

# Cultural Daily

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## Value of Films: Do They Cost What They're Worth?

Garner Simmons · Thursday, January 5th, 2012

If April is the cruelest month, then January is the most clairvoyant. Named for the Roman god Janus — the two-faced deity — January looks into both the past and future. Thus every January, film industry insiders attempt to look into the past in order to discern the future. And this year, the vision is laced with pain.



The total number of tickets sold in the US and Canada for 2011 was down 4%, the seventh negative year since the new millennium began. The only thing propping up the annual box office is rising ticket prices due in part to the ability to charge a premium for I-MAX and 3-D. Consequently, this year's total came in at just \$10.2 billion (the horror, the horror...). According to the studios, the blame lies with video games, the Internet, piracy, and an increasing number of people willing to wait for Netflix to deliver the film on DVD or VOD. However, instead of pointing fingers at outside forces, perhaps it's time to look within the system itself.

One of the most striking examples of what is wrong with the system can be seen by comparing two films: Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* and Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*.

Both are the work of exceptional filmmakers, men of vision and courage whose body of work is remarkable — and since we're talking about two films set in France, one could say they are, in fact, both auteurs. The films have much in common: both are set in Paris; both look backward to an idealized age; both involve historical figures. However, these films could not be more different. Scorsese's film is a love letter to an intellectualized cinema. Allen's is a love letter to the Arts. *Hugo* will play forever in France. *Midnight in Paris* will play forever in our hearts.

As you may know, I am not a fan of 3-D. Nevertheless, Scorsese has used it in ways that I find much more compelling than anything in *Avatar*. At the same time, for me it remains a gimmick — a distraction more than a plus. Right from opening frame we get an idealized Paris as the snow is falling in 3-D annoyingly taking your eye away from the focus of the shot — the sprawl of the city and the Eiffel Tower in the distance. But then, that's the point. This isn't a picture of Paris c.1930, it's a green screen rendering. The longer you look at it, the less real it becomes. Having snow dancing across the screen is akin to filming Doris Day at 50 with gauze over the lens. Scorsese's most effective use of 3-D takes place in the narrow tunnel-like mechanics of the Paris train station clockworks as Hugo navigates the system. And while I loved his sly insertion of "cameos" using James Joyce and Salvador Dali... and Django Reinhardt playing his guitar, these are minor flourishes compared to Allen's recreation of Paris in the Twenties or the Belle Epoch. In truth, Scorsese gives us his personal fantasy while Allen's film allows us to partake in a shared fantasy — the notion of returning to a more heroic time.

✘ Ironically, Scorsese's film also supplies the images that give the lie to green screen and 3-D.

In the middle of the film, Hugo takes his new girlfriend to see her first movie which turns out to be Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last*. Filmed in 1923, it shows Lloyd ten stories above LA as he scales the facade of one of LA's tallest early buildings with a camera angle that allows us to actually see the traffic passing on the street below. It is one of the most miraculous moments ever recorded on film — precisely because it's real. Not one of *Hugo*'s death-defying moments (including his own exterior clock scene) can touch it because Scorsese's filmic daring-do is all done using VFX.

*Hugo* cost a reported \$170 million to produce. And without question, much of it is on the screen. But the story moves at a glacial pace and most of the drama (the rediscovery of Melies and his films) is more cerebral than exciting with the audience far ahead of Hugo for most of the film. My guess is that a major reason Scorsese opted for 3-D was to punch up an otherwise flat story (sorry for the pun). But truthfully, it's tough to imagine this movie making its money back, 3-D or no. Indeed, according to Box Office Mojo, as of the end of the year, HUGO has made \$57 million worldwide. By contrast, *Midnight in Paris* cost \$17 million and has made \$145 million.

If there is a lesson in all this, perhaps it is this: as much as I hate to say it, a film's budget needs to realistically reflect its box office potential. A smarter way to approach HUGO would have been to lose the element of 3-D and tighten the story by half an hour. Instead of indulging every whim, if Scorsese had made this on a Woody Allen-like budget, he might have created a classic that actually made money. As it is, word is that the film may bankrupt his principal backer, Graham King, one of the few true risk-takers left in the business. A sad state of affairs. Wish I were wrong. Because great motion pictures aren't about making money. They are about making us care.

And one final thought: Does anyone think that raising ticket prices in a Recession makes going to the movies more attractive? Ever wonder what would happen if instead of making \$100 million movies about superheroes with over-the-top VFX, they shifted to reasonably budgeted pictures that touch us emotionally and then passed the savings on to the viewer in the form of reduced ticket prices? Who knows, it might even boost the bottom line...

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