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Three cheers for Martin Scorsese, who has not only made Hugo Movie one of the most lovingly fanciful and heartfelt films of the year -- he has also pulled off the subversive trick of introducing a new generation of kids to the magic of silent movies.

And, to boot, he's implanted potentially millions of little minds with the seeds of consciousness about film preservation, one of his pet causes. Yet he does it all within the context of a family-oriented movie for kids -- in 3D, no less.

Having never read Brian Selznick's children's book, The Invention of Hugo Cabret, I had a hard time imagining why Scorsese -- whose list of potential future projects would take him three lifetimes to complete -- would take the time, energy and imagination necessary to make a movie for kids. And in 3D, no less. But Hugo eventually reveals itself as an obvious choice for this ultimate film lover/historian.

The title character is Hugo Movie Cabret (Asa Butterfield), a pale-eyed kid who lives in an apartment secreted in the walls of the depot, circa 1931. His job is to keep all of the various clocks in the station wound and keeping accurate time. But he must maintain a secret existence from the officious and silly station inspector (Sacha Baron Cohen), who tosses unclaimed children into the local orphanage. Hugo's daily quarry is the small toy shop in the corridors of the train station, full of small wind-up toys and overseen by an elderly (and cranky) old guy (Ben Kingsley), referred to as Papa Georges by his goddaughter, Isabelle (Chloe Moretz), who lives with him and picks him up each day.

One day Papa Georges catches Hugo picking up a toy that has fallen on the floor and accuses him of being a thief. Hugo protests, emptying his pockets to prove his innocence and to avoid a threatened encounter with the station inspector. The old man finds a small notebook full of drawings and notations that ring a bell; when Hugo won't tell him where the notebook came from, Papa George confiscates it, to Hugo's horror.

Hugo follows him home, encountering Isabelle instead and making her promise to keep Papa George from burning it, as he's threatened. The notebook, it turns out, was left to him by his late father (Jude Law), a clockmaker who has left him, among other things, a silvery automaton. Hugo has been laboring to find gears and cogs to match his father's drawings in hopes of repairing the automaton and getting it to work.

Eventually Scorsese works his way to the world of silent films -- from the extraterrestrial fantasies of pioneering French filmmaker George Melies to the stunning visual imagination of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. There are recreations of Melies' studio and clips from his earliest work, as well as moments that pay homage to Lloyd, Keaton and the famous photograph of an 1895 train crash.

The story here is about the timelessness of art and the carelessness of popular culture. Scorsese has the perfect vehicle to look at the notion of a contemporary society that tosses out the old to make way for the new, instead of venerating what has come before and recognizing that all art is, in effect, recycling and repurposing.

Visually, Scorsese is operating on all cylinders, aided in no small part by cinematographer Robert Richardson. Richardson's camera swoops and glides, starting with an astonishing shot that begins

in the skies of Paris, soars down into the Paris train station, along the train platform, through the terminal, ending in a close-up of Hugo, peering out through a small window in a giant clock overlooking the main terminal below. It's the first of many amazing bits of camera trickery and innovation that blend actual images with computer-altered ones.

Scorsese is also one of the few directors who makes good use of 3D, the year's worst trend. His images of the Paris skyline make it look like an elaborate pop-up book -- and he also utilizes 3D in dialogue scenes to give his image a depth of field that would make Orson Welles drool with envy.

Hugo isn't perfect; in attempting to create a nearly wordless world of regulars who inhabit the train station, writer John Logan comes up with a weak romantic dalliance beween an elderly merchant (Richard Griffiths) and his age-appropriate counterpart, who runs a station eatery (Frances de la Tour). Too much of the Sacha Baron Cohen material is slapsticky in unimaginative ways, though Baron Cohen finds laughs even where few exist.

Butterfield is a likably vulnerable kid, a youthful hero not presented as being all-knowing or all-capable. He's physically bold but emotionally open, as is Moretz, as his eventual female sidekick. Kingsley is appropriately imperious, yet shows the cracks in this man's crusty exterior.

Hugo is transporting, a smart and imaginative treat that would make a great double-feature with Michel Hazanavicius' The Artist. Put it on your holiday movie list.

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