

Films of 1922



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 pointing out that wide releases were not much of a thing, so even release dates can be tricky. However, some films that might be considered 1922, and could easily be lumped into other years, 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 1922 some of the greatest shorts ever were made (*Cops*, for example). I will be defining a feature as a film longer than 40ish minutes.

Tier :

42. **The Man From Beyond:** Films in the last tier share a lot of common traits: pointlessly absurd plots (often shoved into short run times), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Natural Wonders, Spirituality/Mysticism, and Racism. Luckily the only of this doesn't have is racism. Harry Houdini is the lead and preforms a few stunts, they are nice. There is a nice shot of Niagara Falls. That ends the good things to be said about this film. The plot is nonsensical and diverges in directions that are not needed (it only 75 minutes long). There are far too many title cards. Avoid.
41. **The Headless Horseman:** At an hour and ten minutes, this film still feels long. Perhaps adapting a short story into a feature was not the best idea. Even though the print I watch was of low quality (fair bit of wash out), you could still tell the actors were not up to snuff. Some of the plot points are nonsensical; the town itself believes in the Headless Horseman, but then attacks Ichabod Crane for believing in other supernatural activities? The character of Ichabod is not made out to be bad enough. The other characters (Bones and Katarina especially) are two-dimensional.
40. **One Exciting Night:** DW Griffith almost has the worst film for three straight years. This one is also very bad. It is also two-hours-and-twenty-minutes. It is needlessly long. And it take almost an hour-and-a-half to get to the 'exciting night'. The film is also extremely racist (and for no good reason). Within the first five minutes minutes a title card reads, 'Picutures — white man's magical treasure.' What did you expect from Griffith? The only bright spot is Carol Dempster, which is a welcome change after how bad she was in Griffith's *The Love Flower*.

39. **Sherlock Holmes:** John Barrymore stars as the famous sleuth, but even he can't breathe life into this film. It is worth mentioning that the currently-available version is missing 20-ish minutes. In some instances, it is a few frames within a scene, at other times it appears to be full scenes and sequences. Yet, the viewer is almost happy footage is missing, as it keeps the runtime down. This is not the Sherlock modern audiences know; he falls in love instantly (the most irksome plot point), and isn't all that clever (only one or two instances where Sherlock outwits people). It also worth mentioning that showing out-witting simply is not a silent era strength; wits often need to be explained afterwards; the more complicated the more title cards needed.
38. **Sky High:** The film starts with a rather racist segment regard Chinese immigrants and the viewer almost instantly loses all interest (don't worry there are a few more racist scenes for good measure). Tom Mix is charming, but in a film about how the bad guys are helping Chinese immigrants get into America, being charming isn't a good thing anymore (Tom Mix should be viewed as the bad guy!). The film relies on the Grand Canyon for scenic backgrounds (they are nice). Yet, despite the film literally telling viewers at the beginning about the Wonder's raw size—the size is ignored. Characters go from canyon crest to riverbed in a few hours. Characters are always somewhere near one another. The Grand Canyon is massive and geography does not work that way. Oh, and the film ends exactly how you expect. This was bad mass entertainment.
37. **Manslaughter:** Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. The film is not good. If anything, it veers into so-bad-it's-good territory. The film has a few Roman party sequences (the partying of the 20s is similar to the parting, and downfall, of Rome!). They are not needed. The plot is beyond absurd. A young district attorney loves a wild young woman; if he could only tame her wild ways! She kills someone with her car. He has to prosecute her. She goes to prison and eventually reforms herself. Meanwhile, he quits his job and descends into alcoholism, because he sent the love of his life to prison—for three-to-seven years. She gets out and not helps the poor. They reconnect! Then in the span of five minutes: i) he becomes the lawyer for her organization and he gets sober. He runs for governor. But then is forced to withdraw because he wants to marry an ex-con. Can't have that in Albany! It bad.

Tier :

36. **Lorna Doone:** One of many adaptations of the novel. The film is rather unbalanced (or perhaps the novel itself is unbalanced?). Much of the 90-minute run time is devoted to the earlier parts of Lorna's life. It seems as if the final few sequences (the 'rebellion' and such) are rushed, and everything wraps up far too quickly. There are a few decent shots of the coast. The film simply exists.
35. **The Bride's Play:** The first of three films starring Marion Davies. In many ways all the reviews are the same: Davies is good, not great. The costumes are nice. The sets are decent. The love interests could often be better. The plot is a simple love triangle, with little new added. This film simply does all of those the worst. It also includes a flashback sequence to the Medieval era, that simply eats up runtime (it already only 75 minutes); and is a way of showing more elaborate gowns and sets.
34. **Tess of the Storm Country:** A remake of the same film from 1914, both starring Mary Pickford. Pickford is the reason to watch the film. She is great and a delight as always. The film tries too much to be crowd-pleaser; comedy, romance, pathos, etc. It is also a rather basic morality tale. Unlike a lot of films, Pickford's character is useful. She might be a damsel in distress at times, but even in distress the titular Tess is not helpless. That is nice to see. Otherwise, there simply isn't much going on beyond basic character motivations and being a good person and good people get rewarded.
33. **The Toll of the Sea:** One of the harder films to rank on the list. The film was in color (a two-color green-red), so there should be points for innovation. Yet the two-color system makes everything look distorted; both greens and reds seep into everything. Skin looks an odd orange color. White shirts

have a teal tint to them. Visually it looks off. In the racist environment of the 1920s, this was a relatively positive portrayal of Chinese people. An American even marries one, and has a kid with them! Yet the pregnancy is not shown, but rather an awkward time jump a few years into the future. Anna May Wong overacts at times. The plot is rather basic and lacks much character development. As much as you want to like the film given the context of the times, it does not work.

32. **Down to the Sea in Ships:** There are exactly two good items about this film: i) A young (would have been 16 or 17 during filming) Clara Bow, and ii) the real-life footage of whaling. Clara Bow's character exists...for reasons; the character adds almost nothing to the plot. Yet she is rather good. One particular scene is when someone is brushing her hair, the emotions Bow is able to convey are great. The whaling footage (outside of the inhumanity of whaling) is great, especially from a historical perspective; one of the wikipedia pages on whaling even includes a link to the scenes to show people how whaling worked). Yet besides those the film is generic and not-too-good. The film has a requisite 1920s racist towards Asians (the 'yellow' man tries to swindle the good Quaker out of his business and marry his daughter!). The Quaker/religious piety is a little too much as well.
31. **Blood and Sand:** Admittedly, Valentino does not do much for me. The film follows the (now) all-too-familiar plot of person-finds-success-and-then-it-all-comes-crashing-down-as-they-get-corrupted-by-their-success. Valentino dances again (*Four Horseman*). The main drawback of the film is the heavy-handed morality. There is even a character who simply exists to read off quips relating to Valentino's demise. There is also an outlaw character who exists for reasons unknown (well, the character exists to show Valentino is the same as the outlaw; which again, the morality tale is far too in-your-face).
30. **Oliver Twist:** The film is a start vehicle for Jackie Coogan (*The Kid*), and not much else. I have not read the novel, so I can not comment on how closely it follows the source. The film is a series of issues that young Oliver encounters, semi-strung together in a sensible fashion. Though the film at times feels like a series of vignettes. Characters are not exactly developed. Lon Chaney is a delight as Fagin (Chaney is always a delight).
29. **The Primitive Lover:** The film starts with such premise. A delightful Constance Talmadge is not enjoying life with her boring husband played by Harrison Ford. And then, out of nowhere, her ex-fiance shows up! Who was presumed dead, turns out it was part of a publicity stunt for his next novel! Yet the plot descends into absurdity and some mild racism (with the bonus of women 'liking' to be roughed up at times). The first twenty minutes are hilarious and sadly it falls apart.
28. **Beauty's Worth:** A mild disclaimer: I watched the non-restored and slowed-down version. I have tried to compensate for that in the ratings (the restored version runs the proper 75 minutes, making the film not seem like a drag at times). This is a Marion Davies star vehicle. She is the main attraction, but she is not that good in (relative to her higher ranked film on the list). The costumes are good, but again inferior to another Marion Davies film on this list (*Knighthood* has a much better review). The plot is a sorta-Cinderella story, but with old-fashioned Quakers. The two actors playing the potential lover interests are decent, but nothing special. It thoroughly average.
27. **Sodom and Gomorrah:** Directed by Michael Curtiz (then Mihaly Kertész; *Casablanca*). The film is an overly long dud, albeit a bit of a spectacle; infamous for its cost; massive sets and extras upon extras. The primary issue is a muddled plot, which then ends with a flashback/fantasy sequence in Sodom and Gomorrah. The sequence adds nothing of value of the film (other than massive sets), yet lasts for almost half of the film. Now, Curtiz being the quality director he is, includes a few great shots; lighting, framing, shadows, reflections in water etc. Sadly, these can not save the film.

Tier :

26. **The Trap:** As with multiple films on this list, Lon Chaney carries the film. Chaney is such a great actor he makes the bad tolerable. The title cards go beyond annoying; Chaney's character is an illiterate Frenchman. After the first few, it becomes grating to read them. There are some decent on-location shots of Yosemite National Park. However, the print I watched was not of the best quality. Even so, the film could have used the landscape more; a few more wide shots of the park would have been nice.
25. **The Young Rajah:** Extremely difficult to rank. Almost the entire first half of the film is missing. The restoration includes production stills and re-creates title cards. But simply so much is missing, and it all concentrated at the start. Because of that, it is hard to get in a groove as a viewer. And more importantly, character motivations are not well-established. We read a brief background, but are unable to see it acted out. Valentino is good, and is the main draw. Commenting on the story is rather difficult, though the film is pro-interracial marriage (Valentino portrays an Indian man, who meets a White lady). The mixed-race relationship is a focal point, she even remarks once that although she loves the rajah, she should marry someone of her own race.
24. **The Prisoner of Zenda:** At two hours, the film can at times be long (there are a few surplus characters and a unneeded comedic moments; banana peel and a comedic guardsman being the two worst offenders). Those negatives are outweighed by a solid plot, decent characters, and solid actors. Some of the run time should have shown a few characters slowly changing, rather the audience is left to fill in the blanks of why they changed (becoming King would do that a man). Lewis Stone is rather good, as is Ramon Novarro.
23. **Monte Cristo:** An adaptation of the famous novel with John Gilbert in the titular role. The primary issue is in adapting the novel. The novel is rather long and the film is about an hours and forty minutes. Characters will appear out of nowhere, events are completely glossed over or given a single title card. The costumes are rather good, especially the Count's various suits. John Gilbert had drip. John Gilbert is rather good. Some of the other actors are not very good and overact.
22. **Phantom:** Directed by F.W. Murnau, the film is a disappointment. In that is is directed by Murnau and ranks here. Other directors, would be commended for making a perfectly reasonable (and average) film. With Murnau you expect greatness. There are a few good technical elements; the city moving in on the main character, hallucination of the carriage driver, and brief sequence on the 'topsy turvy day'. The main issue with the film is the unbelievable reason for the main character's decent into scoundrel-hood. After being run over by a wealthy (and attractive) lady, he can not shake her. Becoming lustful and obsessed. If, you buy that, the rest of the film makes a lot of sense and is a solid character study with good acting. But that shock is hard to take.
21. **Love One Another (Die Gezeichneten):** A film by Carl Theodor Dreyer that is not nearly as good as his other work (*The Parson's Widow* and *Leaves from Satan's Book*). Where his previous films has amazing camerawork, this film is semi-lacking in that department. There is a nice dream sequence, a few good edits as well. This film gets bogged down with a plot that simply isn't that interesting; the plight of the Jews on the eve of the Russian Revolution. It does have a lot it wants to say (about loving one another), but the plot is so much of going through the motions (along with side characters that do not serve much purpose).
20. **Flesh and Blood:** A film that is once again elevated by the performance of Lon Chaney. Chaney plays an escaped (and wrongfully convicted) prisoner. Upon his escape, to evade detection he pretends to be a cripple; walking around on crutches. It is another masterclass in physical acting. Yet the plot becomes rather basic; Chaney's daughter runs the mission that takes care of the 'crippled' Chaney. She is to marry her boss. Said boss' father is the man who framed Chaney. There is not much else special. Enjoy another solid Chaney performance.

19. **Saturday Night:** Another Cecil B DeMille comedy-of-remarriage. The strength is the acting of both Leatrice Joy and Edith Roberts (*Flesh and Blood*). Joy in particular is rather good and does a lot of the heavy lifting to make the film work; she plays a wife who quickly comes to regret her choice of husband, yet attempts to make the best of new life. The film can not rank any higher because the plot (and script) is bad at times. Roberts' character (who is from the working class) is literally named Shamrock O'Day. The film is about how people should marry within their own economic and social class. One might claim there is depth to the film (critiquing both the rich and poor), yet kind-with-kind message overpowers, resulting in a decent film that could have been better flushed out.
18. **Dr. Jack:** The first of two Harold Lloyd films on the list, and it is easily inferior. It recycles a few ideas from the better film (the car sequences are rather similar). Some of the gags simply take too long to develop (the card game; giving all the players four aces in an attempt to 'quickly' break up the game). The lengthy ending sequence is a bit of deus-ex-machina; the police tell them someone is on the loose and was spotted near by. Lloyd dons a costume to 'terrorize' the people in the house. The sequence lasts a long time (with a fair bit of laughs). One assumes this was an attempt to spoof the current trend of old spooky homes films and plays. This is a decent Lloyd film but nowhere near his best effort.
17. **The Loves of Pharaoh (Das Weib des Pharaos):** Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. The film is a drama with some romance. It a great example of why Lubitsch is best at comedies and pure romances. Emil Jannings is decent, but the flaw seems to be more with how his character written. And the acting of the slave-girl-turned-wife does not help carry the film. Dagny Servaes simply was not up to the task and the film suffers because of it (you need to believe multiple are in love with her, and would throw away their kingdom to marry her). The restoration of the recently-discovered print is great (a few bits are still missing).
16. **When Knighthood Was in Flower:** The costumes are rather good. The sets are decent (but inferior to some of the better spectacles on the list). Marion Davies is solid in the leading role, but not amazing. A better actress probably moves this up a bit. Lyn Harding overacts as Henry VIII at times, but given he is playing Henry VIII it is tolerated. There is some hand-coloring near the end of the film that looks good. The entire new restoration is rather beautiful.
15. **Nathan the Wise:** For a full disclaimer, the print I watched had the subtitles cut out with roughly thirty minutes to go. I ended up using Google translate on my phone to muddle through the remainder of the film. Perhaps that dinged the rating a little bit. The attack on Jerusalem is amazing, especially the siege tower. Silents have a charm with their large-scale battles lost in the era of CGI. The cast is rather good and features actors from other German classics; Max Schreck (*Nosferatu*) and Werner Krauss (*Dr. Caligari*) for example. Ironically Krauss plays the titular Nathan (a Jew who argues for compassion and shared humanity), ended up being one of Hitler's biggest cheerleaders. The plot is solid, but what stands out is the pro-Jewish (and pro-humanity/peace) message in a German film in 1922.

Tier :

14. **Once Upon a Time (Der var engang):** The second film by Carl Theodor Dreyer on the list. This one is a tad hard to rate properly as a good bit of the film is missing (especially the final scenes). The film has a little bit more of Dreyer's style. The plot is a straight-forward fairy tale. Yet the actors are able to carry it. Who knows if the missing sequences would have made the film a slog (the plot veers into *Taming of the Shrew* territory), or contained some great shots.

13. **Shadows:** Ignoring that Lon Chaney dons Yellowface for the entire film to portray Yen Sin, the film is rather good (and puts Yen Sin in a positive light; instead of the usual operatives of opium dens and other means of underworld nefarity). Lon Chaney does a lot of the work in the film; especially as he could have played Yen Sin in a completely racist way. The film's plot is about converting Yen Sin to Christianity (and Christian morality in general), but is more than that. Except the character of the pastor (played by Harrison Ford) and his wife are not developed enough to elevate this film more. As the plot really had something; a 'religious' town who's members hurt the pastor and wife and shun the honest Yen Sin. Yet, sadly those themes are not developed enough.
12. **The Seventh Day:** A film that captures the issues of the era. A yacht of rich city folk breaks down near a fishing town. The yachtsmen and the fishers interact. It straddles the line of showing the faults with both groups, but also their virtues. The film is enjoyable because of the cast. Richard Barthelmess (*Tol'able David*) is charming as always. Louise Huff and Anne Cornwall are also good.
11. **Grandma's Boy:** The second of two Harold Lloyd films for the year. The film is classic Lloyd—both good and bad. The mothball-candy sequence is hilarious. The car 'chase' scenes are well done, along with a few of the fights. There was a brief detour into a pro-Confederate flashback (that is rather funny, but a classic 1920s mainstay of Lost Cause resurgence). Yet that isn't the main issue, it is the another 1920s mainstay that causes issues; you-can-do-anything-if-you-believe-in-yourself attitude (or briefly in the film, posses a lucky charm). Lloyd hasn't aged as well as Chaplin or Keaton for a reason. It is not that Lloyd wasn't funny, but his films are not often not as timeless.
10. **Robin Hood:** Classic Douglas Fairbanks (*The Mark of Zorro*). The adventure film is in-line with his mid-career change from comedic actor to leading man in adventure films (*The Three Musketeers*). Fairbanks is rather good, as always. The primary issue is the script/runtime (there is an intermission though). A solid hour is devoted to the backstory of the titular Robin Hood; the disappearance of King Richard and the ascendance of Prince John. These are long, mostly boring, and the viewer simply wants the film to get to the important plot. Once the film reaches the Robin Hood portion of the story, the film become pure Fairbanks; sliding down a massive curtain, leaping onto a tower and then scaling the ivy, etc. The sets are amazing (and expensive). They built a town and castle. The cinematography is good and makes use of the set design (characters can be seen on multiple levels of the castle, windows allow for action in the foreground and the background. It is a well-made film, but one needs to survive the first hour to appreciate it.
9. **Moran of the Lady Letty:** The first Rudolph Valentino film I really enjoyed. Valentino plays a wealthy playboy without purpose in life, who is then kidnapped and pressed into work on a ship. The shots of the San Francisco Bay are good, same with the ship sequences. The plot is what you'd expect; Valentino's character because a manly man and get the girl. Yet it the quality and charm of Valentino (and Dorothy Dalton) who make the film work. Of note, is the Chinese character, who's dialogue/title cards are very much racist, is portrayed as a good guy, actively helping Valentino and Dalton. In the 1920s you gotta take positive portrayals of Chinese-Americans anyplace you can.
8. **Love's Crucible (Vem Dömer):** Written and directed by Victor Sjöström (*The Phantom Carriage*), the film is a hidden gem. Hidden in the sense that it desperately needs a restoration and proper home-video release. Available prints show some of the cinematic excellence, but shadows are not as crisp as they should be, for example. The camera moves around some as well, another nice touch. The plot is decent, but could have used a little more motivation, rather a title card simply states she hates her soon-to-be husband and loves someone else. It would have been nice to see this character development. Perhaps with a better copy, this film sneaks into the next tier of films.

Tier :

7. **Crainquebille:** Directed by Jacques Feyder, one can't help but see the parallels to newer realistic depictions of poverty (Italian Neorealism, British Kitchen Sink, etc). The film could easily be made today. A street vendor is harassed by a cop who drums up false charges. The vendor finds life in prison more accommodating than the outside (running water!). A sham trial with a do-nothing defense attorney (and some lovely surreal sequences during the trial). After being released from prison, there is no support system with high chances for recidivism. The realistic simplicity is the strength of the film, along with some solid acting by the lead.
6. **The Burning Soil (Der brennende Acker):** An underrated and oft-forgotten Murnau classic. The film deserves a proper restoration as many of Murnau's films have received in recent years (perhaps one would even result in me bumping the ranking). If a proper restoration existed, I'd recommend it to everyone who enjoyed *There Will Be Blood*. The film does not have much of Murnau's signature visual style (this could be a function of the print quality). What it does offer is multiple well-developed characters. The characters push the film forward. Unlike many silents that rely on deus ex machina or random events to advance the plot, most everything occurs organically because of the characters. It is a well-written and acted film.
5. **Foolish Wives:** Written, directed, and starring Erich von Stroheim, the film has all his classic trademarks. The sets are extravagant. The costumes are wonderful. The on-location shooting is amazing. The characters are horny buggers; deviously horny to boot (who among us hasn't tried to get an OTHPJ from a passed out girl, but were cock-blocked by an intrusive monk?). The shots are amazing, most are excellently composed (excellent use of columns to frame shot and divide characters). Yet, for all the extravagance and technical competency, there isn't that much left in the way of the plot and character development.
4. **The Three Must-Get-Theres:** Max Linder (*Seven Years Bad Luck*) is a comedic genius. The film is a parody of Douglas Fairbanks' *The Three Musketeers*. Although I had watched *Musketeers* last year, the details of the plot and what exactly was being parodied was lost on me at times. That being said, Linder imparts the film with ridiculous humor at every turn. The fight scenes are particularly crazy; the film seems to go out of its way to find new ways of 'killing' the bad guys (encircling Linder, but when Linder ducks they all stab one another being a classic; pretending to be dead, etc). He sails across the English Channel on a horse. It pure fun.

Tier 1: Classics

3. **Häxan:** A film that is a genre all of its own. It isn't exactly a documentary; though at times images are from real-life drawings with the 'narrator' pointing out details. It isn't exactly a narrative film, more of a recreation. It is similar to an essay, yet parts are dramatized. The effects are great; a twirling city in miniature superimposed with witches 'flying', the reverse filming of coins 'falling' to give the illusion of them being sucked up. The costumes and make up of the devil and various demons. The film is a visual treat (the restoration on the Criterion blu ray is especially delightful). The film also succeeds by being an early sorta feminist film; 'witchcraft' was merely a way of suppressing women (who in some instances simply did not wish to become pregnant), and the suppression of women continues today; though with a semi-simplistic take on mental health and mental health treatment (it was 1922 after all). The film is a breakthrough for what the medium can be, defying the conventions of the time.
2. **Nosferatu:** Directed by F.W. Murnau the film is a renowned classic. It established horror conventions and built the foundation for all future vampire films. Yet, while watching it is difficult to appreciate how innovative it was, the film is not as scary as more modern films. In-context it is revolutionary, and that could easily bump it up to the top spot—though it is enough of a drag to rank second. Another drag is the lack of character development. The final drag is that the film does

a lot of explaining (again, this is the first Vampire and an early true horror film) via title cards. What makes the film excel is the work of Murnau behind the camera. The first excellent shot is the dark carriage taking Hutter to the castle (both the undercranking to produce an eerie darting of the carriage and use of the photographic negative to swap the blacks and whites). The use of shadows are infamous. The use of tinting is also perfect (especially with candles going out). The shots of the death ship are amazing, and often sped up or slowed down, each contributing to the sense of horror. This may not be Murnau's masterpiece, but it certainly is one.

1. **Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler (Part I and II):** Sticking with tradition, I lump both parts together as one film. Directed by Fritz Lang, the film is a classic. The opening act is a tour-de-force of cinema. Most every thriller owes a debt of gratitude to the sequence. The editing of the opening act, and the entire film is great. Most silents have a difficult time telling intricate stories with many characters. *Mabuse* does not have this issue (partially because of the editing—characters will be discussing someone, the title card will display the aforementioned character's name and the next scene begins with that character. The film cross cuts perfectly). The sets have the tell tale signs of German Expressionism, but are toned down. The effects are amazing; the circular card table, the 'ghosts', and perhaps best of all the sequence driving to the quarry. The film is amazing. The four-and-a-half-hour run time does not seem long as the plot is so tight and characters well-written. Perhaps the only knock is that the opening sequence – that establishes Dr Mabuse as a criminal mastermind – does not fit in much with the rest of the film's criminal activities. Even still, there is perhaps no better introduction of a criminal character in cinematic history. This may not be Lang's masterpiece, but it certainly is one.