

Symbolic Imagery in Silent Films Essay

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The film chosen was *Sherlock Jr.* The film was created back in 1924 and produced by Buster Keaton and Joseph M. Schenck. The story is about a young man who wants to become a detective but also works at a local theatre. He likes a woman and likes to treat her to things but has a hard time doing so because of the lack of money he has. The young boy was framed by another family member of the woman's family after one of the family member's stopwatches was sold without the owner knowing. The majority of the film is during when the young boy dreams at his job in the cinema booth about how his life could have been if he was the best detective and got a case solved. After being woken up by the woman he loves, the woman tells the young man that they found out who the real person was who sold the stopwatch and that her family admits that they have made the mistake of not letting him near their house again. Visuals were much needed in order to tell this story. The use of facial expressions, motion, cinematography, and production design were all important in replacing the dialogue and conveying the narrative to the audience.

Facial expressions are one of the best examples of how to convey to the audience what the characters are thinking or feeling during specific actions or reactions, especially when the film is a silent film. One example that which facial expressions are used to help the audience understand how a character is feeling is during the time when the young woman the main protagonist loves hears the news that he never wants to be seen again by her family again after being framed as the person who sold the stopwatch. The visual representation of sadness is covering up the person's face with either their arms or hands. The young woman is seen hunching over the stairs' railing unable to look at the young man leaving the household. When the young man does leave the house, she shows tears in her eyes and is gasping for breath showing that she is crying and sad to see the young man go.

The motion of objects such as props, actors, or cameras can help visually tell the story of a film. For example, when the young boy is dreaming during his job at the local theatre, he walks into the film as if he is in the film itself. The stationary camera sells the visual effect of the young man being in the film because if the camera was moving around, it would make the audience think that the film is actually a stage and not a film projected on the screen. Another example of how motion helps visually tell the story of a film is during the same scene when the environments keep changing, the young man is trying to find a way to exit the screen. After each sudden environment change, he makes a motion that suggests that he is confused about how the environment changed so suddenly. Motion can be used by the actors to help convey to the audience how their character is feeling. Just like how body language is used subconsciously in the human brain to determine what the person might be thinking.

Cinematography is one of the best factors in creating a film. Cinematography consists of lighting, shot composition, etc. An example of how cinematography was used to help tell the story in *Sherlock Jr.* without dialogue was during the dream when the young man thought of himself as the best detective in the nation. He was doing a case and found out where a thief was located with a pearl necklace. He prepared a disguise for him to immediately get into when he jumped out of the window from the thief's hideout right after taking back the pearl necklace. The part where the cinematography comes into play is how the audience is able to see the inside and the outside at the same time. There was a transition from two different sets of the same scene. One was the outside where the disguise was located and another was the same, but with the wall of the hideout opened up so the audience can see what's happening inside. This decision of cinematography from the film conveys to the audience how flawless the transition of different disguises was and how the detective character was able to flip the odds in his favor.

Production design is also one of the best factors in creating a film. It is based on the set design, architecture, colors, patterns, etc. An example of how production design is used to help convey to the audience a certain feeling is when the two thieves demonstrate how they plan to take out the detective. One of the ways they planned to take out the detective was by making him hit an explosive pool ball on the pool table while playing a pool game. They demonstrated how destructive the pool ball was by tossing it out into the backyard and hitting a small tree. The production design used in this demonstration was probably a small explosive buried underground. The reason why they showed this destructive power first was because they wanted to show the audience why the thieves wanted the detective to hit the ball.

The concepts of motion, cinematography, and production design are all important when creating a film. Each one serves a different component or aspect of the film and also shares components that can help convey to an audience certain moods or emotions. These findings in the film *Sherlock Jr.* can serve as a catalyst for inspiring my own distinctive approach to utilizing visuals in my own short films by helping me brainstorm ideas on how to convey an audience certain emotions or moods. Even though *Sherlock Jr.* was a silent black-and-white film, it still did a great job of conveying the right emotions and moods to the audience through these filming components.

References

Laurel & Hardy. (July 11, 2018). YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZuqWxITq38>