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Visual Storytelling

September 15, 2024

The Importance of Visuals in Silent Films

The movie *A Quiet Place* was an innovative venture by director John Krasinski in creating a practically silent film when the silent film was much past it’s prime. While *A Quiet Place* is not a true silent film, being that there are sound effects and a score accompanying the scene, the distinct absence of dialogue allows for an interesting atmosphere in a modern film that must rely on visuals alone to create an intriguing story. Even with its use of captions during scenes where characters use sign language, *A Quiet Place* focuses on visual elements to help create suspense and develop a complex and terrifying story.

*A Quiet Place* opens with a family of five, a husband and wife, a preteen daughter and two young sons, tiptoeing gently through an abandoned convenience store. Despite the clearly post-apocalyptic state of the scenery, along with the text reading “Day 89” upon the film’s beginning, the movements of these characters depict a specific kind of fright. The audience has no context as to why the world is post-apocalyptic, and despite the quiet and gentle nature of the movements of the characters, they never look around suspiciously to see if someone can see them. And, while the characters move gently and precisely throughout the whole scene, they do not seem afraid, and even make jokes through sign language and laugh silently at one another (Krasinski, *A Quiet Place*). This leads the audience to question the framework of this post-apocalyptic world and what danger they could possibly be facing in which they’re not afraid of being seen.

This question is answered quickly. After leaving the convenience store, the family treks along a path in the forest that has been cleared of all fallen leaves, despite it currently being Fall. This shows the audience that this family has walked this route many times. The family begins crossing a bridge, but the youngest son stops right before it. He pulls out a toy space shift and plays with it, leading it to start making spaceship-esque sounds. This makes the family freeze, their faces taught with fright. While the father runs back to try and grab his son, the mother descends into silent sobs, collapsing to the ground (Krasinski, *A Quiet Place).* The reactions of these actors, despite there still being no present threat, tells the audience that whatever monsters are lurking may not be able to see, but they can definitely hear. Tragically, the littlest son is swept away by a large, incredibly fast creature and presumedly dies. Upon dissection, the bridge the family was crossing is used as a metaphor for the family crossing to the other side of this post-apocalyptic world and coming out the other end, something that the smallest son never does.

The majority of the film takes place a year after this incident. The mother of the family is pregnant and far along in the process, which leads the father to do extensive research on how to destroy these creatures. By showing the extreme disarray of the father, the hopelessness of the mother, and the fear of the two remaining children, the audience can come to the conclusion that if their monster problem is not solved before the baby comes, it will not end well. This creates high stakes and a high-pressure situation for the characters, as they are now working on a timeline. During this research period, the director, John Krasinski, makes a point to focus on seemingly random items in his office. This includes a timer, a stray nail sticking out of the floorboards, and a shotgun (Krasinski, *A Quiet Place).* Focusing on these three objects creates a sense of dread in the audience, knowing them for being auditory items, and allows the audience to wonder how they will come into play. Specifically, the stray nail in the floorboards creates a sense of concern in the audience, which allows us to connect to the characters, worry about their well-being, and wonder how that small nail will impact the entire story.

*A Quiet Place* also uses lighting and cinematography as a tool of visual storytelling, relaying underlying messages about the inevitable outcome of the characters. For example, the majority of the film takes place during daylight hours over the span of a couple days, however, once the film is beginning to reach its climax, it decides to stay within the nighttime hours. The kids of the family become trapped in an impossible situation where the outcome seems dire, and the darkness of the environment arounds them not only makes the audience tense, but communicates a sense of hopelessness for the characters. Ultimately, their father sacrifices his life for theirs, and after this moment, the sun slowly begins to rise and it seems the darkest times are behind them. The film uses a similar technique during the birthing scene of the mother’s baby. The mother hides out in a shallow pool in their basement with her newborn baby who is unable to stop crying (Krasinski, *A Quiet Place).* The red lighting of what seems to be an alarm system fills the room, and creates a sense of danger and violence that is approaching due to the impossible situation of a noisy baby.

Finally, using visual clues from the messy array of items on the father’s desk, his daughter is able to put together the pieces of how to defeat the monsters, which her father had been working on for months (Krasinski, *A Quiet Place).*  This is told wordlessly as the daughter studies the items on his desk that dedicated the entire movie into creating and fixing. By using visual cues of items such as the girl’s cochlear implant the speaker her father was working on, they are able to come to the conclusion that you can momentarily deafen the monster’s hearing, long enough for them to pull the trigger on the shotgun and kill them, calling back to shot of the shotgun at the beginning of the film.

Ultimately, *A Quiet Place* was able to use visual storytelling in place of dialogue in order to create a terrifying atmosphere of silence in a post-apocalyptic world. Through the actor’s performances, cinematography and directorial choices, the filmmakers were able to create an environment that portrayed the fear of the characters and the impending doom of their fate without using any dialogue. I hope to use many of these same tricks in my short film, specifically designing the setting of every scene to have a deeper meaning to the character and their impending outcome. Additionally, I hope to focus on background items or figures that may seem inconsequential as they are shown, but later come to have a deeper meaning and foreshadow the direction of the story, just as *A Quiet Place* did.

Works Cited

*A Quiet Place.* Dir. John Krasinski. Paramount Pictures, 2018.