

Integration of sound and image in chaplin's city lights (1931)



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In 1927, *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature length film which synchronised singing and dialogue with pre-recorded music score and sound, was released. Within the span of less than three years, sound technology had become established in the film industry. Enter 1931, and Charlie Chaplin, one of the silent greats, had just completed *City Lights*, defiant in its silence in the era of sound. Yet, it would be reductive to say that Chaplin completely spurned sound technology without considering how it would add to his style (Flom, 61). The reality was that *City Lights* represented the beginning of Chaplin's gradual integration into sound, and appropriation of sound into his distinctive Chaplinesque style (Flom, 63).

Critics like Eric L. Flom and Donna Kornhaber have made arguments for Chaplin's distinctive filmmaking style, and his creative integration of sound with his pantomime style. This essay will reiterate and build on the prevailing discourse on the use of sound in *City Lights* (1931), through a deeper textual and theoretical analysis of the film, informed by Fran Apprich's paper "Born into Sound". The essay will utilise Apprich's image-sound approach to *City Lights*, to explicate on how Chaplin deftly plays with silence and selective sound, the substitution of dialogue and sound, and precision of the music score in tandem with the images to underscore the alienation of the Tramp figure and to elevate the sentimental melodrama (Woal 5). Finally, the essay will present an analysis of Chaplin's unconventional use of the shot/reverse shot convention, thus demonstrating that the powerful economy of Chaplin's visual style dispenses the necessity of conventional use of sound and dialogue, to paradoxically allow for a more liberating unconventional use of sound.

In his paper “Born into Sound”, Apprich contends the concept of ‘neutralisation’ and ‘visibility’ which this essay will use to analyse the selective use of non-diegetic sound effects and the foregrounded ‘visibility’ of sound in silence. An image or sound could be neutralised when taken out of its original context and then spliced with another image or sound. This is presented in the film through the creative substitution of the conventional dialogue for soundtrack, non-diegetic sound effects. Furthermore, Apprich contends that the power of images can evoke an imagination of an associated sound, even in the absence of it, and that it is this imagined sound that allows for possibilities of meanings, between imagined sound and image, diegetic and non-diegetic sound, with imagined sound. The concept of visibility was based on Balaz’s belief that the normalisation of sound or music within a film, made the use of silence or the use of a singular sound set in between silence, all the more apparent. The paper will briefly reference these ideas put forth by Apprich when discussing the use of sound in the film to further the current discourse on City Lights.

In City Lights, the Tramp meets a blind flower girl, but a misunderstanding results in the blind girl thinking that the Tramp is a rich man. The Tramp then befriends a Millionaire by saving his life, but the Millionaire only recognises the Tramp as his friend in an inebriated state. Meanwhile, the Tramp continues to sustain the flower girl’s idealisation of him by borrowing money from his Millionaire friend, or by working to provide for the girl financially. In an effort to get money for the girl’s rent and to pay for an operation to restore her eyesight, he manages to borrow enough money from the Millionaire. However, upon sobering up, the Millionaire accuses him of

stealing the money, and sets the police after the Tramp. The Tramp manages to get the money to the girl, but tells her that he will be going away. The police catch him and he is imprisoned for a few months. Upon his release, the Tramp tries to find the girl but she is no longer at her corner selling flowers. While walking on the street, the girl, now with sight, takes pity on him and gives him flowers. She then recognises him as her benefactor after touching his hand and hearing his voice. The film then ends on their ambiguously bittersweet reunion.

In the opening sequence, the kazoo sound substitutes the voice of the government people, who are giving a public presentation of the statues. It serves a comic effect in ridiculing political figures, but it also makes a larger conceptual point of undermining the nature of dialogue, especially the use of dialogue by people in power. It suggests that the boring political rhetoric of the leaders, unintelligible to the masses, effectively translates into gibberish in the film. Alternatively, by opening with such a scene, it can also be read as Chaplin's snarky take on the novelty of sound in the film industry (Kornhaber 195). A close reading of the meeting sequence between the blind flower girl and the Tramp reveal the subtleties of emotions, cleverly heightened through the sensitive use of the soundtrack, silence and precise figure movement (Preminger 172). The subtle tonal shifts in the soundtrack serve to emote the characters, an affective form of linguistic that transcends the limitations of speech and dialogue. In the Tramp's significant realisation that the flower girl is blind, the soundtrack pauses for a pregnant moment of silence. Shocked, the Tramp places the flower onto the girl's hand. The

music resumes at a slower pace, almost as if reflecting the hesitating tenderness of the Tramp's behaviour towards the flower girl.

Following which, we note that the audience's imagination of sound provides the premise of the film, which is the blind girl's idealisation of the Tramp as a rich man (Davis 55). The cause of this misunderstanding is visually explained in their meeting sequence, circumventing exposition or dialogue. The Tramp enters and exits an expensive limousine to avoid a policeman, but the blind girl hears the door slam of the car which Tramp exits from, and assumes that he is a rich man. Here, the visual movement allows the audience to imagine the implied 'sound' of the door slam (Brownlow, Unknown Chaplin). Most importantly, it is functional to the narrative as the ensuing drama relies on the narrative plausibility of the misunderstanding. This misunderstanding is reiterated when the owner of the rich man comes back for his car, slams the door and drives off. The panning of the camera facilitates the visualisation of this mis-hearing by panning to screen left, to frame the Tramp standing next to the car before it drives off, before panning back to show the girl calling out to him. The simplicity of this mis-perception deepens the comic pathos of the blind girl's idealisation, that is so precariously dependent on the aural construction of the Tramp as a rich man.

The soundtrack also serves a more explicit linguistic function as evident in the exchange between the millionaire and the Tramp (Kornhaber 189). When convincing the millionaire not to take his life, the Tramp launches into a mini speech, and the soundtrack accordingly changes to reflect a soothing, pleasant tune, while the inter-title states " Tomorrow the birds will sing".

After which, Tramp straightens up his posture to enact the stern pep talk; <https://assignbuster.com/integration-of-sound-and-image-in-chaplins-city-lights-1931/>

the soundtrack follows suit, sharp strains of the strings while the inter-title states “ Be brave! Face life!”. The substitution of the soundtrack draws attention to the affective power of music, while the welding of music with the expressive actions creatively expresses emotions in a way that transcends conventional dialogue.

Sound effects are used selectively, serving the function of an aural close-up as it draws attention to specific points in the frame. Yet, the artistic choice of selectivity is deliberately non-naturalistic, and hence self-reflexive in its ‘ visibility’. In the second party scene, Chaplin accidentally swallows a whistle, and he develops uncontrollable hiccups that sound like the whistle he ingested. The whistling interrupts the professional singer just as he is about to sing. Here, the ‘ visibility’ of the whistle sound is heightened, such that it is the only sound we hear; we do not hear the surrounding party scene noises, and ironically, never actually get to hear the singer (Kornhaber 189). Thus, this visible and neutralised sound, set in conflict against the imagined bustle of the party, and made visible against the silence, underscores the comic alienation of the Tramp. As viewers, or listeners, we too cannot ‘ hear’ the surrounding noises, hence, Chaplin creates this separate aural dimension that places us in sympathy with the Tramp as an outsider figure in high society (Preminger 169). It is through the use of this aural close-up that Chaplin economically conveys alienation, without the use of dialogue or conventional sound.

In the final scene, Chaplin reappropriates the usual shot/reverse shot convention to heighten the emotions of the scene, and to subtly convey the unequal power dynamic (Kornhaber 202). It is a medium shot framed from <https://assignbuster.com/integration-of-sound-and-image-in-chaplins-city-lights-1931/>

directly behind the flower girl, with the Tramp's body facing squarely at the camera but with his eye-line matching the girl's. The flower girl is seated, with her body at a 45-degree angle to screen left but turning to look at the Tramp, such that we only see the back of her head. As such, the angle of the camera exposes and underscores the vulnerability of the Tramp. His facial expression is fully captured, an unrestrained smile of joy upon finding her. He holds up the flower sentimentally and stares in wonder at the flower girl, whose face turned away from the camera. The camera then cuts to her, alone in a separate frame, laughing and ridiculing him in a sarcastic inter-title – 'I've made a conquest!' Visually, this represents their relationship, the flower girl is like a disinterested spectator, maintaining a safe and judgmental distance while the Tramp stands, vulnerable and exposed (Calhoon 393). Their interaction is a direct inversion of their first meeting, with the flower girl now in a position of power. This is also visually represented by her indirect eye-line match to screen left when the camera frames her, as opposed to the Tramp who faces her directly. This unnatural distortion of the usual shot/reverse shot convention create visual uneasiness, reflecting the painful and unequal power dynamic between the two characters.

It is not until the flower girl touches the Tramp's hands, that the power dynamic is equalised. Cleverly, Chaplin then reverses the shot to represent this change visually. When she holds his hand to give him a coin and a new flower, she experiences a moment of recognition. This shot is framed more conventionally, adhering to 180-degree rule in the shot/reverse shot tradition; it is placed next to the Tramp, foregrounding his body and with the

flower girl now facing him. The camera fully captures her struggle with emotions, possibly shocked, confused then moved. What follows is a brief conversation through the intertitles – ‘ You?’, ‘ You can see now?’ and her reply, ‘ Yes I can see now.’ In this masterful sequence, Chaplin has reversed the use of sound and sight; the power of the visual representation of their internal emotions precedes the terse dialogue. Following the dialogue, the screen fades the black and the music soars – the intensity of emotions escapes speech, and finally transcends the frame itself.

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