

How Films Have Utilised Sound, Silence and Movement Throughout Decades

Question 3: *From the film & music cluster lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay (or equivalent). Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.*

Misha Lakhani

Student Number: 1906030

BA Course Title: FILM & TV

Word Count: 2,607

Lecture's Name: Rob Jones

How Films Have Utilised Sound, Silence and Movement Throughout Decades

Question 3: *From the film & music cluster lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay (or equivalent). Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.*

“Is the notion of cinema as the art of the image just an illusion?” (Chion) The power of silence can evoke the true beauty of movement and sound which does not have to be heard or even seen for one to feel what is inside, but to simply tell a story in its own way through expression of visionary image, sound in silence and communication of movement in many different art forms “In the realm of the sublime, silence becomes something other than absence or nothingness.” (Wawrzinek) To help me make strong validations, I will analyse the use of these techniques within motion picture by delving deeper into the meanings and exploring how practitioners have showcased silence in movement and communication throughout their work during time.

I firstly decided to look at The Pre-Golden Age and Silent Age era of film from the original classics of Disney. The concept of Disney has explored the use of silence through its empowering visuals and sound during its early years. This can be seen in Walt Disney’s 1928 classic animation called Steamboat Willie. In this famous show, the use of silence is being portrayed through the bodily communication and dramatic movements of characters. Louise Krasniewicz states “It is an ingenious piece of work with a good deal of fun. It growls, whines, squeaks and makes various other sounds that add to its mirthful quality.” We cannot hear the characters voices but are able to follow the story by black and white visuals and synchronised sounds. An example of this is seen at the beginning of the show when Mickey Mouse is whistling and turning the wheel of the boat, where “synchronous sound immediately enhanced the acoustic realism and commercial profitability of the cinematic experience” (Harper) and movement from both character and object simultaneously, where we witness “Mickey doesn’t speak but makes noises in reaction to the gruff treatment from the steamboat captain” (Krasniewicz). The overall theme’s soundtrack helps to create an emotional balance between audience and characters for comedic purposes, which is prolonged throughout the entire animation, but more so when two characters fully engage with each other with strong use of silence being demonstrated through no dialogue. This is repetitive throughout sequences where each character is using strong hand gesture movements to convey their use of non-verbal interaction with each other to keep the flow of the narrative connected to the protagonist.

Another example of this is seen as the story unfolds when Minnie and Mickey are interacting together with a large animal, thus displaying emotion through use of facial expressions, dramatic body movements and no dialogue. “All the effects that were developed over the past 25 years in cartoon animation - bodies stretching out of shape and then reforming, animals talking, object acting like humans – all now had their magic enhanced by sound that seemed natural and drawn directly from the screen.” (Krasniewicz)

I like how Walt Disney had created this movement piece because he introduced a fresh sense of visuals to the world through his use of abstract art and with the cinematography being in simple black and white form, thus enhancing its overall effects and showing the aging process of how characters have transitioned over the years within Disney. He takes the audience on magical journeys with him through the beloved Mickey Mouse and other famous characters that captivates the imaginations of adults and children for many generations by stating himself that “I hope we never lose sight of one thing-that it all started by a mouse.”

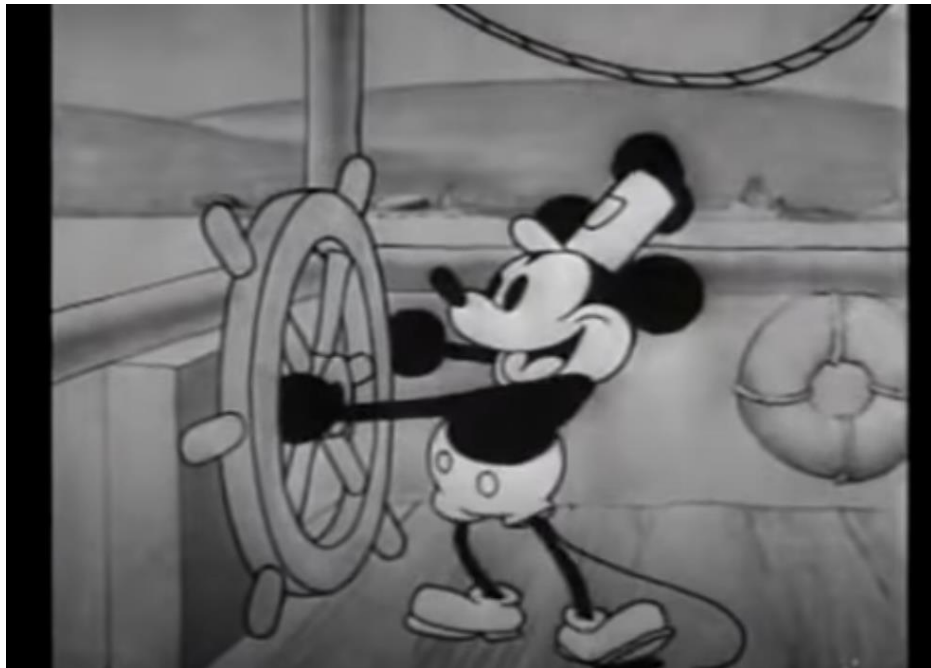


Figure 1

Marilyn Fabe says that “many film directors, film theorists, and aestheticians believed that the image defined the essence of cinema and was the feature that distinguished it from literature and theatre.” and we see that Walt Disney’s use of silence through imagery had a high appeal in the making of Mickey Mouse. He uses the same type of style in his first production called Plane Crazy that was released in 1928 by him and Ub Iwerks.

Plane Crazy did not have the use of synchronised sound at the time, compared to Steamboat Willie being the first cartoon of his to incorporate this, and securing a more effective feeling from when theorists say “They felt that the addition of synchronised sound (especially in the form of spoken speech) to film was a disaster that would destroy the cinema as a unique art form” (Fabe) at the time. Where Walt Disney done what others have failed, he has made silence and filmmaking seamless by bringing silent characters to life “synchresis is what makes dubbing, postsynchronization, and sound-effects mixing possible” (Chion)

The use of point of view (POV) was also introduced in Plane Crazy, thus giving the audience a more personal close-up feel with characters through its audio and vision. The silence used in this short animation is also dramatic and impacts the way in which certain objects are being portrayed, from like when Mickey falls off the plane and bounces onto the floor, as seen in Figure 2. This could have created

a moment for the audience to think that he will express his frustration and anger through verbalising his words, but instead the sound in his movements and facial expressions are displayed in his silent demeanour that adds a memorable feel by drawing you in closer to that moment and making the audience believe pain is real without speech, as Sampson states “In fact, most animation historians rarely mention the great use of POV (point of view) shots in this cartoon that was highly unusual for the time period”. I feel that Iwerkz and Walt Disney’s methods in this simplistic piece opened new doors and ways of experimenting with the use of synchronised and non-dietic sound from silence in American film and television during the 1920’s.



Figure 2

Another old classic which separates the depiction of movement and communication in silence is Walt Disney’s Laugh-O-Gram’s first ever silent 1928 film, *Alice’s Wonderland*. The clear distinguishing features in this short silent movie also conveys synchronised sound and imagery with no dialogue. For the writer to have kept the audience following and laughing along to the show was by introducing title cards, and words on the screen to create a more immersing and emotional engagement for the viewer to understand what is happening, and his way of experimenting with animation. The difference to this short animation however is the crossover between cartoon and real-life characters, intertwining them both into one story, like Charles Darwin states “vocal utterances express emotion, we are naturally led to inquire into the cause of what is called “expression””.

For example, there is a scene whereby Alice is being chased by an animated character within the extraordinary world, and for her to escape the lion she ends up running towards a hole in a tree to hide. The lion follows her inside, and then words such as “G-R-R-R” and “OUCH” appear to signify there

being an emphasis of fear via subtitles on screen to show “emotional expressions of many mammals and humans” using “facial expressions of emotion, such as those of anger, surprise, and fear.” (Soloman)

As we see Alice run, the sound of the music also seems to pick up to enhance the suspense and create a tempo of that moment as Alice is trying to escape cartoon characters. What makes this version of Alice’s Wonderland highly symbolic is because the notion from how movement and talking with pictures is used to indicate the interaction of characters, and experimentation with live-action and animation from “human emotion is expressed in external movement and, what is more, that movement can “inductively” provoke in man the emotion that gave rise to the movement.” (Abel)



Figure 3

Furthermore, and to challenge the idea of how movement and silence between real human and animation has developed more overtime since the 1920s, I also decided to look at Steven Spielberg’s 1975 film Jaws, primarily focusing on the scene where Brody ends up killing the shark, and how its been tackled in more modernised films as the years progressed. Throughout the duration of the film, there is a repetitive sense in how physical communication between man and beast has formed where “the theory of emotion is related to the observation that awareness of reality is not a matter of all or nothing at all” (Tan), like that of Alice’s Wonderland of how she interacts with the cartoons, except she is placed inside the fantasy world of magic that many children dream of being in, compared to the real world where man and beast conflict with each other, and how the director’s drawn silence on an inanimate object of like the ocean in Jaws and made it an especially useful weapon .

The use of dialect in Jaws is quite prominent, and the audience gets to witness the slow rise in conflict of through the suspense and build-up with non-diegetic sound. Spielberg focused his communication

between Brody and Jaws through silent movements, and this is seen when Jaws is moving throughout the water as scary audio plays in the background to enhance tension in preparation for his attack for “such emotional expressions work to solidify or alter a ‘sense-of-self’ or ‘sense-of-other’ for particular identity formations” (Pribram), compared to the use of diegetic sound being heard when Brody attacks Jaws with a spear. The means of this communication and vision of Jaws becomes apparent to the viewer through effective dialogue because the beast is mostly being spoken about rather than seen through the first half of the film by the anticipation, fear, and silence of wondering when the shark will appear. It is as if Spielberg wanted to keep the attack of the animal as a surprise to scare the audience in a quiet but deadly manner, and I find it keeps the audience enthralled throughout the film.

You can note the change of effects on how sound seems more useful through its form of dialogue and movement compared to that of Walt Disney’s previous classics when the dialogue is not very much known or heard, except for Alice’s Wonderland, when it is clear in the form of title cards, and “The End” being shown on screen to signify the end of the show.

“Silence is a form of solitude: in the absence of other people’s speaking voices around you, your world becomes entirely your own. “(Myers) To express emotion doesn’t always have to be heard by the sound of one’s voice, but can also be shown through the use of the character’s bodily movement, and that is what I find really powerful about these films.



Figure 4

The elaboration of how silence is used within media in a more contemporary art form portrays how communicating through movement and its language has changed, and so I found that Guy Maddin’s 2002 film *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin’s Diary* from the original *Dracula* novel was a fascinating watch because the way that he shows communication and interaction is through the medium of dance. The way that this horror film was made is so moving and effective because it emulates how the beauty of sublime in darkness is displayed in such an elegant manner that is enough to captivate its audience throughout, and I found this to especially be the case in the re-enactment of the iconic graveyard

scene when the two characters are portraying elements of delicacy through ballet dancing. We can see how the difference in how Mina and Dracula are interacting, and their relationship just keeps you fixated the entire time because they seemingly escape the ordinary world into a fantasy one. This indicates to the audience that we know what is not real but because of the movement and the silence in their dancing and expressions makes it so believable. The notion of purity and solace is represented from the female characters white dress, compared to the dark and menacing demeanour from Dracula and his seductions. You can then see the sudden change in its atmosphere the moment Dracula decides to bite into Mina's neck to allude control.

Alfred Hitchcock says that "When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. I always try to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between." Maddin also seems to keep following the old methods of silent filmmaking current by using title cards, dark lighting, and the colour red to denote darkness and blood, and black and white camera effects to keep the old traditional and authentic style. This adaptation of *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* has been beautifully acted out, alluding to the sense of a dark classic, repertoire and tone expression of an emotional piece with non-diegetic audio to show both Dracula and Mina's connection with each other through a beginning, a middle and an end from their intimate dancing.

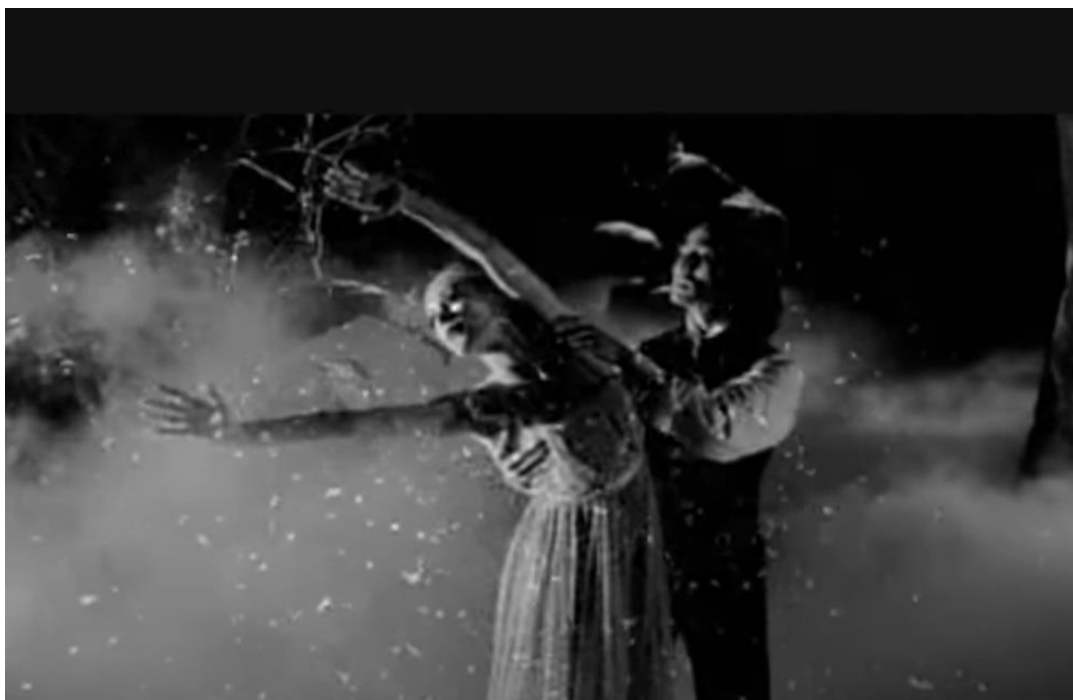


Figure 5

Much like Mr Cosmin Marculetiu has discussed in his blog about a French dancer called Jean-Georges Noverre "A step. A gesture, a movement, and an attitude express what no words can say. The more violent the sentiments it is required to depict, the less able is one to find words to express them. Exclamations, which are the apex to which the language of passions can reach, become insufficient and have to be replaced by gesture" and because dancing is an elegant way of communicating, it makes

the means of emotional expression easier. Maddin's piece also contains no dialogue and uses the silent movement of dance in a more frantic fashion to tell the audience that something is about to happen as their movements become more erratic throughout the dance, whereby Walt Disney focused on the softer side of animation and characters.

The link between these films conclude to use of an audio soundtrack being the main source of sentiment that keeps the audience thoroughly in tune with the narrative. Maddin uses strong elements and a more personal feel of his build up to the destruction of characters in this set piece via communication through flowing body movements and loud tempos, whereas in Walt Disney's animated pieces, he brings forth the sense of comedic language to keep his audience engaged. So, we see the difference in how the expression of emotion is depicted in each moving image as their way of communicating in non-dialogue silence.

Filmmaking throughout the decades, more so in The Silent Era and present day, has fundamentally changed through expression of movement, such as body language, sound, and silence because you do not necessarily have to speak in order to convey a sense of emotion. Directors still draw on the visual effect of silence on screen throughout time, and still use it as a big part of filmmaking to keep the story structured "by manipulating what you hear and how you hear it -- and what other things you don't hear -- you can not only help tell the story, but you can also help the audience get into the mind of the character" (Murch).

Silence has a big effect on filmmaking and its audience as a form of keeping them fully entertained and connected with character and objects. Even though filmmaking has changed, there are still elements of silence in film production which is still truly relevant and powerful in whatever aspect of the story that can create long lasting memories; and that is what I wanted to convey through the understanding and comparison of these techniques, and because I am interested in seeing how the development process of silence and movement has changed over the decades.

REFERENCES

- Chion, Michel. (1994), *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Wawrzinek, J. (2008) *Ambiguous subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the postmodern sublime*. Leiden, Netherlands: Editions Rodopi B.V.
- Krasniewicz, L. (2010) *Walt Disney: A Biography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Harper, G. Eisentraut, J, Doughty, R. (2014) *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media A Critical Overview*. Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Myers, B. (2010). *Loneliness and Revelation: A study of the sacred*. New Alresford, England: O Books.
- Marculetiu, M. C. (no date) *11th-Grade Dance History*, *Blogspot.com*. Available at: <https://baadancehistory.blogspot.com/2007/10/entrechats-and-revolutions.html>
- Fabe, M. (2004). *Closely watched films: An introduction to the art of narrative film technique*.
- Abel, R. (ed.) (1999) *Silent Film*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Darwin, C. (1872) *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street
- Tan, E. S. (2013) *Emotion and the structure of narrative film: Film as an emotion machine*. London, England: Routledge.
- Pribram, D. (2012) *Emotions, genre, justice in film and television: Detecting feeling*. London, England: Routledge.
- Wade Sampson, staff writer (2008) *Plane Crazy About Mickey Mouse*, *Mouseplanet.com*. Available at: https://www.mouseplanet.com/8238/Plane_Crazy_About_Mickey_Mouse
- A quote from Hitchcock* (no date) *Goodreads.com*. Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1207522-in-many-of-the-films-now-being-made-there-is>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Oh My, D. (2013) *It all started with A*, *Disney.com*. Available at: <https://ohmy.disney.com/movies/2013/02/12/it-all-started-with-a/>
- Marculetiu, M. C. (no date) *11th-Grade Dance History*, *Blogspot.com*. Available at: <https://baadancehistory.blogspot.com/2007/10/entrechats-and-revolutions.html>
- Solomon, R. C. (2019) *Emotion, The Physical Expression of Emotion*, *Britannica.com*. Encyclopædia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/science/emotion/Social-structures-of-emotion>
- Ebert, R. (no date) "Jaws movie review & film summary (1975) | Roger Ebert." Available at: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-jaws-1975>

Norris, M. (2005) *Behind the Scenes with Film Editor Walter Murch*, NPR. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4994411&t=1607525899771>.

Silence and why it's important in film (2017) *Ecgprod.com*. Available at: <https://www.ecgprod.com/silence-and-why-its-important-in-film/>

FIGURES

Figure 1: *Walt Disney Animation Studios' Steamboat Willie* (2009). Youtube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBgghnQF6E4>

Figure 2: *Plane Crazy Mickey Mouse Classic Walt Disney 1928 sound cartoon* (2009). Youtube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCZPzHg0h80>

Figure 3: *"Alice's Wonderland" (1923)- Walt Disney's /Laugh-O-Grams/ Walt Disney's Alice Comedies* (2013). Youtube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIFEIVkYSnw>

Figure 4: *Jaws (1975) - Brody kills the beast scene (10/10) | movieclips* (2011). Youtube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpxOLhuNXfM>

Figure 5: *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's diary (The Graveyard)* - *Guy Maddin* (2009). Youtube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYroFjMvbWk>