizons.

Tier 7: The Babe, The Bad, and D.W. Griffith

42. **The Love Flower:** One of the three D.W. Griffith films on this list (he directed four in 1920, but one is presumed lost). Just down the list is the review for *The Idol Dancer*. Everything there applies except the female lead (Carol Dempster) was not good, in fact she was bad. Richard Barthelmess is also in this and is still good. The only good thing about the film were the underwater scenes. The plot was awful, to the point it isn't worth describing.
41. **Headin' Home:** I'm not sure how to describe this film. As it absolutely is not a Babe Ruth biopic. Nothing about the upbringing depicted in the film of Babe Ruth is true. It is a completely made up back story (Babe Ruth plays himself). Most of the movie is pure hokum: Babe rescued a dog from a pound! Once he got famous he still missed Mama's pies! Also the title cards wuz awful. Avoid.

40. **The Idol Dancer:** We have D.W. Griffith at his worst here (well near his worst, it hard to say what exactly was his low point). Racism towards native peoples? Check. Overly religious and preachy morals? Yes! Mismatched shots? Multiple times. The female lead (Clarine Seymour) is the lone bright spot (Richard Barthelmess is also good) but even she is not good enough to elevate this bad film any higher.

Tier 6: Completely Mediocre

39. **Humoresque:** The winner of Photoplay Magazines Medal of Honor, and not a deserving winner. Although the film is realistic in portraying NYC tenement housing the film is an overly predictable melodrama. Kid grows up poor, is loved by his mother, who buys him the violin he really wants; said boy also likes a neighborhood girl who requires a crutch. You can guess what happens next. Oh and for added drama, the Great War makes a brief appearance. Though again, you can guess what happens.
38. **Suds:** If it was not for Mary Pickford, *Suds* would not be in this tier. The film is suppose to be a comedy-drama, but the comedy is short and forced. Every single scene with Lavender (the horse) is absurd and silly (not the good silly). However Pickford's charm, and well, everything, makes the movie tolerable.
37. **The Flapper:** Rather standard fare; innocent girl gets sent to a boarding school, falls in love with an older man. Thinks she isn't experienced enough. Fakes a gaining experience. There are funny moments. Olive Thomas was good (in one of her few roles before her tragic death in 1920). The film wraps up rather too quickly and conveniently. The reason to watch is the cultural importance related to the flappers of the 20s.
36. **Something to Think About:** The best part of the film is easily Gloria Swanson (*Sunset Boulevard*). There are a few nice shots; reflections in a pail, the shadow of a noose, to name a few (directed by Cecil B. DeMille). However the major downfall is the constant and in-your-face christianity that you know is going to be the deus ex machina; which right on schedule it is.
35. **The Testing Block:** The first of four William S. Hart features on this list. Hart's usual morally gray character isn't that morally gray, and the evidence of his darker side, does not age well. The entire plot plot is too outlandish and at times cringe-inducing. Although, a huge shout-out to the Capitola Historical Society, who have hosted a beautiful and scored print – with a brief introduction – of the film on YouTube.

Tier 5: Decent Films with Bright Spots

34. **Romeo and Juliet in the Snow:** One of four Lubitsch films on this list, it is both the shortest and the worst. That is not to say it is bad, but the others are better. The film is a tad over 45 minutes, and although having some funny moments, wraps up much too quickly. This particular Lubitsch film also suffered from having weaker leads (the other three all featured some all-time greats).
33. **The Mollycoddle:** The first of two Douglas Fairbanks adventure films. And sadly, every minute of watching *Mollycoddle* you want to be watching the other film on the list. Fairbanks is good; the action is decent and the comedy is okay. The best sequence is a brief animated sequence. The film itself tries to make a statement about how ('primitive') Indians and ('civilized') Americans/Europeans are not that different after all, but it comes across as dated and patronizing at times. The reason to watch is to see Fairbanks.

32. **The Spiders:** Technically two films *Part I* and *Part II*, *Part I* also came out in 1919, but I make the rules here. *Spiders* (directed by Fritz Lang) is a miss. The film(s) are best viewed as an early *Indiana Jones*. Lang does have some well-framed shots, and a few instances of good effects. But the films are slow and rather uninteresting; especially compared to other adventure films from 1920.
31. **Kismet:** One of a few Arabian-set films on the list. *Kismet* is rather gritty; a revenge tale with corrupt leaders as well. If the film held my attention better at the start, it probably ranks higher (also, another public domain film with okay picture quality). Otis Skinner is good in the lead role.
30. **Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Haydon):** The first of two Jekyll films on the list (a third was made but is considered lost). This version was set in modern times and had a much lower budget. Most everything about this version is worse, except the scenes of Mr. Hyde. The Haydon version leaned into the evil of Mr. Hyde; we have arson, multiple assaults, and a murder. However, everything else is inferior, but the film is still worth watching.
29. **The Woman in the Suitcase:** Sadly, the public domain print on YouTube is of iffy quality. A better quality print and I probably rank this film a little higher. Enid Bennett is rather good, as a daughter who investigates her father; she suspects he is having an affair. The film does not come across as dated; the plot holds up rather well. Both *Suitcase* and *Kismet* I'd like to see again with a restored print.
28. **Outside the Law:** A rare non-horror film from Tod Browning (*Dracula*, *Freaks*). This is an early gangster film. Priscilla Dean is rather good, perhaps the best part of the film. Lon Chaney has two supporting roles, one of which required yellowface (though the film did have the Chinese characters (played by white actors) be the voice of reason and civilized to the gangsters life of crime. The available print does suffer from nitrate deterioration and is rather damaged in the final third. Overall it was a decent enough film.
27. **Pollyanna:** The film is pure Mary Pickford. Pickford is America's Sweetheart for a reason. Pickford (27 at time of filming) plays a 12 year old (and you though high school rom-coms were bad at age differences). The plot itself is melodramatic with some bits of excellent Pickford comedy. Another small plus is the film is rather anti-car. As cars a bad. People should drive less, take more public transit, and watch more silent film.
26. **Kohlhiesel's Daughters:** A Lubitsch comedy starring Henny Porten and Emil Jannings (which will be together in another Lubitsch comedy later on). Porten steals the show, playing both of Kohlhiesel's daughters; Leisel and Gretel. There are a few good moments and directing, a shot of Gretel crying is well done. However the pacing of the film is off: the final few minutes are rather rushed. Yet it remains rather enjoyable and funny.
25. **Sand:** A William S. Hart Western. Rather standard fare, with a(n extremely) predictable plot. Yet the film ranks this high because Hart is so good. This film is more comedic than the others on the list, and more focused on the romance/courtship.
24. **The Cradle of Courage:** The second of two consecutive Hart films on the list, and in many ways a standard Hart film: morally conflicted soldier returns from the Great War and must decide if he wants to go straight or continue his pre-War life of crime. Though it is a non-Western. Hart is good, the on-location filming in the streets of San Francisco is the nice. The two female supporting actors are both good. *Cradle* is a decent film without many flaws, but also lacks anything to make it rank higher.

Tier 4: Solid Films with Various Ways to Improve

23. **Algol: Tragedy of Power:** This is a difficult film to rank. The figurative interpretation is that capitalistic forces corrupt—making labor and farmers worse off. If that is the goal, the film accomplishes it rather well. Yet, the literal interpretation is a new (and clean) energy source (which costs more) has put coal miners out of work. In an era of Climate Change, it is hard not to grimace. In modern times; yes Elon Musk is not cool, but his cars, solar panels, and batteries, are better than burning fossil fuels. If we are going to punish films for not aging well, we need to stay consistent; this film does not literally age well. It does figurative age well. Depending on which view you take, decides where this film ranks. I am in the literally camp and mining coal, transporting coal, storing coal, and burning coal all literally kill thousands a year.
22. **The Confession:** A film I desperately hope get a quality restoration; not because the film as a whole is great, but the cinematography could be amazing. The film is often shot with minimal lighting, and brief ‘lightning strikes’ to illuminate the murder that sets the events in action. Restoring the images to crisp black and white could mean I easily rank the film higher. The cinematography is the best part of the film. The plot – a priest hears a confession, but he can not break his oath to god, even if it means saving his brother – is rather basic. Although the film can be interpreted as anti-death penalty, it comes across that way more with the idea that god will save the innocent; not acknowledging that the death penalty murders innocent people.
21. **Hobson’s Choice:** Starting with the bad: i) lots of title cards, ii) title cards followed by shots of the actors saying everything in the title card, and iii) lack of close ups. *Hobson’s Choice* is funny, but too much of the comedy is wasted on title cards, and then not allowing the actors to react the cards. Better direction would have greatly improved the film. Yet, the film ranks this high because the plot has aged perfectly; it does not seem out of place. An ‘over-the-hill’ thirty year old woman, puts into motion a plot to get married, run her own business, and then help her younger sisters get married. She even teaches her husband how to read (the film is set in the 1880s). The film is decidedly feminist and benefits greatly.
20. **Anna Boylen:** Directed by Ernst Lubitsch, this is a German film about the life (and death) of Anne Boylen. Emil Jannings is extremely impressive as King Henry VIII. Jannings gives the character sarcastic wit, and gives the king a humorous (and constant) sexual desire. Jannings’ performance puts the film in this tier. *Boylen* works best when it is a sexual comedy (it is directed by Lubitsch after all). Then final half hour gets a tad serious (Boylen is sentenced to death, in case you forgot your history).
19. **Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (Paramount):** A retelling the the classic Robert L Stevenson short story. John Barrymore (brother of Lionel and Ethel; grandfather of Drew) carries the film with a good performance. There are some good VFX. Yet, the film ends up taking a tad too rosy view of the world, despite showing the underside with Mr Hyde’s adventures.
18. **Daughter of Dawn:** Filmed on location in Oklahoma, with an entirely Native American cast. The production of the film is what makes the film special; the plot is a standard love triangle with the spurned lover seeking revenge. Worth watching for the historic importance.
17. **The Last of the Mohicans:** The first film adaptation of the novel. *Mohicans* is difficult to rate. Like *Daughter* the film centers around Native Americans. Except, here, the Natives are exclusively(?) played by white actors in makeup. The subtitles frequently use the word ‘savage.’ Yet the plot is better. There are better shots (the cave sequence is well framed). Barbara Bedford is rather good as Cora Munro. The film is much more violent (not graphic, you don’t see blood, but a fort is ransacked, injured soldiers are murdered, and a baby is yeeted; yes a baby is straight up tossed into the air). The technical aspects result in *Mohicans* ranking higher.

16. **Erotikon:** Directed by Mauritz Stiller, *Erotikon* is a Swedish rom-com. Unlike the next film on the list, *Erotikon* is very progressive and does not bog down in conservative morals. However the hour-thirty runtime seems long, especially given the (lengthy) opera sequence. The comedy also isn't as good; the final act tries to pull off everyone-misunderstands-and-just-misses-figuring-it-out-multiple-times-in-a-row but the pacing does not work. Perhaps with better pacing and shortening of the opera sequence (though the sequence is full of foreshadowing and potentially important) the film could rank higher. There are also nice 'aerial' shots and effects.
15. **Why Change Your Wife?:** An early example, of what would eventually be called a comedy-of-remarriage, but as this was pre-code, an actual divorce happens! Cecil B. DeMille directs this amusing film. Gloria Swanson is rather good. Some of the costumes/gowns(?) are out there. The film is a tad too conservative; the main message of 'don't nag your husband and make sure to keep putting out' is a little cringe-inducing at times. But given it was 1920, and the comedy was good, it doesn't tank the film.
14. **Below the Surface:** Hobart Bosworth is excellent as the father that realizes his son is being conned. Bosworth's facial expressions are amazing; the perfect fix of anger, disappointment, yet still caring for his son. The plot itself is rather standard; father realizes son is being conned by a beautiful woman, while the son believes it is love. The underwater scenes are also rather good.

Tier 3: Worth Watching and Rather Good Films

13. **Genuine:** A difficult film to rank, as most existing versions (in good quality) are a 44 minute abridged version. It is clear that there are scenes missing, though it is easy to fill in the gaps. The abridgment is about half the length of the original feature. If a full-length restoration is completed, I'll update the rankings. *Genuine* is another German Expressionist film, directed by Robert Wiene, it features great sets and great use of mirrors and effects. An early horror film centered around the titular succubus who wreaks havoc on the men in her wake.
12. **Way Down East:** Lillian Gish absolutely carries this film; she is amazing. However, this film features many of D.W. Griffith's worst traits (well, the non-racist ones): outdated morals (even by 1920 standards), overly preachy title cards, and too long (many 'comedic' relief scenes needed to be cut; they were not funny). The river/blizzard sequence is a classic for a reason. Excellently shot, edited, and acted. That sequence and Lillian Gish allow the film to rank here, otherwise it would be much lower.
11. **From Morn to Midnight:** Possibly the most expressionistic film out of all the German silents on the list. *Midnight* took the sets from *Caligari* and turned the dial to 11. The sets were minimalist, two dimensional, and amazing. Shot were avant garde: a bike race is distorted with mirror, characters literally fade in, etc. The issue is all the amazing visuals are wasted on a simplistic morality tale about the corruption of money (and to some extent class). The distortions and sets do not fit the themes of the film; they almost exist because they could. This lack on integration means the film can not rank any higher (and could easily be ranking lower if the disconnect was more jarring).
10. **The Parson's Widow:** Directed by Carl Theodor Dryer (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*) the film is filled with small moments of great camera work; a small pan from outside to inside of a building was probably my favorite. The camera moves some in this film, and it is a treat to see. The plot is decent, with some comedic moments.
9. **The Saphead:** Buster Keaton's first leading role in a feature, and Keaton is the reason to watch. You can see the development of the type off character he would perfect in later movies (that he wrote and directed; here he only starred). The film is quite comical, but not near his best work.

8. **Sumurun:** Another Lubitsch film. The best of the bunch. The pacing is much better. As always multiple comedic moments. A larger cast, who all have developed characters and contribute to the plot (as opposed to *Anna Boylen*). Yet it is Pola Negri that dazzles and helps to put *Sumurun* in this tier. Negri was absolutely amazing.
7. **The Monastery of Sendomir:** Directed by Victor Sjöström (sometimes referred to as Seastrom), *Monastery* is a great Swedish film (*Erotikon* and *Parson's Widow* were also Swedish Productions; don't sleep on Swedish Silents!). Sjöström's framing of shots is excellent, the corners are often blacked out so to give a feeling of looking through an arc (of the monastery). A few shots are even of action in a room thru an arc. The plot is decent enough, with a few moments of nice foreshadowing.
6. **The Golem: How He Came into the World:** A classic of German Expressionism. The influence on *Frankenstein* (1931) can easily be seen. The effects were rather good. The sets were good, but not great, same with costume design. Some good acting as well.
5. **The Toll Gate:** A delightful western starring William S. Hart. Hart is rather good as outlaw with a soul; one which he is in constant battle with. Some might find that the plot leans too heavily on using Hart's redeeming qualities to get him out of jams (especially when we've seen him kill multiple people and light multiple buildings on fire). Yet, this 1920 film stands in stark contrast of the Westerns from the 30s–50s; Westerns with a clear good guy who saves the day against evil. *Toll Gate* has much more in common with spaghetti westerns; morally gray characters. Hart pulls off this dynamic with ease. Also supporting characters, particularly Anna Q. Nilsson, are great.

Tier 2: Classic and Must-Watch Films

4. **Within Our Gates:** Directed by Oscar Micheaux, *Within Our Gates* is proof that African-Americans have been making important films for over a hundred years. Though the first half to two-thirds is a tad scattered; lots of important social topics are mentioned (white-friendly preachers are even attacked and mocked), but the plot does bounce around location and characters. Micheaux had shoestring budgets (about 200k in 2020 dollars; including advertising, printing, and delivery) and it does come across in some scenes. Though the more alarming item was a few instances of bad acting. Yet the final third is a manhunt and subsequent lynching. The final act is moving and artfully shot; close ups of ropes, (white) children enjoying the goings-on, etc. The (budget-driven or should I say racism-driven) flaws can result in the the film ranking lower. The quality of the messages and their impact could easily move the film up a spot or two. Either way, it is a must watch.
3. **The Mark of Zorro:** One of the first 'superhero' movies and important in developing the swash-buckler genre. The movie is a pure delight. Douglas Fairbanks absolutely carries the film as both the shy, clumsy, and effeminate Don Diego and the titular Zorro. In addition to great stunts, Fairbanks puts such whimsy into playing Don Diego; from shadow puppets to cheesy magic tricks. The film set the standard for superhero movies, the duel role of the lead, and comedy in the genre. An absolute must watch and a great introduction to silent film; *Zorro* is pure fun.
2. **The Penalty:** An early crime/gangster film starring Lon Chaney. Barrymore's physical acting in *Jekyll* is put to shame by Lon Chaney. Chaney plays an underworld leader who lost his legs as a child. Except, Chaney has his legs, instead in tied his legs to give the allusion of being an amputee. A movie that today would either be CGI or played by an amputee, Chaney did the hard work to make the film look authentic (and it does). Not only is this an early gangster film (that showcases Chaney's talents) it gave Blizzard (played by Chaney) a multi-dimensional character and back story. *The Penalty* was ahead of its time and a classic.

Tier 1: Masterpieces of Cinema

1. **The Cabinet of Dr Caligari:** This film is considered an all-time classic for a reason. The sets are amazing. Conrad Veidt is great as Cesare. The sets are perfect, and shown in the photo. Most anything mystery/thriller has paid homage to *Caligari*. Any more description risks spoiling this classic masterpiece. Go watch it. If someone said *Caligari* was the greatest film ever, I would not be arguing with them.