

Gabriel Drozdov

Prof. Higgins

FILM 307: The Language of Hollywood

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Talking and Tapping and Singing and Dancing

To ground a film is to play the orchestra; you must conduct the elements to play the symphony. Reality as depicted in film is precisely orchestrated because films, unlike our lives, tell stories. A balance must be achieved between naturalistic and realistic representations, or else the film may be either unbelievable or noisy, distracting from the production's purpose. To ground a film, for instance in Henry Hathaway's *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, is to avoid the bright checkerboard dresses of the time and stick to darker inaccurate shades. Here, reality's earthiness is shrouded in a façade, as the synthetic dresses are utilized to clarify the tone. Thus, reality in film is never fully grounded, especially not in musicals. A musical heightens the world through song, but the grounded segments between musical numbers exist in the same universe as the songs. The shifts from music to story and back are struggles, as elements of the production such as color and sound must stay relatively consistent whilst simultaneously serving to distinguish between reality and abstraction. *Singin' in the Rain* is exemplary in its execution of conducting a visual and audible symphony; the film utilizes the full spectrum of its soundtrack in order to broaden the experience from grounded action to emotional abstraction. And, in the "Good Morning" number, color and sound collaborate to develop the narrative and organize the scene, allowing for the film to tell its story and effectively move the viewer.

Musicals need good voices to succeed. *Singin' in the Rain* is no exception to this rule; the film is sometimes hard to bear because the antagonist, Lina Lamont, is characterized by her

comically whiny voice. In a film about music and the transition into the sound era, Lina is the antithesis to the aestheticism of audio. Yet, she brings to light how voice can be as emotive as music, especially in the early sound era. Films such as the Marx Brothers' *Monkey Business*, whose soundtrack almost wholly consists of dialogue, show how essential voice is to characterization and tone. *Monkey Business* is first and foremost a comedy, so the main comedic characters are juxtaposed with people who sound normal. Meanwhile, *Singin' in the Rain* is a musical, so the main musical characters are juxtaposed with the shrill Lina. Thus, Lina can be inferred as the antagonist merely by her voice, even before she exhibits any ill intentions. She is as blunt as a car stuck in a river, serving not to ground the film but instead to emphasize the romantic and abstract nature of the musical world around her.

The film uses elements directly related to music in order to show that the film's lofty musical world originates from its physical world. This can be heard through the film's most prevalent incidental sound: tap dancing that permeates most if not all of the film's musical numbers. While dialogue usually rests atop the soundtrack in most films, musicals often take detours to embellish images and sounds in order to evoke emotion rather than further the narrative. *Singin' in the Rain* usually stays grounded in its visuals, save for the "Gotta Dance" number, so the film fills our vision with a reoccurring action that produces sound. The same method is applied in *Scarface*, wherein guns are seen and heard, but the violence they assert is often in the background. The film's violence is grounded by having a connection between the roar of gunshots and their physical origin, because the unbelievable excess of violence is encapsulated in a tangible action. *Singin' in the Rain* is a happy movie, but it grounds its numerous impossible musical situations with the tangible, physical act of tap dancing. Therefore, we can retain the emotional experience of the music without the film blinding us with absurdity;

although these situations are not believable, they aren't horribly outlandish, until of course the grand finale.

Of course, musicals are defined by their music, but the score accompanying songs usually goes unexplained and poses the risk of uprooting the action. *Singin' in the Rain* explains its music by setting its plot within a musical world, in which the characters are musically trained and lighthearted. Most prominently, Don and Cosmo originate from a humble life of song and dance that allows the duo to be lively and jubilant in straightforward situations. Thus, it is easier to engross ourselves in musical numbers such as "Moses Supposes", because the duo's personality is characterized by grounded happiness and playfulness that manifests into singing and dancing. The songs, and therefore score, must emerge from somewhere physical and grounded, such as from Cosmo's piano playing in "Make 'Em Laugh". Yet, the necessity for score to emerge from physical actions is not exclusive to musicals. *The Clock* briefly incorporates the same emergent transition by heightening the level of its ambient sounds. The excuse for this change is that the characters are supposed to be listening adamantly to the world around them, but the soundtrack gradually rises, introducing a score that mimics the ambience. Eventually, we are separated from the ambience and enveloped in the score; the climactic kiss marks our furthest point from reality, but we were able to smoothly transition into this emotional experience due to how we began grounded and moved on from there.

"Good Morning" brings us into an elevated emotional world through its use of a consistent color palette whose dynamism comes from exaggeration. While still outside, we are exposed to the four colors that pervade the following musical number: red (in the window tiling), green (in the plants), yellow (in the window frame), and blue (in the shadows and reflections). The palette is very neutral, containing only the three primary colors, the oft present green (a

mixture of yellow and blue), and shades of black and white. In the house, the palette remains balanced, with yellow in the foreground and green in the background, as well as shades of blue and red throughout the composition. Even though the shot is orchestrated and artificial, the balance gives a sense of realism that is confirmed by the unremarkable conversation taking place. The camera then cuts into the kitchen, whose composition is in stark contrast with the previous room. Here, almost everything is yellow, and the remaining colors are only accents to the otherwise monotone room. We see the film's elevation into the musical world before we hear the score come in, because the composition is no longer natural. Back in the dining room, we are presented with a larger frame, revealing more of the red flooring that in turn tinges the entire composition with red hues; what was previously ordinary has been elevated through the repositioning of colorful elements in the frame. The scene continues to assertively mingle red and yellow until the music stops, when the trio sits engulfed in a yellow couch. The emotional effect of the song and dance has not disappeared, because the colors have not faded in the final composition; the suits exhibit blue shades that complement the yellow posterior. Yet, as the song is over, the exaggerated and enormously scaled hues have finished their turn and the film returns to the scene's original yellow hue.

Sound plays a transitional role in "Good Morning". The emotional arc of the musical number goes full circle, ending in a discussion about futility similar to the one it began on. Regardless, the substantive portion of the musical number is upbeat, requiring a transition both out of and into melancholy at the beginning and end, respectively. Both transitions utilize sound as the driving force to naturally progress the film through the musical world. The transition into "Good Morning" involves the usual trick; Cosmo tap dances to provide an incidental, physical sound from which the musical world can emerge. Almost directly after his brief musical number,

the score quietly rolls in. Furthermore, with more subtlety, dialogue is used to transition into musical elements. The pacing of dialogue before Cosmo's brief stunt speeds up as Kathy and Cosmo suggest careers to Don, ultimately flabbergasting the excitement into song and dance. Still, the dialogue alone is inadequate to naturally progress the scene into a musical number, so the score later accompanies another escalation in pace that entices Kathy to sing. The transition back into gloom is a simpler one; it pairs the grandiose finale with laughter. Therefore, we aren't met with silence once the music stops, but a brief pleasant cacophony similar to the score itself. The emotional arc is returned to its ordinary state, and with the emotions felt, the film turns back to its narrative.

Sound and color collaborate in ways that often seem overlapping and redundant, but still manage to establish tones that could not otherwise be felt. The talent of film is very often to think for the audience, instead of making the audience think, because films don't have to tell us how to understand emotions and hope for the best. Films *show* us emotions, just as *Singin' in the Rain* shows us happiness through bright palettes and song and dance. Yet, even with the extent to which a film can be unnatural or abstract, we don't have to make a leap to believe it; successful films are crafted with imbedded emotions and styles that, because they are felt first, have a very obvious and effective intention. We are not a reader, and we do not interpret what we see when we first see it. We are an audience, and, at least at first, we experience films as they were intended and as they were made.