

Silent Cinema

Film Studies

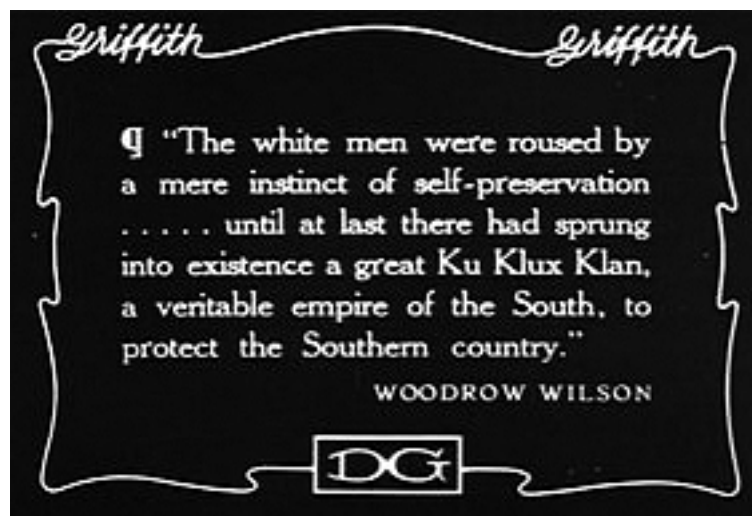
Definition: a film with no synchronized recorded sound, especially spoken dialogue. The term "silent film" is something of a misnomer since these films were intended to be shown with a musical accompaniment.

¶ (very) brief history of early cinema...

- ☛ In order to create the illusion of movement, still pictures must appear in rapid succession (persistence of vision). The invention of photography in 1826 launched a new series of discoveries that made early cinema possible.
- ☛ A flexible and transparent film, a fast exposure time, a mechanism to pull the film through the camera, and a shutter – all of these innovations had been achieved by the early 1890s. The two most important firms developing film cameras and projection devices were those of Thomas Edison in the US and the Lumière brothers in France.
- ☛ W.K.L. Dickson, Edison's assistant, developed the kinetoscope, a peep-show device that displayed short 35mm films to individual viewers. Edison believed that movies were a passing fad and did not develop a system to project films onto a screen. The Lumières were the first to do so and held one of the first public showings of a motion picture projected onto a screen on December 28, 1895 in Paris.
- ☛ The first films were simple in form and style. They usually consisted of a single shot framing an action, usually at a long distance. Until about 1903, most films showed scenic places or noteworthy events.
- ☛ From about 1904 on, narrative form became the most prominent type of filmmaking and the worldwide popularity of cinema continued to grow. French, Italian, and American films dominated world markets. However, World War I restricted the flow of films from country to country and Hollywood emerged as the dominant force in film production.

Important aspects of silent films

1) Intertitles: because silent films had no synchronized sound or dialogue, onscreen intertitles were used to narrate story points, present key dialogue and sometimes even comment on the action for the cinema audience



2) Music: screenings of silent films almost always featured live music: from large orchestras to a single piano or organ. Music was essential, contributing to the atmosphere and giving the audience vital emotional cues.

3) Acting: silent film actors emphasized body language and facial expressions so that the audience could better understand what an actor was feeling and portraying on screen. Since we are used to the levels of communication conveyed by the sound film and conditioned to half-watch everything in today's fast-paced digital world, we may have lost our ability to concentrate on purely visual elements. If we are fully to fully appreciate the silent film, we must master a new set of watching skills and become more sensitive and responsive to the language of the silent film, especially its most expressive vehicles: the human face and body – a look that speaks volumes, the body used as powerful instruments of expression, and don't forget...the way the actor walks. Equate the personal acting style of facial and physical expression or emotion an actor in the silent film era to the way a modern film actor uses the qualities of his or her voice for expression.

Let's all go to the (silent) movies!

Are movies from the silent era primitive and barely watchable by modern standards? Before passing judgment consider:

- ☛ Silent films are frequently played back at the wrong speed: silent films were shot at 16-23 frames per second (fps); modern movies are shot at 24 fps
- ☛ Deteriorated condition of silent films: many silent films exist only in second or even third generation copies which were often copied from already damaged and neglected film stock. It is estimated that only 10 to 15 percent of the films made during the Silent Era survive today.
- ☛ Modern-day audiences regard silent film acting as simplistic, melodramatic or campy.

Because silent films are the product of another age, they must be judged as reflections of the society and culture of that day. Once any biases are overcome, watch masterpieces from the silent era and appreciate the editing, composition, lighting, camera movement, special effects (color was even used: hand-painting individual frames or by tinting and then dyeing the film itself), and other cinematic elements that have shaped and influenced modern cinema.

Suggested Titles

The Birth of a Nation
City Lights
Safety Last
Nosferatu
Battleship Potemkin

Sources:

The Art of Watching Films, Boggs/Petrie
Film Art: An Introduction, Bordwell/Thompson



Silent Film...with a twist!

The idea behind making a silent film is to explore how to communicate without dialogue and to make connections to film's own narrative history.

What is a Silent Film?

A Silent Film is a bit of a misnomer. There is sound, it is just not synchronous dialogue. Silent Films were often produced with musical scores attached to them. So, there was a soundtrack that was played live during the viewing of the film.

Silent Film runs from 1894-1927. 1894 marking the first known film and 1927 is when *The Jazz Singer*, the first film with synchronized dialogue was released.

Main elements of Silent Film:

- No synchronous dialogue
- Intertitles to communicate parts of the story to the audience
- Live music and sound
- Acting that emphasized body language and facial expression
- Frame rates that varied between 12-26 fps (frames per second)
- Tinting - the film was given a wash of color

Silent Films were/are far more sophisticated than people initially give them credit for and handled all forms of genre: drama, epic, romance and comedy...

TASK - Creating and documenting the process of making a film

Your assignment is to create a Silent Film.

Preproduction:

1. Create a call sheet.
2. Come up with a story and write a script - even if there is no dialogue, you must write a script.
3. How it will sound? What genre is it?
4. Think about how shots will fit together and how cinema is not just about the things that we see.
5. Create a storyboard based on your script - pay attention to how you will communicate the story visually and try not to assume that your audience is familiar with your piece, you have to create a complete narrative that requires no pre-knowledge of the text; ask yourself how the sequence will cut together
6. Create a shot list from this storyboard.
7. Your aim is to create a film that does not rely on the spoken word to communicate a story.
8. Create a schedule for your production process, this should include pre-production, production and post-production

Production/Postproduction:

1. Film Length: 60 seconds (you may choose to "vary the frame rate" as a tribute)
2. Color graded footage
3. At least one intertitle, with all titles and credits are white font on black background, simple and clean
4. At least one of the following special effects: stop edit, dissolve, and/or double exposure/clone
5. "Sound"