

# The best of silent movies

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## SILENT MOVIES

Talk to people who saw films for the first time when they were silent, and they will tell you the experience was magic. The silent film, with music, had extraordinary powers to draw an audience into the story, and an equally potent capacity to make their imagination work. They had to supply the voices and the sound effects, and because their minds were engaged, they appreciated the experience all the more. The audience was the final creative contributor to the process of making a film. The films have gained a charm and otherworldliness with age but, inevitably, they have also lost something.

The impression they made when there was no rival to the moving picture was more profound, more intense; compared to the easily accessible pictures of today, it was the blow of a two-handed axe, against the blunt scraping of a tableknife. The silent period may be known as "The Age of Innocence" but it included years unrivalled for their dedicated viciousness. In Europe, between 1914 and 1918 more men were killed to less purpose than at any other time in history. In publications of the time, one reads horrified reactions against films showing "life as it is".

You did not leave the problems at home merely to encounter them again at the movies. You paid your money initially, for forgetfulness. Gradually movie-going altered from relaxation to ritual. In the big cities, you went to massive picture palaces, floating through incense-laden air to the strains of organ music, to worship at the Cathedral of Light. You paid homage to your favourite star; you dutifully communed with the fan magazines. You wore the

clothes they wore in the movies; you bought the furniture you saw on the screen.

You joined a congregation composed of every strata of society. And you shared your adulation with Shanghai, Sydney and Santiago. For your favourite pastime had become the most powerful cultural influence in the world — exceeding even that of the Press. The silent film was not only a vigorous popular art; it was a universal language — Esperanto for the eyes. Although the genre of silent movie faded in the 30's it left us plenty of short and feature-length comedies created by four greatest silent screen actors: Charles Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton and Harry Langdon.

The most beloved of the four, the most appreciated by critics, Charles Chaplin, was the first to win general acclaim. Chaplin was a master of pantomime. His virtuoso improvisations quickly attracted the attention of American film-makers. At first he turned down all offers but in 1913 he finally joined Mack Sennet's film company. His success with the public was truly unique. This fact opened great opportunities for him to start his own business. He showed rare versatility in acting as the producer-director-script-writer-musician-leading actor of his own comedies.

His most famous films are "The Kid", "The Gold Rush", "The Circus", "City Lights", "Modern Times". Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton's contribution to the genre has been profound as well. Both comedians used story material of a young American trying to be successful as a man, in his love and in his business. Though they were both gifted and original actors and they could match Chaplin in his skill it took them longer to receive recognition that could compete with Chaplin's fame.

However by the early 1920's both Lloyd and Keaton were already well-known to the public and could start producing feature films, which meant that they were very successful at the box-office. The fourth actor, Harry Langdon, was noted for his man-child portrait that made him different from the other major comedians of his time. The four great comedians created a great comic tradition that was carried on with the sound age. They have given us masterpieces that will never fade, and they will influence the film comedies yet to be born.