

Hyojung Kim

Writing 1

Spring Semester 2015

May 12, 2015

Martin Scorsese's Ode to the Magic of Films

Mankind's first encounter with the technology of movies must have been enchanting. Inside a film, the movements and time of a piece of a world that only exists for a moment in reality is captured forever and can be transported anywhere. The fascination with it would not have been very different from what Harry Potter must have felt when he first saw the alive portraits of the magical school, Hogwarts. In fact, when the Lumière brothers screened the first moving picture ever of a train arriving at a station, the audience would scream and duck thinking that the train was actually there and was going to hit them. However, it was not the Lumière brothers who made film what it is today. That credit goes to Georges Méliès, who not only recorded what was actually happening, but used stories and special effects to create a world of dreams inside films. The movie "Hugo," which is set in the 1930s, the early days of film, is director Martin Scorsese's movie about Méliès, dedicated to his innovative mind and his dreams about dreams. Scorsese, one of the most accomplished contemporary directors, seeks to explore the past of film and its audience in "Hugo." **Here, he creates an allegory of the power and magic of film and its fantasy that has inspired him and other young directors with symbolic characters and items, while asserting his aspiration to continue creating and improving its dream.**

The director begins the story of films with himself and other directors' early days: the protagonist of the story, a boy named Hugo, acts as a persona of Scorsese and as a metonymy for all contemporary directors who has been inspired by preceding films. Although Hugo never speaks directly to the audience, the point of view of "Hugo" is most

similar to the first person narrative in literature. The film does not include narrations in Hugo's voice that inform the viewers of his feelings and thoughts, but the camera follows Hugo and shows them what he sees. What Hugo does not know remains as a mystery, and any piece of information he learns is instantly transmitted to the audience. Despite the fact that in most cases the author cannot be identified with the narrator, in this movie the feeling that the director is telling his own story is deliberately created with the use of first person point of view. Following the narrator, the audience sees in the introduction that he is an orphan living in the walls of a train station in France of the 1930s. They also learn that the objective that drives Hugo through the rising action is to fix an automaton his father, who died in an accident, has left him. As it progresses the movie reveals that the automaton which seems to have been designed to write was actually made by Méliès, and that its role is far more than just a broken toy: it acts as a symbol of Méliès's films and the wonders they bring. Hugo's father, when introducing the automaton to Hugo, says that devices like it were made by magicians to entertain people. What its intricate design enables it to do looks like magic to people, and Scorsese says that films are the same. Hugo also confesses that he thought he would not be lonely anymore once he had fixed the automaton, as films entertain their audiences and act as their companions. The significance of the automaton then makes Hugo's role more than that of a narrator. He is not only speaking as the voice of Scorsese himself, but his story is also an allegory for the story of the youth of current directors. Hugo is fascinated by the automaton, as Scorsese as a boy was, and all directors in their youth must have been, with the early films that put them on their current path. Once the audience realizes the role of symbols, the story of Hugo fixing the automaton becomes the story of young viewers being mesmerized by the world of films and eventually becoming creators themselves. The encounter of Hugo and Méliès is also a metaphor of the young director himself meeting Méliès's films for inspiration in his own work. The first meeting is made when Méliès

catches Hugo stealing parts for his automaton from his toy store. Hugo plans to fix his automaton with Méliès's parts, as Scorsese received parts of Méliès's dream and adapted them into his own work.

Hugo, however, cannot complete the automaton by himself as a director cannot complete a film on his own: a film needs an audience as much as a creator, and Scorsese introduces another developed character who will assist Hugo in fixing the automaton, the young Isabel, to symbolize the audience of film. Isabel is an orphan like Hugo under the protection of "Papa Georges," Méliès. The encounter between Isabel and Hugo happens almost directly after Hugo meets Méliès. She, whose hobby is to devour books, is then introduced to films by Hugo and almost instantly falls in love with them. By setting up Isabel in this way, the director demonstrates how the main form of media in which stories are told in the society has proceeded to films from books. The two are very similar in the way that they tell stories, and the majority of the audience has simply been transmitted to films as Isabel was. Isabel is also a character that complements Hugo. Hugo's automaton, which stands for movies, could not move even though Hugo, the creator, had almost perfectly fixed its parts. Hugo believes that the machine does not function because it is missing a key which should fit in the keyhole at the back of his neck, and is frustrated because he is unable to find the key by himself. However, later in the story he discovers that that Isabel had the key all along without knowing what it was. When the two of them put the key in the keyhole and turn it, the automaton's magic is perfected, and it starts drawing as it was meant to. This scene shows how an art can only be perfected when a creator meets an audience. Every one of the audience who loves films is the last piece that complements the theaters, just as Isabel was the last piece of the automaton. The friendship and bond the two build exploring the automaton also seems to represent the connection that happens between an audience and the creator in the experience of watching a film.

While Hugo and Isabel both love films and seem to be going towards a bright future for them, the movie also discusses moments of doubts that is inevitable as films struggle to overcome reality; however, Scorsese then concludes by declaring that the power of film will always prevail over the harshness of reality. This part of the story is told by the life of Méliès himself. When Méliès first appears in the film, the narrator Hugo and the audience do not know that he is the man who opened commenced the age of special effects, for he appears as a grumpy old owner of a small toy shop, not a great figure in films. In the time period the film is set, Méliès has already abandoned what has before been the the greatest passion in his life. The audience is left wondering at first, but when the movie almost reaches its climax, Méliès discloses his story. The old man reveals that his movies that used special effects to create worlds of dreams were hugely popular in the beginning, but his business began to crumble with the initiation of war. The Great War here serves as a metonymy for the harsh reality that takes away and crushes people's dreams. When the war came the brutalities of reality overwhelmed people so they could no longer afford fantasies, as other limits of reality often draw people away from entertainment yet today. The calamities of war frustrated and discouraged Méliès greatly, and he even admits that he was forced to sell his films to a company that melted them and fabricated them into shoe heels. The impression of blandness that shoe hills generally evoke creates a strong contrast with films as a symbol of mundane reality, as opposed to the magnificent world of films. However, in the climax of the film, Méliès learns that people have been returning to films and were once more seeking their dreams through Hugo, which restores his enthusiasm. In the end Méliès appears as a lively and pleasant man in front of a large audience who gathered to watch and celebrate his films, instead of as the grumpy old man who scolded Hugo in the opening. This story of Méliès's dreams that were lost then restored is an allegory that shows even though fantasy films provide may seem to disappear in harsh times, they are immortal

because people will always want to see dreams no matter what cruelty they experience in the real world.

The protagonist and other developed characters including Méliès himself are not the only characters contributing to the analogy of film and reality in this movie, for the conflict with the antagonist of this story also fulfills that mission. The main antagonist is the station inspector, whose job is to capture orphans at the station and send them to orphanages. Hugo, living inside the walls without any parents, inevitably becomes his main target. The station inspector is a man who is only concerned with practicality and his work, even though it involves sending protesting orphans to orphanages in trucks that look like cages. His mind has no time for fantasies, quite the opposite of Hugo or Isabel. His detachment to the world of fantasies is depicted in the scene where he encounters Isabel. Isabel, as an attempt to draw his attention away from Hugo, recites a poem to him. He is then greatly confused and stops Isabel, leaving almost immediately. However, he seems to be embarrassed by his failure to understand in this scene, which may imply a covert hunger for exploring fantasies. This trait makes him more than an undeveloped character that only displays his evil side for the sake of conflict. The symbolism of the inspector is also subtly expressed by a physical flaw: he can only walk with the help of a mechanical device on his left leg. This device often malfunctions, and the inspector is seen interrupted in the middle of action due to his deficiency. The audience later learns that his leg was injured in the war, which is again, a metonymy for reality's brutality that destroyed Méliès's enthusiasm too. He is seized by this wound reality has left him and cannot be free to dream. For instance, his conversation with the flower lady at the station, the conversation with his love interest or "the girl of his dreams" is interrupted abruptly because his device breaks down. Reality is incessantly dragging him back to his trauma so he cannot satisfy his desires. Nevertheless, towards the end, he once more understands the importance of dreams when he lets Hugo go

so he can return to Méliès with his automaton instead of sending him to the orphanage. In the ending scene the audience become aware that he has escaped from his trauma, for his deficient leg has been “fixed” perfectly by the device that Hugo has created: a device whose mechanisms quite resemble that of the automaton. He is seen happily conversing with the flower lady, his wounds of reality cured with the power of the world of fantasy. Imagination once more proves that it is the antidote to the poisons of reality and should not be shunned.

As it can be noted by examining the significance of the antagonist, the characters and symbols deliver much of the message of this movie, but the final but not least important declaration is made not by the story itself, but by the way it is told: the 3D technology. Méliès’s special effects were innovative and astounding at the time, but the creators of film over the generations did not simply follow what has already been invented. The ways of charming audiences and presenting them with dreams have evolved so much over time with the passion of those who were passionate about films as Méliès was and have reached where they stand today. 3D technology is one of the most modern creations, and this new technology of 3D and CGI shows images of Paris and the train station that are so beautiful that they almost cast a spell over the audience. These images make Paris seem like a magical kingdom and not a city that exists in reality. The technology that created them are not tools that Méliès had in his days, but only exists because of Méliès’s innovation of introducing special effects into films. In fact, they may actually be no different from the early technology in that their purpose is to present a world of fantasies to the audience. The fact that this film was particularly filmed in 3D to create such splendid images seems to be a testament to the progress film has achieved, with the same goal as its pioneers. This statement of legacy and progress parallels with the very last scene of the movie, where Hugo is performing a magic trick Méliès had performed before, as if to show that he has inherited Méliès’s dreams and will cherish and improve them in his life. This film was also the first

movie that Martin Scorsese, the 72-year-old veteran director, has created in 3D. By deciding to employ a new technology even after 40 years in the industry, Scorsese seems to make a pledge to the audience that he will never stop innovating and that film will continue to progress.

This pledge of Scorsese approaches as a particularly touching one once the significance of the symbols and the message of the movie are understood. "Hugo," despite the impression its colorful poster with images of child actors may give, is not a simple children's tale of adventure. Rather, it is an allegory about the beginning of special effects and the path films have walked so far told in a fantastic way using representations. The director Scorsese incorporates himself in the movie as the young boy Hugo and leads the viewers to Paris in the 1930s, to have them witness the ambition and achievement of Méliès and express recognition and respect for the man who has made today's world of films possible. The audience also receives a nod of recognition and fellowship in the experience of watching the movie as the young Isabel helps Hugo complete the automaton, which can otherwise be understood as the genre of films, as the delegate of all viewers. The characters overcome the conflict caused by the limits of reality and declare to the audience that although reality can be harsh, the comfort and power of fantasy will always be valuable and needed. Scorsese by telling this story expresses gratitude Méliès's pursuit of a dream that inspired so many, and states his love and passion for films as a director and an audience in the form of a beautiful story. In short, the movie is a eulogy to the past and a declaration for the future.