

Responses to time, space and emotion-A critical analysis of sound design and music composition in ‘speechless films’

This thesis is centred with the possibilities of sound including sound design and music composition in the context of ‘speechless films’, and how they emerge and infect with moving images. The ‘speechless film’ means films with little or without lines, which also includes silent films and films being muted in this essay. The following chapters will expand on the significance of sound accompanied with moving images without voices, an interview with Sound artist: Steven Walker on his sound recreation of silent films, and the reasons behind the fact that people watch films without sound in public.

The origin of silent film is a film with no synchronised recorded sound in the case of the inventions: phonograph (?) and moving pictures (?) by Thomas Edison in 1890s didn’t work with each other. **Edison thought that, if he could unite the sound of his phonograph with his moving pictures, he could create the illusion of life itself—a picture of a person that could move and speak, as if it were alive. (A Very Short History of the Transition from Silent to Sound Movies by Emily Thompson)**

No human being is more responsible for cinema’s ascendance as the dominant form of art and entertainment in the twentieth century than Charles Chaplin. Chaplin was famous for the iconic figure ‘The Little Tramp’, a poor but elegant man who often got into trouble with a good heart.

“Modern Times” is Chaplin’s self-conscious valedictory to the pantomime of silent film he had pioneered and nurtured into one of the great art forms of the twentieth century. **“Modern Times: a story of industry, of individual enterprise, humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness.”** It is considered as a sound film, for the sake of containing very little dialogues. The sound design and music composition are primarily Chaplin’s own musical score and sound effects, as well as a performance of a song by the Tramp in gibberish. This remarkable performance marks the only time the Tramp ever spoke. Chaplin resisted talking pictures in part because the Tramp’s silence made him understood around the world. However, with the gibberish song, Chaplin ingeniously makes the statement that talking in any one language is meaningless in all others, while at the same time allowing the Tramp to “speak” in a way that is universally understood. It was the Tramp’s swan song. Chaplin retired the character with “Modern Times.” **Through its universal themes and comic inventiveness, the film remains one of Chaplin’s greatest and most enduring works. Perhaps more important, it is the Tramp’s finale, a tribute to Chaplin’s immortal character and the silent- film era he commanded for a generation.**

(Chaplin, C., et al. (2010). *Modern times*. [New York, NY], Criterion Collection. & Essay by Jeffrey Vance, adapted from his book *Chaplin: Genius of the Cinema* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003).)

During the era of silent films, movie theatres hired musicians to play music that matched the mood of the scenes, making the experience more enjoyable for those who could hear it. **The musicians sat in a pit below the screen and played music that fit the mood of what was happening in the movie: sad music when the baby was sick, scary music when the monster approached, and happy music when the lovers got married.** However, even people who couldn't hear could still follow the story through reading the titles and watching the actors. In the 1920s, inventors tried to merge movies and recorded sound using electricity. They used microphones and amplifiers to collect and make loud recordings that could be synchronised with the image. They took their invention to Hollywood, but movie makers were not interested in using it, arguing that silent movies were still loved by everyone.

Another case study on early films:

There were two opposing groups in the early days of cinema: the "purists" who didn't like the idea of having language in movies and preferred only pictures, and the "integrationists" who saw the value and importance of intertitles in enhancing the storytelling and advocated for incorporating text creatively into cinematic storytelling.

The ideology of the former group can be encapsulated in a statement by one Howard Dimick:

[The spectator] demands that you give a play by pictured action only, and resents your impudence in offering him text, and the insult to his intelligence it implies; but the insult is really directed against your own technique – or lack of it – in having to resort to any medium of interpretation other than the pictures themselves.

Of course some opponents of title usage did grudgingly admit that a title here and there would be necessary to narrate particularly complex passages. Even writers such as Dimick, who maintain a strong ideological opposition to the use of text occasionally admit minor usage of text for practical purposes. Representing this standpoint, William Lewis Gordon writes, “Were it possible to do so, the perfect photoplay would be one without any leaders [intertitles], the scene action telling the entire story without resort to words. However, when this is attempted the lucidity of the story is too liable to suffer, where the occasional leader of a few words will bridge over a certain combination of events, giving the story a clearness quickly grasped by the audience, and perhaps avoid the introduction of several minor scenes otherwise necessary to make the story intelligible...”

Filmmakers realised that as film became a medium capable of telling more and more complex stories, the characters in those stories must reflect the lives of the Americans that were filling the theatre seats. Allowing characters to speak, and to speak like those reading the words, was one of the most effective ways that this could be accomplished. Silent character speech

deepened the cinema's storytelling capabilities, contributing a key narrative device that has extended well beyond the 'silent' era.

(The Sound of Silents: Representations of Speech in Silent Film, Torey Liepa, New York University MiT4: The Work of Stories May 7, 2005)

The Role of music in speechless films:

Charlie Chaplin films and the very first Mickey Mouse episodes are representative of this category. Since there are no dialogues in the film, the music is everything the film has to lead the emotional flow. (The Role of Music in Movies)

Fantasia (film) One of the most highly regarded of the Disney classics, a symphonic concert with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, embellished by Disney animation. Directed by Samuel Armstrong, James Algar, Bill Roberts, Paul Satterfield, Hamilton Luske, Jim Handley, Ford Beebe, T. Hee, Norm Ferguson, and Wilfred Jackson. Narrated by Deems Taylor. (Would be expand on this)

The Role of sound design in speechless films:

Blackmail (1929) Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock's first film with sound was also his final silent film. He made some interesting changes between the two versions as he didn't want to simply add dialogue and sound effects to his silent script. The silent scenes had a fluidity that was missing from the more rigid, talkative sequences. Even in the famous scene where a chatty customer repeats the word "knife" during breakfast after the main character has stabbed someone, the use of sound to explore psychological states was new and innovative. Hitchcock also used sound in a scene where the newsagent's ringing doorbell drowns out other sounds, emphasising the main character's guilt. To work with his lead actress Anny Ondra again, Hitchcock had to experiment with live dubbing as her thick Czech accent required her to mime while another actress delivered her lines with a different accent. **(Would be expand on this)**

The interview with Steven Walker on his silent film project

Film 1: *Scar Tissue* (1979) Directed by Su Friedrich. This is the film that I used a poem by Sylvia Plath (Poem is called "Ariel"). I'll try and find my film with the soundtrack to show you at some point.

Film 2: *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) Directed by Stan Brakhage. This was the world influenced film.

Film 3: *Lights* (1964-66) Directed by Marie Menken. This was the film about a light festival that was synthesised sounds. **(Would be expand on this)**

Monday, April 10, 2023

The reasons behind the fact that people watch films without sound in public

What is the importance of subtitles? Do people watch films with a speedup version? Limiting the disturbance and save time? (**Would be expand on this**)