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Symbolic Imagery in Silent Films: A Quiet Place

In silent films, visual effects and symbolic imagery are crucial for the storytelling of a film. Because there is no dialogue, directors, cinematographers, and screenwriters have to come up with different ways to advance the plot. An example is *A Quiet Place* by John Krasinski. *A Quiet Place* is a more modern film compared to most silent films, which became less and less popular in the late 1920s and early 1930s. *A Quiet Place* uses many techniques of silent cinema, and this paper will explain all of the symbolic imagery, how visuals were used to tell the story in place of dialogue, and how the concepts discussed can help my own distinctive approach to utilizing visuals in my own short film.

Much like all silent films, *A Quiet Place* is no different when it comes to using visual storytelling as the main method of communication with the audience. For example, the movie relies heavily on the combination of the performances of the actors, subtle objects, and well-thought-out cinematography, exactly like other silent films. However, some could argue *A Quiet Place* has an even more unique way to express unspoken dialogue, and that is with American Sign Language. In the movie, there are many scenes where American Sign Language is used to help the characters communicate with each other without making noise and getting themselves killed by the creatures that stalk their new world. For instance, during dinner, the Abbott family will speak to each other in sign language. During scenes in the movie where their lives are at stake, the sign language is slower, firmer, and exaggerated to enunciate the importance of their survival. There are also many more emotional scenes between Lee (the father) and Regan (the older sister who is deaf) communicating in sign language to pull at the heartstrings of the audience. All in all, American Sign Language appears multiple times throughout the film to create the needed tension for a horror movie while also developing character relationships without any spoken dialogue.

When it comes to more physical objects presenting as symbols for the film, there are many used to convey emotions, themes, and meat for the plot. An example is the red lightbulbs. In the film, they are used as a way to signal immediate danger to the family. Another example is the sand paths around the land. They are used by the characters to silence their footsteps so they can walk freely without making noise and even run when they need to. The sand paths also signify the attempts to survive without making a single sound, and this can symbolize determination and fragility. Another symbol used is the famous toy rocket, which caused the death of the youngest child. The toy rocket represents both innocence and danger as the bright and colorful toy is responsible for a fatal impact. Finally, one of the most notable symbols in the movie is Regan’s cochlear implant. Without dialogue, the audience can still understand the struggles that Regan deals with at the beginning of the movie when she feels disconnected from her family and frustrated with her disability. However, as the movie progresses, the audience is able to see how this disability turns into a symbol of empowerment and becomes the weapon against the creatures that murdered two of her family members.

Moving onto motion, there is no doubt actors play a vital role in both silent and dialogue-heavy films. In particular, silent films rely heavily on the actor’s facial expressions, movements, and body language. Since there is no spoken dialogue, they must convey the message with their bodies, and with *A Quiet Place*, this looks like their physical gesturing with sign language, raw facial expressions, and body language to convey their fear and desire to survive. A key example where the acting was important for the film was in the scene where the family turns to the sound of the rocket going off in the youngest sibling’s hand when they are on the bridge. The camera is focused on Regan for a bit as she watches the rest of her family react to what is behind her. The audience can see the confusion written on her face without her having to say, “I’m confused.” She eventually turns around and her face written in confusion turns to that of true horror as she sees what is happening behind her.

The cinematography is also a huge factor in the visual storytelling and working with the actors. The framing and camera angles can make or break a scene. In *A Quiet Place*, there are many close-ups to really capture and emphasize the characters’ emotions. The audience can better read the situation when they can see how the character is responding to the circumstances. Lighting is another key factor in visual storytelling. In the film, the dim lighting sparked fear and a sense of dread in the audience, while the brighter lighting showed the more hopeful moments. For example, the bathtub scene with Evelyn Abbott (the mother). In this scene, she is trying to give birth without making a single noise while one of the creatures is lurking directly behind her on the staircase. It is first dimly lit, but as Evelyn gets closer to giving birth, the lightbulb above her flickers, inducing stress into the scene. Cinematography also goes hand-in-hand with the sound and even the lack thereof. In almost the whole film, Krasinski takes advantage of silence. In many, many scenes, music or instrumentals are not present as the silence totally engulfs the scene. This silence makes the audience hyperaware of every sound, which helps place the audience in the character’s shoes since the characters *must* be hyperaware of even how loud their breath is. It was also clever how every time the camera was focused on Regan, there was little sound, or no sound at all to represent her impaired hearing.

When it comes to my own short films, *A Quiet Place* has inspired a new interest in using more symbolic objects, even if my film is not a silent one. Symbolism helps with adding more depth and creativity to a film and can add more meaningful layers. The use of silence is also a good tool to use. You do not always need to fill your film with lots of dialogue; silence can speak for itself. Another technique I could use is utilizing colors to symbolize different themes in my film, while also tying in lighting with it as well.