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FROM SILENCE TO SOUND: CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE TALKIES

by

Kylie Groot

Submitted to the School of Honors Committee

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for University Honors Scholars

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I would like to say thank you to my Honors professor, Dr. Gordon Miller, for encouraging me to set high goals and working with me to reach those goals. I would also like to thank my advisor, Professor Christopher Clark, for furthering my love of storytelling and supporting me through this process. Finally, none of this would ever be possible without the continual love and support of my wonderful parents, who constantly encourage me to keep learning and growing and for being the unsung heroes of this thesis.

Abstract

The era of silent film, though brief in comparison to the history of cinema itself, set a solid foundation for the medium that is beloved by audiences around the world today. However, many stereotypes and preconceived notions surround the lost art that fell from the spotlight at the invention and mass production of sound film a mere thirty-two years after the invention of the motion picture itself. Changing technologies, the adaptations of filmmakers of the period, and the opinions of the general public were all contributing factors in the quick and total transition from silent film to sound film. Through this research, several benefits of silent film became apparent that caused audiences of the late 1920s and early 1930s to be resistant to this change. The works of Alfred Hitchcock and the example of films such as *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* provide case studies for what makes a silent film successful in the eyes of filmmakers and audiences alike. In response to this research and study, a silent short film has been produced using the techniques of classic silent films in the context of film technology today.

KEY WORDS: Silent Film, Sound Technology, Film Production, Visual Storytelling

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Introduction

“[T]he talking picture has its place but this doesn’t mean that the silent picture is doomed. On the contrary, it will remain the backbone of the industry’s commercial security” (Fones-Wolf 15). The entertainment industry is one that is constantly changing and adapting. The technology, standards of filmmaking, and opinions of audiences today will most likely change in fifty, twenty, or even ten years. Nowhere is this more evident than in the transitional period that marked the beginning of sound film and the eventual demise of silent film. The quote above from Paramount Pictures’s vice-president Jesse L. Lasky during this period represents how rapidly and significantly movie making changed during the late 1920s and early 1930s and how unprepared the film industry was for this change that resulted in the eventual demise of silent film.

The beginning of sound film popularity took place only thirty-two years after the birth of film as an entertainment industry, significantly affecting the methods and technology by which films were produced. The introduction of sound technology initiated a new standard for the film industry, forcing filmmakers to adapt rapidly and successfully to remain relevant and profitable. This transitional period saw Hollywood take its influence from Broadway writers and actors, while also making the need for live musicians and vaudeville performers arbitrary, significantly changing the film industry from the inside out.

However, this transition faced pressure from all sides, both on the production and on the receiving end of the industry. A noticeable factor that did not seem to play a role in the rapid development of sound film is the resistance it faced from filmmakers and audiences alike. Despite this resistance, the transition reached its full potential and made silent films and theaters’ old ways of exhibition almost irrelevant. As a result of this near extinction of silent film, the lost

art form is often seen as archaic and amateurish. Stereotypes are often stuck upon silent films that stem from the lack of exposure and education the general public have on this medium. Therefore, the genius of silent film is not looked to as verifiable inspiration for many filmmakers today, and thus the art of a motion picture without sound is lost.

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the factors that caused the transition from silent to sound film to occur despite facing pressure otherwise. Something that could possibly be gained by research in this area is better insight into what types of films satisfy audiences. By looking at what made silent films so hard to transition away from and what made sound film succeed, filmmakers today can gain understanding into what makes a successful film. This thesis will also examine the 1927 silent film *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* more in depth, as a classic film of the era that applies the techniques of silent film successfully. The culmination of this research and study will be the production of a silent film produced by myself, using the techniques and concepts presented in this thesis. The questions that I am looking to answer throughout this thesis are:

- What technologically and culturally contributed to the rapid total transition from silent film majority to sound film majority?
- What did the film industry look like prior to the introduction of sound and how did this differ from after the transition?
- How influential were the opinions of the general public in filmmaking decisions and to what extent were audience preferences reflected in film content?
- If there were many benefits to silent film over sound, and if audiences preferred silent, then why did sound film become the new norm?

The current research on this subject focuses on the effects sound film had on the film industry. I have noticed that the information I have collected from my research falls into several categories on the factors that affected the transition to sound: changes in film technology, adaptations filmmakers had to make, and reactions of the general audience.

Changes in Technology

The inciting factor that sparked the beginning of the transition to sound film was the invention of sound recording technology. While invented during the same time period as picture recording, it did not grow in popularity until the introduction of sound shorts produced by several film companies shown before feature presentations in theaters. Interestingly, sound technology was rapidly introduced to an industry that was in no way suited for it. It was expensive and time consuming and there was no telling if audiences would approve, but it quickly became a necessity for all the major production companies.

Sound recording technology began with the phonograph, invented in the late 1800s by Thomas Edison. Initially, Edison intended his invention of the kinoscope to accompany the phonograph, providing recorded image to go along with recorded sound. However, it was the motion picture that took off and began sweeping the entertainment industry, not revisiting sound recording until the late 1920s. Those who did combine sound with visuals were none too popular, creating a “visual bias” in film history as discussed by Patrick Feaster and Jacob Smith (Feaster and Smith 11). They argue that history has a “cinema-centric” point of view when it comes to researching the history of film technology and its development. In actuality, many sound recording techniques inspired visual recording techniques, although they were used less frequently in popular culture. Because sound technology had already been developed by the 1920s, it is logical that a full transition to sound films could have occurred so rapidly in totality.

Kenneth MacGowan discusses how the changes in technology had a significant impact on the style of films in the late 1920s-early 1930s. Cameras became immobile because even the slightest squeak would appear on sound recordings. Multiple cameras had to be set up from

different angles to capture complete coverage while maintaining the same level of sound. (MacGowan 291). However, this made lighting effectively difficult since cameras were capturing the scene from different angles. The light may have been excellent in one shot, but terribly dark in another shot. Filmmakers needed to sacrifice quality in order to meet the demands for sound film. MacGowan concludes that although the transition was difficult, filmmakers continued experimenting with the technology because they knew if they perfected it, audiences would respond positively and make these films successful and profitable.

A reason why sound films were initially successful was because the concept of hearing actors speaking was so unique that it drew people to experience it. The debate about sound's positive or negative effects on film was put on hold while audiences experienced this new phenomena. Eric S. Faden states that "sound demonstrated that cinema's emerging technologies must contain a certain duality: initial novelty and the potential for future invisibility" (Faden 101). While initial novelty drew people in, to keep audiences on board with sound, film producers needed to find a way to make this technology invisible. Audiences may have wanted to hear actors speak, but they did not want this concept to take away from magic and imagination of the cinema. The goal was to make audiences unaware of the technology that was used to play prerecorded sound over a moving picture, and instead draw them in to the many possibilities that sound film created.

Because creating a film encompasses a large amount of technology in all areas of production, the transition to sound was extremely difficult in terms of the technology needed to accomplish it. New technology needed to be purchased or created and technology that continued to be in use needed to be used in different ways. Barry Salt explores all of the areas of film

technology used during the 1930s and how they changed to accommodate to the sound transition. In his discussion, he states that “technology acts more as a loose pressure on what is done rather than a rigid constraint” (Salt 19). Because this was a period of rapid change, experimentation and unorthodox techniques were common amongst filmmakers. Each production company discovered new ways of making sound technology work for them, using it to the best of their ability to create what they needed. Salt concludes by noting that film technology during the early thirties reflected the style of the late silent films, with notable changes only taking place towards the late thirties. While the changes in film production were significant, the changes were not visible onscreen until much later.

Some of the technological changes made during this time period were playback, dubbing, and voice-doubling (King 285). Each of these techniques produced the illusion that the sound the audience was hearing was coming from the actor’s mouths, but in actuality it had been pre-recorded or recorded by someone else entirely. King explores how this proposed violation of authenticity was created and how audiences responded to it. This technique of prerecording was much cheaper than live recording, making it a tempting choice for many filmmakers. It also provided the opportunity to continue working with actors who made the transition to sound with difficulty. Actors that audiences had positively responded to in the past may not have been talented with dialogue or musical numbers, but with the help of dubbing or voice-doubling they could continue to work. Filmmakers had to make the decision whether or not to risk audience criticism in order to save themselves time and money.

Adaptations by Filmmakers

Adapting to the new novelty of sound became a necessity for filmmakers as soon as the first sound pictures were released to the general public. The production company that pulled the trigger on this transition was the Warner Brothers in their production of the first sound short, *Don Juan*, and the first full-length film featuring sound, *The Jazz Singer*. When these films were met with the same level of success as popular silent films of the period, other production companies began to follow suit.

According to Jonathan D. Tankel, “[*The Jazz Singer*]’s extraordinary success at the box office convinced the major studios that conversion, previously unthinkable, was now the only avenue open for the film industry” (Tankel 21). If action was not taken on the part of other filmmakers, Warner Brothers would have the advantage at the box office by being the only production company putting out films with sound. When *The Jazz Singer* came out in 1927, a major draw for audiences was that it contained the novelty of dialogue, being able to hear the voices of the character’s onscreen. In this case, audience’s opinion on sound in film did not affect the film’s success because viewers were likely to pay to see something new. However, this novelty would not carry sound films forever, causing production companies just entering the sound film world to have to work harder to make successful, profitable sound films. Continuing to produce only silent film was not an option, but neither was making mediocre, low-quality sound film.

Gomery notes several reasons why filmmakers were not enthusiastic about making the transition to sound and why it was generally avoided. First of all, it would require entirely new equipment, making current equipment obsolete and costing companies large amounts of money.

Secondly, they would have to account for time spent learning how to effectively produce films in an entirely new way. Third, if these companies transitioned right away, they would still be under contract with actors and directors with no experience in sound film, posing a possible risk. For these reasons, filmmakers were hesitant to transition to sound film until it became evident that it could no longer be avoided without their companies becoming irrelevant. Gomery also notes that the major film companies decided to wait and observe audiences' reactions to the Warner Brothers sound films before diving into transition, using the early sound shorts as experiments in an unpredictable era (Gomery 12). He concludes that these companies acted wisely, proven by each of their successes in future years.

Changes were also made in the distribution and exhibition phases of filmmaking. During the silent film era, live musicians and vaudeville acts often performed before showings of feature films. When sound films became increasingly popular, theaters began letting go of these performers and replaced them with universal soundtracks and sound shorts that accompanied these films. Hanssen discusses how the transition to sound film affected revenue and rental fees between distributors and exhibitors. He concludes that "sound technology altered the structure of incentives in movie exhibition...As a result, percent-of-gross pricing became the norm" (Hanssen 380).

Charles Moul discusses the connection between the quality of a product and the producer's production experience, focusing on the film industry between 1925 and 1941 (Moul 97). He concludes that the quality of sound films increased as filmmaker's experience with sound technology increased. From this, it is likely to conclude that as sound film increased in quality, audiences became acclimated to the new technology and it became more accepted. Moul also

discusses how the transition to sound changed the set of skills necessary for actors to be successful. Performers now had to be able to speak well on camera and learn all of the lines, while still remaining relevant to and connecting with audiences.

Production companies often made the decision to hire actors with Broadway backgrounds in order to appeal to “the more profitable metropolitan market, where a Broadway-style of motion picture entertainment was a safer bet” (King 315). Related to this transition, film dialogue began to reflect the dialogue of Broadway plays, changing the dynamic from slapstick comedy to artistic and clever. Broadway writers were hired simply because they knew how to write dialogue.

Many silent actors that continued to work during the sound era had to make changes to their techniques to avoid being replaced. Those who had experience in stage acting began to resort to their old techniques. Johannes Riis explores the differing acting techniques used in early sound film acting, both naturalistic and classical styles, and the influences they drew from to create successful sound films (Riis 3).

Reactions of General Audiences

The leading factors in the level of success sound film had in the industry were the reactions and opinions of the general public. While audiences had a variety of opinions on films with sound, filmmakers relied on the numbers from the box offices to direct their productions.

Robert Spadoni surveys both the positive and negative responses audiences and critics had to the first sound films, noting that while hearing actors' voices made them more personable to the audience, sound also made them more aware of the technological processes of film and lessened the magic of the experience (Spadoni 4-6). Edits were much more noticeable because of the changes in sound quality from take to take and early sound recording caused actor's voices to sound less realistic. Another reason audience experiences were affected was because multiple takes of a scene cost more and actors had less takes to get everything right, and therefore mistakes often made it into the final film. Filmmakers needed to get involved in sound film extremely quickly, therefore eliminating time for learning and refining sound technology. According to Spadoni, the audience needed time to make sense of this change before they could be accurate critics of sound film. After a while, their brains would adjust to the new novelty.

Blake Allmendinger also notes the negative reactions sound film received from audiences. A common genre in silent film was slapstick comedy, popular amongst audiences but affected by the addition of sound. While someone falling off a tall precipice or being slapped in the face by an opponent are seen as comedic in silence with the use of whimsical music, these same actions with the addition of sound and dialogue are seen as violent instead of amusing. Allmendinger also makes the point that "talkies did away with a need for the imagination" (107). Before dialogue, audiences could imagine what characters were saying or the emotions they were

feeling, giving them a larger role in the experience. When sound was added, it took away the audience's role in interpretation and instead told them what characters said and felt.

Also contributing to the argument that sound had both a positive and negative impact on cinema, Ron Hutchinson looks at why Vitaphone sound recording succeeded when other technologies had failed in connection with the reaction of the general public. The first successful sound film was the short *Don Juan*, well received by the public and encouraging the production of feature-length sound films by Warner Brothers. According to Hutchinson, the sound shorts were "the turning point in the direction of the Warner's handling of sound" (41).

The first full-length feature that used sound technology was *The Jazz Singer*, although only parts of the film contain dialogue and live-recorded songs. This fact may have been a reason why the film was generally well received; it did not overwhelm the audiences with dialogue throughout the film, but instead gave them snippets that piqued their interest in this new technology. In general, humans do not embrace change readily, but once movie-goers acclimated to the new phenomenon of hearing the voices of actors onscreen, they were more positively receptive. Jeff Webb looks at how actors influenced the public they entertained, specifically Al Jolson from *The Jazz Singer* and the most popular silent film actor Charlie Chaplin. Both communicated with their audiences differently; Jolson through his theatricality and Chaplin through his facial expressions and body language. Originally, many film goers were opposed to the addition of sound to film because it communicated in a different way than their beloved characters, such as Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp". Because actors did not speak in silent film, everyone in the audience could imagine the characters' thoughts and emotions and therefore each could relate to the character onscreen. Once sound film introduced dialogue, the audience was

told what each character thought and felt, lessening film's ability to connect with all audiences (Webb 169). Webb states that adding sound to film quite possibly lessens its ability to unite and bring audiences together.

Two factors "shaped the 1930s movie house: sound movies and the Depression" (Butsch 106). The 1930s were an era of significant change for a majority of the American population, so it is logical to conclude that the Great Depression had an effect on what films were popular during this time period. According to Butsch, while movie admission increased between 1934 and 1948, many audiences responded negatively to sound films. They no longer had control over their viewing experience, but instead were subjected to what the filmmakers had provided for them. While some preferred being able to hear the dialogue onscreen, many preferred the previous practice of live music.

Example of Hitchcock's *Blackmail*

Perhaps the most significant filmmaker during the period of transition was Alfred Hitchcock, a silent film director who successfully made the transition to sound, unlike many of his contemporaries. According to John Belton, Hitchcock's mastery of both silent and sound techniques influenced filmmakers of all genres and created new norms by which films were produced in the future (Belton 238). Belton looks at Hitchcock's use of intentional dialogue, noticing that he differed from his contemporaries in that he did not create dialogue simply for the sake of hearing actor's speaking, but that he used the new tools at his fingertips to add more depth to his storytelling.

Hitchcock also used music in a way that reflected the storytelling techniques of silent films. Neil Brand notices that although Hitchcock was comfortable with and adequately used dialogue, he did not use it when it did not enhance the story. He was comfortable in the silence, something that most filmmakers were afraid of during a time period when audiences seemed to be expecting sound. Brand provides significant insight into Hitchcock's creative process, having worked on the score for his film *Blackmail* (Brand 26).

Thomas Hemmeter also discusses the significance of Hitchcock's use of silence in his article, "Hitchcock's Melodramatic Silence." While a majority of filmmakers were fully embracing the change to sound, Hitchcock continued experimenting with silent film in a successful way. According to Hemmeter, Hitchcock believed silent film was the purest form of film because they conveyed meaning through visuals instead of words (Hemmeter 32). He was not opposed to sound, however, and readily included sound and dialogue when it enhanced his story.

His readiness to embrace sound in film and his willingness towards experimentation is noted by J.P. Telotte in his article, "The Sounds of Blackmail: Hitchcock and Sound Aesthetic." Hitchcock knew how to include sound artistically, providing an example to filmmakers of just how well sound could become a storytelling technique. Hitchcock remained successful and relevant because of his willingness to experiment with all the changes in technology flourishing during this time period. He found what worked for his storytelling style and used it well, not shying away from the difficulties sound presented on the film industry. Telotte concludes that it would have been impossible to revert back to the old ways of silent film, especially for Hitchcock who was always willing to embrace every aspect of the medium of film (Telotte 190). It was the persistent efforts of Hitchcock and other filmmakers towards new technology that eventually won over audiences and solidified the total transition into sound film.

Study

The period of time when silent film thrived was but a brief moment compared to the now ordinary age of sound film, but the classic charm these films provide has always captivated and enthralled me. Diving deep into this period of history inspired me to follow the example of the great silent filmmakers and create a silent film of my own, with no dialogue or sound effects whatsoever contributing to the storytelling. While on the surface, this may appear to make the filmmaking process simpler because a significant element is removed, in fact it provided an entirely different set of questions that needed to be answered and required a shifted perspective during the pre-production, production, and post-production processes. To effectively create a successful silent film, I needed to not only research the techniques of prominent silent filmmakers makers of the past, but also process what making a silent film in today's era means and what changes need to be made to the traditional practices of filming in silence.

The concept of silence in film has become much more prominent in today's cinematic society, much more so than in the era of Quentin Tarantino and others who focused mainly on creating strong dialogue to carry their films. Many filmmakers today are following a new shift towards incorporating more silence and focusing more on visual storytelling than on dialogue. According to the Los Angeles Times, "Nearly a century after 'The Jazz Singer' signaled the end of the silent era, dialogue-light movies are making a return, with a distinctly 21st-century spin. It's a new and, many filmmakers say, welcome development in a medium constantly seeking fresh ideas" (Zeitchik). The article notes how many films released in 2017 have significantly more moments of silence than films of the past, such as *The Shape of Water*, *Wonderstruck*, and *First They Killed my Father*. Whether attributed to a cultural swing in the film industry, or

simply audiences' newfound interest and appreciation for silent films, filmmakers are steering away from dialogue heavy storytelling and they "increasingly realize that silence, more than just offering a moment of contrast or a simple breather, can be a device in its own right" (Zeitchik). In my own study of classic silent films, I also took the time to look at films such as these and learn from the techniques of experiences filmmakers of today. My goal in this study and practice was to create a silent film that engages audiences that may be accustomed to dialogue driven stories using the techniques of both the great silent filmmakers of the early 1900s and those of the great filmmakers today.

A film that I spent a significant amount of time with was Murnau's silent film, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, released in 1927. The film follows the story of a married couple from the country rekindling their romantic relationship after the husband ends his affair with a woman from the city. The film begins with the Man's affair, and the Woman from the city begs him to join her there. She suggests he "accidentally" drown his wife, sell his farm, and follow her to the city. When he takes his wife out in the boat, the Man cannot go through with this horrific action, and instead begs his Wife for forgiveness. When she does, the two of them share a lively and romantic day in the city together. On the ride home, a terrible storm capsizes the couple's boat. The Man frantically searches for his Wife, but fears he has lost her. Miraculously, his Wife has survived, and the Man is overjoyed. Through the film's camera work, acting, and musical score, it effectively communicates with audiences even today, though not a word is audibly spoken. The film does include title cards, which contain written dialogue from the characters that was important enough to the understanding of the story to warrant explicit communication.

The cinematography is simple but intentional; it follows the typical progression of shots from establishing to close-up, and also provides the audience with clues to what is significant in a scene and who's emotions they should be paying attention to. For example, the bundles of reeds play an important role in the story, so the camera makes sure the audience sees them multiple times. There are several long shots of the man gathering them, contemplating them, and putting them in the boat initially to save himself. However, they end up saving the wife's life by keeping her afloat when the boat capsizes during the storm. Another element that was apparent to me was the shot length often varied depending on the mood and tone of the scene. In the scenes leading up to the Man's potential murder of his wife, the shots are longer and often linger on the man's face, indicating the internal turmoil he is going through and how long time feels to him. When the mood is lighter, the scenes cut quickly between the actions. When the Man is playing a carnival game with his wife, the shots are cut closer together to reflect his energy and focus shifting from one thing to the next; from the game to those watching him to his wife cheering him on.

When looking at a silent film, it is impossible to ignore the acting, because that is largely what communicates the story and makes the audience believe what they are seeing. Acting in a silent film is significantly different than acting with the additional asset of a voice and spoken word. All of a sudden, facial expressions become crucial and body language imperative to the truthful portrayal of the story. Often silent films are critiqued as containing goofy, overdramatic acting that contributes to their overall whimsical stereotypical appearance, but when they are truly considered they reveal the talent it takes for an actor to act without the use of their voice. In *Sunrise*, the performances of the actors are what made the viewing experience memorable to me

and made the film emotionally resonate. Both the Man and his Wife use not only their facial expressions but also their entire bodies to tell the story. Also, neither actor rushes through any of their movements; they each slow down and take their time to show every progression of emotion on their face and in their movements. Although this takes more time than viewers are used to in today's cinematic society, it is an effective technique. Nothing is skipped over; every eye twitch and arm shrug has a purpose and communicates something to the audience. The scene where the Man is about to murder his wife feels incredibly authentic because the actor, George O'Brien, takes his time. At first he slowly stops rowing, and sits silently in the boat. In a close-up, his eyes rise below his eyebrows from the floor of the boat to the Wife. Then he rises, again slowly, with his head down in a manner that the character has never done before, and steps closer to Janet Gaynor, playing his wife and towers over her. The slowing down of time for this scene gives Janet a chance to show all of her character's thoughts on her face as she processes what is about to happen. She does not simply jump from calm to terrified, but instead makes her way from cheerful to solemn, then to concerned and worried, and finally to fear and realization of what is happening. She folds her hands together, physically begging her husband not to follow through on this act. In this scene, though there are no words spoken, there is a strong emotional impact.

Perhaps what truly brings everything together in a silent film is the musical score that accompanies the visuals. The melody becomes the words that the characters speak, and the cadence of the score gives the viewers emotional cues throughout the film. The music carries the film on its back, creating punctuation and becoming a voice of its own in the final product. The tone of the film relies heavily on the tone of the music; a melancholy tune makes the audience feel melancholy, especially when paired with a close-up of a somber face of a character the

audience has grown to care about. In *Sunrise*, the score composed by Hugo Riesenfeld and Ernő Rapée successfully reflects the emotions of the characters throughout every scene and often the setting in which the scene is taking place. For instance, when the Man and his Wife are out on the water, the music is low and deep with quiet swells that give an impression of the slow movement of waves and the wind. When the Man and his Wife are in the city, the music is fast paced and lively. There is also more chaos in the score as people bustle back and forth going every which way, and it gives the viewer a feeling of disorganized but festive energy. In the carnival scenes, the score also contains a slight jingle to reflect the type of music that would most likely be playing in that setting. The musical score both creates beautiful melodies to communicate emotion and creates an auditory representation of reality. Without a strong score, a silent film will not succeed, for it is the heart of the film beating throughout its run.

In addition to the need for a strong score, another element that silent films make use of more than current, dialogue heavy films is visual symbolism. Elements in a scene such as the setting, props, or minor characters often reflect the action that is going on between the main characters in the main plot, and the filmmakers consciously show these to the audience to give them another visual clue as how to feel and what to think about what is happening. In *Sunrise*, the director and cinematographer make good use of this technique. When the Man and his Wife are making their trip across the water in the beginning, the Wife is beginning to feel anxious and realizes that she has no way out if anything goes wrong. She looks over to a flock of birds, who being taking off as if they too can feel the tension in the air and would rather be somewhere else. This visual adds to the unsettling feeling of the scene and helps the audience realize how trapped the Wife is feeling. Also, when the Man is lying in bed contemplating what the Woman from the

city has asked him to do, a shot of water and waves is imposed on top of his image. This creates the effect that the Man is drowning in his own thoughts while also imagining what he is planning to do the next day, which is drown his Wife. It gives the audiences a visual representation of how the man is feeling, rather than simple words, and therefore it is more emotional.

One of the most recognizable elements of silent film is the use of title cards. Because there was no technology generally available to communicate words audibly, filmmakers decided to use them visually to communicate essential information that could not be communicated with the camera. *Sunrise* opens with a prelude on title cards, giving the audience an introduction to the theme and context of the story. Throughout the film, title cards are used when characters are speaking important dialogue that contributes to the understanding and emotion of the story. However, they are not used too frequently so that they take away from the visual storytelling process, but instead are used only when necessary. Most of the title cards are concentrated at the beginning of the film, and once the Man and his Wife reach the city they are hardly used at all. In the sequence where the boat is capsized and the Man searches for his Wife, no title cards are needed. In fact, there is only one title card used in the final third of the film. From studying this film, I learned the importance of title cards and how they are best used to make a film better.

While studying this film, I realized how the stereotypes that usually accompany silent films often keep people from enjoying classic films such as *Sunrise*. Though different from films of the present in many ways, it is an authentic representation of a relationship that is beautiful both visually and audibly. The story does not feel romanticized; it reflects conflict and resolution that I believe the majority of people can relate to, and that is what ultimately makes the film so strong. I learned a great deal from studying the solid visuals, strong acting, and exceptional

music the filmmakers put together to create a beautiful, emotional story. *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* is a testament to what made silent films so great and why so many people were able to connect with them.

Application

Beginning the creation of my own silent film required taking not only what I had learned about assembling a strong film from filmmakers of the past, but also what I have learned about what made people so resistant to eliminate silent films and how I could apply what made them great to my own film. I wanted to know how I could take what made silent films beloved by audiences together with the technology and adaptations that have been made since that time period to create a story that could emotionally connect with audiences and also actively engage them. Committing to making a silent film also begged the question, “Will it also be in black and white,” from many sources, both those in the film industry and those with little or no film knowledge. I was quickly made aware of the stereotypes that come along with silent films and my desire was to break out the mold that these stereotypes created and make something that was new in today’s culture.

When considering whether the film should be in black and white as well as without sound, I thought about what my goal was for this project and whether or not black and white would add or detract from that goal. I intended to use the lack of sound to engage audience’s imaginations and elicit relatable emotions from each of them, and none of this had anything to do with the removal of color as well. Because of this, I decided that I would leave my film in color so that the only noticeable difference would be the silence and therefore break the stereotype. I went into the pre-production process with the overarching thought that I wanted to act like the technology for sound hadn’t been invented yet, but that every other current technology was available to me. I was interested to see how this would affect my production process and how it would affect my final product.

The pre-production process began with a story, the most important element in any film. I wanted a story with a theme that most people could relate to, and therefore my story is about a young girl who is desperate to find love, even if it means ignoring the people in her life who already love her. Romance is the main theme of most silent films, although there may be other subplots that drive the story along. Just as *Sunrise* represented an authentic relationship, I wanted my film to represent an authentic emotion that many people have felt throughout their lives. The short film follows a young girl, Katie, on a first date that goes horribly wrong. She meets a young man who has just gone through heartbreak, and the two hit it off. The script, which can be seen in full in Appendix A, ends with Katie realizing her own independence and deciding to not pursue romance with this new stranger. After the structure and plot points of the story had been thought out, I began writing the script. This was a challenge because I had to figure out what was going to be communicated on the page and what I had to keep off the page. Because there was no dialogue, I had to figure out what visuals to include in the script that would take the place of the dialogue. I also had to find the balance between what emotions I dictated through action, and what emotions I need to communicate to the actors during the production phase.

The pre-production process also included planning out what visuals I wanted to incorporate into the story, because what the audience sees is going to be a large part of what is communicated to them. I knew that I wanted to take my time and use longer shots, taken from the study I had done of *Sunrise* and its cinematography. This was especially true for the climax, where slowing down time would have a great effect on the emotional impact of the scene. I had to figure out what visual symbolism I wanted to use to communicate the theme of my film. After a lot of trial and error and getting sound advice from seasoned filmmakers, I decided to add the

action with Katie and Parker's hands. Katie moving her hand both towards and away from Parker's represents visually her emotions and the decisions she is making in her mind. After this, planning the shot design ultimately led up to this climactic moment. Because my cinematographer and I knew how important the visuals in this film would be, we went through three drafts of shot lists before approving of the final copy, seen in full in Appendix B.

Finding actors that I felt would be able to communicate the story that I had spent months creating was a daunting task. I wanted to find people who would be able to demonstrate emotion with not only their faces but their body language as well. A significant part of the story is communicated through the acting, so much so that I needed to find actors with experience and technique.

Determining the production design was also a significant part of the pre-production process. Set design, costuming, and lighting all contribute to the mood and tone of the film, so first I had to decide what I wanted those to be. Looking to the examples of classic silent films, the tone is often primarily light-hearted, although there certainly are serious and darker undertones. I wanted the mood of my film to be light, while also handling serious emotions. Just as most classic silent films had happy endings, I wanted my film to leave the audience feeling content and in high spirits. To accomplish this, I determined that I wanted the shots to be filled with light and the set design and costumes to be filled with bright colors.

The production process was simply, or not so simply, carrying out the decisions that I had made during the pre-production process. Finding the correct lighting on the set for the defined shots took up most of the production time, which was necessary in order to create the tone. Directing the actors became the most important activity on set, because their performances

would be what the audience would look to first to find the story. Making sure the actor's performances effectively communicated their emotional progression in every scene was my primary focus during production. One note that I made during filming was for the actors to take their time and not rush through the scene, but rather to slow down to ensure that every facial expression and movement is noticeable and intentional. In this way, I was looking to the example of *Sunrise* and the performances of George O'Brien and Janet Gaynor, who emotionally resonated with me as a viewer.

The post-production process was where the final storytelling process began. Looking over all of the footage and compiling it together, I looked back at the goals I set during the beginning of this process and began bringing them to fruition during the editing process. One decision that I consciously made was to make edits longer, reflecting the style of classic silent films and also strengthening the emotional impact of certain scenes. In the scene in the restaurant, I made the edits longer so that the audience feels the tension between the two characters, Katie and Nolan, and so that they feel as uncomfortable as the characters feel. In the scene outside in the park, I made the edits longer so that there is more of a build up to the climax where Katie makes her decision. Extending the scene gives the audience more of an emotional release when the decision is finally made, whether they are satisfied with the decision or not.

Perhaps the most important part of the post-production process was adding the musical score. I wanted the music to work as a form of dialogue in my silent film, much like the score in *Sunrise*. I additionally wanted the score to also resonate with audiences' emotions, so I knew that I needed to have a score that was well put together and complimented my story. When I communicated with my composer, I let him know that I wanted the score to reflect those of

classic silent films in its whimsy and full atmosphere. He was able to deliver beautiful music to accompany my film that complimented both the theme of the film overall and each scene individually.

One of the last things I needed to think about in regards to post-production was the addition of title cards. I know that I wanted to include them, but I needed to decide where they were needed and where they would add best to the story. I decided on four moments at which to add title cards. First, when Parker first bumps into Katie, I included title cards for their dialogue. I decided to leave the entirety of Katie and Nolan's conversation without title cards because their relationship is not what the audience will care about, except for when Nolan exits. I added a title card with his dialogue when he rises to leave, mainly for clarity for the audience that he is leaving the restaurant. I also added title cards for Katie and Parker's dialogue when she bumps into him outside of the restaurant to mirror the use of title cards in the beginning when they bump into each other. Finally, I added a title card when Katie tells Parker she has to leave, which makes the moment and her decision concrete and significant. The addition on readable dialogue in these sections focuses the audience on what is going on and makes them realize that this is a significant piece of the story. Looking back to *Sunrise*, I contemplated adding a prologue and epilogue to introduce and conclude the story. I only considered this addition once I felt satisfied with the rest of the final edit of the footage. Then, I added in the prologue and epilogue and previewed the cut to determine whether or not it was a good addition. Ultimately, I decided that the prologue was more satisfactory than the epilogue, since I wanted the last shot to be the last thing the audience sees and meditates on. I did not want to summarize the theme of the film with words, but instead let the audience's imagination bring them to their own conclusions.

Through the research done to investigate the factors that caused the transition from silent to sound film and looking at what made silent films so hard to transition away from, I have been able to produce a silent film that utilizes the techniques of successful silent films and filmmakers of the classic era. By being able to combine what made sound film succeed and what has been lost from silent film, I hope my film will be able to engage audiences' imaginations and satisfy their expectations.

Conclusion

“The ‘talking picture’ will be made practical, but it will never supersede the motion picture without sound. It will lack the subtlety and suggestion of vision, that vision which, deprived of voice to ears of flesh, intones undisturbed the symphonies of the soul” (Kobel 269). Photoplay editor James Quirk, confident in silent film’s staying power, captures what sets silent film apart and, in his opinion, makes it greater than the ‘talking picture’ will ever be. The use of dialogue can often discredit the viewer by providing them with information without the need for any work to be done on the viewer’s part, allowing them to passively engage in a medium that for so often was an immersive experience. A shift back to the roots of cinema in the silent film would stimulate the imagination of the viewer, making them an active participant in the view process.

Through my research on the changes in film technology, adaptations filmmakers had to make, and reactions of the general audiences during the late 1920s and early 1930s, I have been able to determine what technologically and culturally contributed to the rapid total transition from silent film majority to sound film majority. The desire for constant improvement and the draw of a new novelty drove the progression towards sound film, though the public constantly pushed against the elimination a beloved recreational activity. Many artists lost their jobs in the transition, as new technology eliminated the need for live music and the addition of dialogue edged seasoned silent actors out of the spotlight. However, the wonder audiences experienced at hearing the people on the screen speak for the first time carried sound film into the cultural majority and silent film out.

I hope that classic silent films continue to be brought into the light and are studied by those who love film and those who love to create film. By bringing this lost art into the twenty-first century in a way that engages audiences of all ages, the stereotypes that have for so long been associated with this art might fall away, opening the door for future research and interest in this area. I hope that filmmakers continue to look to the golden era of silent film to learn how to connect with audiences and engage the imagination. By doing so, viewers would be wholly brought into the viewing experience by being asked to interpret for themselves what each subtle movement, touch, or glance means for them in that moment, making the film a personal and revealing experience.

“The value of silence in art is its stimulation to the imagination, and the imaginative quality is art’s highest appeal. The really excellent motion picture, the really great photoplay, are never mere photography. Continually, they cause the beholder to hear things which they suggest - the murmurs of a summer night, the pounding of the soft, the sigh of the wind in the trees, the babel of crowded streets, the whisperings of love” (Kobel 269).

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Appendix A

Focus Script

FADE IN

1 INT. RESTAURANT - DAY - PRESENT

The bustling outdoor restaurant is filled with people talking and laughing with one another.

2 INT. RESTAURANT ENTRYWAY - DAY

KATIE, an optimistic and energetic girl in her 20s, walks through the door.

She turns a corner and bumps into PARKER, a good natured guy also in his 20s.

Both awkwardly apologize to each other. Parker continues walking to his table. Katie walks up to the hostess.

3 INT. RESTAURANT TABLE - DAY

Katie is led to a table by a waitress.

She sits down, gets out her PHONE, and begins looking at social media. She scrolls through post after post of GOOD-LOOKING COUPLES, perfectly poised and beautiful.

She looks down at her outfit. She begins taking off her jacket, but then changes her mind and leaves it on.

A TEXT FROM HER FRIEND JENNY POPS UP

ON TEXT

Hey Katie! I haven't heard from you in a while, wondering if you wanted to meet up some time and catch up.

She ignores it and puts her phone away. She cannot sit still.

The WAITRESS, a perky woman in her late 30s, comes over and Katie orders several APPETIZERS, pointing them out on the menu.

She looks toward the entrance, waiting for her date to arrive. She scans the restaurant.

Katie then notices Parker at another table in front of her to her right. She watches as his girlfriend arrives. They exchange a hug and begin talking to one another.

Katie turns back to her own table as a waitress brings over a

(CONTINUED)

2.

CONTINUED: (2)

TRAY FULL OF APPETIZERS.

She looks towards the entrance again and sees her date arriving. She smiles and gets up to give him a hug over enthusiastically.

NOLAN, in his 20s, is reserved and is surprised by her enthusiasm. He receives the hug reluctantly.

They both sit.

Katie points out all the APPETIZERS she ordered. Nolan's eyes widen at the amount of food and Katie's extreme forwardness.

Katie talks rapidly.

Nolan sits quietly, occasionally nodding, but is focused on finishing the food on the table.

The waitress comes over and Nolan interrupts Katie to give her his dinner order. He checks his WATCH.

Katie realizes how long she has been talking. She gives the waitress her order.

She waits to give Nolan a chance to speak. He is not paying attention, but instead looking across the restaurant.

Katie looks over to see where Nolan is looking and sees PARKER and his girlfriend arguing.

Nolan shakes his head and turns back to the table. He takes a sip of his drink.

Katie and Nolan sit in awkward silence. The waitress brings them their food.

Nolan eats right away. Katie decides to give it another shot and talks again.

Nolan offers simple responses, and soon Katie runs out of things to say.

Nolan checks his WATCH. Katie's shoulders slump, and she looks around the restaurant.

At PARKER'S TABLE, she sees Parker's girlfriend rising to leave. Parker pleads with her to stay, but she denies him and exits. Parker follows.

Katie turns back to her table as Nolan checks his WATCH. He

(CONTINUED)

3.

CONTINUED: (3)

rises, apologizes half-heartedly, and leaves the restaurant.

Katie sits back and looks at the ceiling. The waitress comes with the check, and Katie stares at it in disbelief.

She sees her phone light up on the table with a TEXT FROM JENNY.

ON TEXT

Ashley and Sarah miss you too, they said they love all of us to hang out together sometime. Maybe Tuesday?

She picks up her PHONE and shoves it into her bag.

4 EXT. RESTAURANT - EVENING

Parker stands outside the restaurant looking at his phone.

Katie, walking and looking down, bumps into Parker.

They begin awkwardly apologizing again, but begin laughing at their situation.

Parker asks her where she is going, and she points in the direction of her car. He tells her that he is going the same way, and offers to walk with her.

5 EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Katie and Parker end up passing both of their cars and instead continue walking and talking.

They end up sitting on a BENCH, laughing and talking together.

Parker gets out his phone to check the time. On his phone is a photo of his girlfriend, now his ex, and his smile fades. Katie notices.

She looks down at HER HAND, which is close to Parker's. She inches it closer.

Parker looks up, trying to appear happy, but his smile is forced.

Katie weakly smiles back. She looks down at HER HAND next to Parker's.

She takes a breath and looks straight ahead.

(CONTINUED)

4.

CONTINUED: (2)

She looks down at HER HAND again.

She pauses, then moves it away from Parker's.

She turns to Parker and tells him that she has to go.

They say their goodbyes, and Katie leaves Parker alone.

6 INT. ALYSSA'S CAR - NIGHT

Katie gets into her car and sighs.

She looks at her phone and sees another TEXT FROM JENNY.

ON TEXT

So Ashley and Sarah and I were
thinking of grabbing coffee on
Tuesday. You in?

This time she reads it. She types up a response.

ON TEXT

That sounds great! I can't wait to see
everyone.

Jenny types a response.

ON TEXT

So how was your date?

Katie types a response.

ON TEXT

It was just what I needed.

She sends it, then leans back and smiles.

FADE OUT

Appendix B

Shot List

- 1A: Establishing shot of the restaurant, slow push in as Katie walks into frame up to the waitress.
- 2A: Dolly in to waitress, then pan around the restaurant to face Katie. Parker bumps into her.
- 3A: Medium shot of Katie walking up to the table and sitting down. She sees a text on her phone, but ignores it. She debates taking off her jacket, but leaves it on. Waitress comes over and takes her appetizer order. Katie scans the restaurant.
- 3B: Medium shot of Parker at his table as his girlfriend arrives.
- 3C: Over-the-shoulder of Nolan arriving. He and Katie hug.
- 3D: Side shot of Katie and Nolan. Katie shows Nolan the appetizers and he eats some. He checks his watch.
- 3A: Katie makes conversation. She keeps getting interrupted.
- 3F: Medium shot of Nolan eating and nodding.
- 3D: The waitress comes over to take their order.
- 3A: Katie tries to start conversation.
- 3F: Nolan smiles and nods. He keeps eating. He looks over his shoulder at Parker's table.
- 3B: Parker and his girlfriend argue.
- 3F: Nolan turns back to the table, shaking his head. He takes a sip of his drink.
- 3D: Nolan and Katie sit awkwardly in silence. The waitress brings them their food. They both begin eating.

- 3A: Katie gives up talking and continues eating. She looks around the restaurant and her eyes land on Parker's table.
- 3B: Parker and his girlfriend are still arguing. The girlfriend rises and leaves. Parker pleads with her to stay and then follows her out.
- 3A: Katie looks sympathetic. She turns back to the table.
- 3F: Nolan continues eating and checks his watch. He says that he has to leave and rises to go.
- 3E: Nolan leaves. Katie sits back in disgust. The waitress brings the check. Katie shakes her head in disbelief.
- 4A: Over-the-shoulder of Parker's phone with a picture of his ex-girlfriend.
- 4B: Wide shot of Parker looking at his phone. Katie bumps into him. They apologize to each other and laugh. They begin walking together.
- 5A: Panning shot around a tree as Katie and Parker walk. Parker checks his phone. The camera follows them as they sit down on the bench.
- 5B: Over-the-shoulder on Katie talking to Parker.
- 5C: Over-the-shoulder on Parker talking to Katie.
- 5D: Medium shot of Katie and Parker sitting on the bench talking. Katie looks down at their hands.
- 5E: Extreme close up of Katie and Parker's hands. Katie moves her hand closer to Parker's.
- 5B: Katie looks up at Parker and smiles.
- 5C: Parker smiles back. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and looks at it.
- 5F: Close up of Parker's phone with a picture of his ex-girlfriend.
- 5D: Parker's smile disappears. He looks up from his phone and fakes a smile.

- 5A: Katie notices Parker's mood shift and her smile fades. She looks down.
- 5E: Close up of Katie and Parker's hands. Katie moves her hand away from Parker's.
- 5B: Katie tells Parker that she has to go.
- 5D: Slow dolly out as Katie says goodbye, gets up and leaves.
- 6A: Medium shot of Katie getting into the car. She hears her phone go off with a text.
- 6B: Close up of Katie's phone as she reads the text. She types up a response and sends it.
- 6A: Katie reads her friend's response.
- 6B: Katie sends another message.
- 6A: Katie sits back and smiles.