

Hitchcock transition from silent to sound movies essay sample

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INTRODUCTION

It seems quite extraordinary to imagine a movie without sound, but this is how early movies started their voyage capturing society and its despair irony and beauty like other forms of arts. There has been two periods of silent movies, the early period between 1900 to 1919 and later 1920 to 1929 known as Golden age of cinema. The 1920 witnessed a revolution in communication and giving rise to feature length films, telephone, and radio and at the end of decade, sound technology as well. However, it would be wrong to assume that silent movies did not contribute any thing to American film history. The silent picture was a universal language communicating through messages and signs. The silent films era is sometimes referred as the “ Age of the Silver Screen”. The silent movies for viewers were rather pretending to be deaf and trying to understand the message through facial expression (Chion, 1928). At times it seemed troublesome to guess the meaning and what the actors wanted to convey, but like poetry it was talking to self and provided a chance for each view to interpret the expression in his/her own way (Langman , 1998)

The early period of silent movies was romantic and sentimental and witnessed movies, such as *The Christmas Burglars* (1908) and *The Sealed Door* directed by David Griffith. These movies portrayed an ideal America like a painting full of passions and emotions which actors powerfully presented through their expression. On one side if actors were deprived from expression, they had an aided advantage of filling their expressions with greater feelings in which they were quite successful (Cohen, 2001).

Before the arrival of Clair, Hitchcock, Lang, Vertov, filmmakers used to frame head to toe camera shots that made the characters less visible. The later directors changed the techniques and close-ups allowed larger than life shots to emphasize theatrical presentation superseding peep-show devices.

However, not long after making his first film in 1908 Griffith intuitively used such techniques more frequently to emphasize facial expressions of actors, permitting more subtle performances. These early movies evolved through certain techniques of trial and error that were later accepted as standard techniques for expressing ideas, sequence of action developed by directors, such as Griffith and Hitchcock. Despite the lack of sound, they were able to effectively use these techniques, refine them and manipulates the audience see the details of their art (Chion, 1928).

As sound was not available, directors focused more on moving camera creating depth in scenes, breaking them into different close shots and creating suspense and excitement in the movies. The silent cinema was a distinctive art like theatre that required more skill on the part of actors. Such performance needed long, short, and close-up shots with extreme facial expression to convey thought and emotions clearly. Many of these actors have to twitch their eyes and do subtle facial expression (Marks, 1997). The silent films had no sound instead onscreen dialogues were used (subtitle) to narrate the story, mostly of key dialogues. Some times commentary was also added to the key points of the story, which made the role of title writer more important than the scriptwriter. These subtitle or inter-title would even become an art in itself, often featuring illustrations or abstract decoration

commenting on the movie, which was lost after the arrival of sound (Eyman, 1997).

Even though called silent films, these films were not as silent as people believe now. For example in the beginning, there would be narrators who would stand alongside the screen and introduce the moving images, then arrived narrative films with music, where pianist would used to play music or some times grand orchestra would be available to match the movies and scenes, which made music or sound available earlier than critics believe (Marks, 1997). There are some critics who believe that such activities distracted the audience and making movie viewing less enjoyable due to the incoherent music. Perhaps it was this kind of thinking which opened the way for sound cinema.

The lack of sound provided filmmakers a chance to experiment in different ways, yet a time arrived when there were no more innovation left to be tried, this movement from silence to sound was a natural progression. The reason was that the power of narrative was falling or rather reached its ultimate heights with movies such as *The Big Parade* and *Greed* (1925) and *Sunrise and Wings* (1927), *The Crowd* (1928) and *City Girl* (1929). Had there been sound at the beginning of the movies, the sound would have reached perfection at the inceptions of film production (Eyman, 1997). Beyond every thing else, there were other inherent problems in silent movies; such as the music in silent movies was a bridge back in time. There were live pianos that played extempore and played what pianist found suitable depending on their experience, skill and imagination. Such movie viewing gave the feelings of

incompleteness, as music depended on the mood of musician and his inspiration. Other than that another problem was the lack of consistency, music changed from theater to theatre; it was not possible to replicate same kind of music through out a movie premiere, which gave rise to multiple meanings for viewers regardless of one common message which was only possible in sound cinema.

The idea of combining sound with picture was not some thing new. From the beginning, it was hard to imagine having movie without sound. Even playing music was again one of the reason that viewers could not simply watch action with no sound, its like being pushed for silence and keep on thinking for a long time, yet pay for it. Watching movie was part of entertainment, but only silent movie had its limitations. It ran out of stories and innovation in late 1920s and became a monotonous repetition of facial expressions where viewers took little interest due to the lack of attention and concentration forcing producers and engineers to look for some thing different. Thus the need of sound arose and filmmakers realized that sound can be tried as an effective medium along with motion.

The Warner's brothers in mid 1920s developed a process called Movieton which employed newsreel shorts accompanied by synchronized narration and called Fox-Movietone News, which provided viewers to watch and hear historical events. It was this invention that ultimately led to the production of feature films with sound.

Looking at the good response from the audience from these experiments in April, 1927 Warners brother built first sound studio and started to shoot *The Jazz Singer*. *The Jazz Singer* had a few sequences, songs and some dialogues, the result was a great sensation which thrilled the audience sweeping the industry escalating Warner's brothers profit from 2 millions to 14 million and the story of sound cinema started.

Hitchcock started his career as a designer of title card. Later on he moved to Germany and worked in apprenticeship in studio system and started direction in silent movies.

The Lodger (1926) is his first film, where he introduced themes that would be explored through out his career. Perhaps the most striking example is the use of a glass ceiling in *The Lodger*, enabling the cinema audience to see what the characters 'hear'. In *Downhill* (1926) there is a recurrent visual motif of descent; in *The Ring* a boxer's career progress is demonstrated through improved billing on a succession of posters and billboards; and in *Easy Virtue* (1927), the audience is able to 'listen' to a marriage proposal over the telephone by watching the facial expressions of an eavesdropping switchboard operator. These techniques were particularly useful and even liberating narrative devices, given that in these years most of Hitchcock's stories were adaptations of stage plays and the witty dialogue of West End favorites (Allen, 2004).

Hitchcock's silent films emphasize the division of visual and verbal signs, such as the face of a screaming woman that symbolizes victim-hood. He

would de-contextualize the face, viewers would know nothing of the identity of the face, and this technique can be referred to French Surrealism, which Hitchcock exploited in his cinematic practice. It worked, because the emphasis was not scream that was missing, but the face. The women face would convey the expression of fear and terror and each viewer could imagine that fear in his mind in his own way. Hitchcock is expert in capturing basic human emotions, such as fear, laughter, anger boredom that seems the main goal of all his movies (Morris, 1997).

The Ring (1927) conveys message through signs. For example the hero Jack progress is illustrated in the shape of upward movement of name in successive placards, reducing his life span into cards, yet viewers were able to understand the meaning. Such technique was creation of non-availability of sound, yet it was as effective as any one could imagine. In the Farmer's Wife (1928) Samuel sweetland's aggressive pursuit of partners is associated with names list. The movie also shows lack of moral growth due to the repetitive scenes of courtship, which is portrayed like daily routines lacking soul and spirit. Another of Hitchcock's movie, Champagne (1928) is also an example of human facial expression, through a man's face. The villain face depicts lust, while Betty's face who is the lead actress face has as an expression of love. The movie presents the villain as a protector of Betty, but he is fanaticizing Betty, while Betty thinks the other way.

Even though, it is a silent movie, yet the message is conveyed to the audience through facial expressions, which tells the whole story and what lies inside the characters and what they are up to (Lubin, 2001).

The Manxman (1929) is created through the shot of triskeles (the three legged symbol of the Isle of Man) emblazoned on a ship's flag. This technique effect is created by the enclosure of three linked elements within circular field forming triangle or a love triangle framed on the shots of Peter on shipboard. Hitchcock silent films allegorize the viewing process as mis-reading. The characters in his silent movies struggles to define themselves in circumstances they are thrown into. Their life is shown as a futile illusion or in the words of Tennyson struggling to climb against the climbing wave, yet the characters are able to achieve their goals in life. His silent movies, such as Easy Virtue and Manxman, Lodger, The Ring, The Farmers Wife, he has successfully shown extremeness of facial expression, gestures, close-up, long shots combined to create a meaningful illusion, which is fully comprehensible to audience despite no sound. Thus we can say that Hitchcock silent movies dramatize both sets of illusion, the inside movie and the outside created by the viewers.

His career of silent movies came to an end with arrival of sound technology, but Hitchcock made his comeback through his first talkie Blackmail (1929). Initially it was shot as a silent movie, but later on converted to sound cinema. The effect was different due to his ready grasp of dramatic and symbolic techniques added with free play of language allowing him to extend his art in much stronger way through the use of sound technology. One of his famous sound effect in the movie is " knife: sequence and his use of music creating a psychological enhancement for audience by beeping horns in urban streets and the muted dialogue, where audience had to guess what

character are saying (Ryall, 1993). Hitchcock was expert in moving images and he had proven his brass in silent movies, but his basic intention was to capture the attention of his audience by all means. He likes to have full control and closer attention of his audience reaction. The arrival of sound made his ability to control his audience more furiously by applying different techniques combined with skillful cinematography.

For example in *Juno and The Paycock* (1930) adopted from a stage drama shows Irish revolution. It was produced in a time, when talking movies (talkie) were still new in the arena, thus it was no surprise that the movie contained very heavy dialogues and even singing, even at occasion when there was no need of singing or excessive talking. Hitchcock instead used many techniques in the movie, such as multiple use of gunfire to show the violence in the Ireland. It was some thing new, yet in very effective way to portray existence of violence in Irish landscape.

Hitchcock incorporates sound into his films in quite unorthodox ways. Even though his movies are combination of sound and image, but at times, he creates the anti-thesis of sound and image by contrast of sound and imagery and separates them. The camera and focusing on the character, while in background two other characters are talking is again Hitchcock genius to understand the new sound technology that could effectively communicate the characters mind without speaking a word. The film last scene is most remarkable, where Mary Boyle is shown distraught, while camera is moving away, but audience can hear her wail, is a perfect combination of sound and picture, creating a strong effect of sorrow and loneliness (Wood, 1989).

Murder (1930) is about an actress who is found murdered. The movie is mystery in classic Hitchcock style to find the real murderer. The movie is combination of sound and camera technique put together and shows the mastery of Hitchcock. He in his earlier silent movies used a technique where he would put the editor's note which was called moving point of the view to make the audience part of the film, similar technique is used in the movie which make the viewers indulge in the story. Hitchcock during his career moved from expressionism, which was more prevalent in his early movies as at that time emphasis was more on facial expression, but in his later movies, especially after the arrival of talkies, he creates realism by unique sound and visual effects. This realism was made possible in multiple ways, such as use of space, time and sound and soundless-ness and the purpose was to involve the audience. One such technique is adopted in a scene where Sir John, the juror is looking in mirror and is thinking, the audience can hear his mind, even though he is not talking.

This technique is a unique combination of sound and picture, yet the character is not talking, but he has successfully portrayed talking inside his mind. In Murder Hitchcock maximise the use of sound, he adds the sounds of background talking to create the neighbourhood effect. Being a mystery film, he creates shadow effect with powerful background sound and the result is a movie that is combination of extreme suspense and mystery.

With more experience, Hitchcock made extensive use of the sound, and kept on experimenting with music. He seems to be in love with the music as eight of his protagonists are musicians, starting from Waltzes from Vienna (1933)

to the Man who Knew too much (1956). He uses (background) for two reasons, one is to create excitement and thrilling effect, such as villain committing some crime or murder, where the effect is enhanced by quicken music and at other occasions, he would use it to create the feeling of impending doom which the character does not know, but viewers could feel that some bad thing is going to happen. Such technique created an illusion on the part of viewers. The most convincing way for such seductiveness is to allow the audience to believe in character's point of view. Once the viewers are exposed to such feeling, they become part of this illusion which he skillfully creates, and the dramatic events are enhanced by sound effects, such as screams, thunder, shadow walking, talking to mirror. In such kind of scenes, it was more sound effect which would overtake the visual effect making the scenes as realistic as possible. In the 39 Steps, which is a story about a man wrongfully accused, but he is bent on survival is shot through high angle shots.

For example Hannay's view from the abyss and the dramatic juxtaposed shots, such as cleaning lady scream and roaring train, all these scenes create powerful imagery and impressive sound effects showing Hitchcock skill. The 39 Steps is setup in a theatre within the film, one set of viewers are outside the theatre, another outside the film, which creates illusion and reality at once, blurring the line between reality and illusion (Allen, 2004)

On stylistic level Hitchcock manipulates sound in a realistic way that requires the incorporation of aural effects into the plot, yet not mixing with rest of the film. He would substitute it with a second plausible sound or visuals effect

through substitution technique. For example in the movie, *The Man who Knew Too Much* (1934), he used vases to his function during a shootout at spies scene. He uses vases that line the room shelves as a visual substitute for aural extension, hiding the violent death of spies. Unlike the early gangsters movies that portrayed naked violence, Hitchcock prefers suggestive technique, he portrays this violence by showing shattering of the vases. In order to have effective substitute sound, he employed unique techniques; for example the sound of real gunshots would be too hard to record in a realistic ways, instead he uses amplified sound of balloons or crockery to intensify the effect (Wood, 1989).

BLACK MAIL (Ryall, 1993)

Black Mails (1929) was the first talkies of Hitchcock originally recorded as silent movie. Alice White; the daughter London shopkeeper; her boyfriend and Scotland Yard Detective Frank Webber are out in a restaurant arguing. Alice leaves with an artist to his studio, where he tries to rape her, but she grabs a knife and kills him. Alice leaves the studio and returns to home. The detective Frank quickly comes to the conclusion that Alice is the murderer. However, a criminal who had witnessed Alice tries to blackmail Alice and a chase is set in the London.

Black mail is Hitchcock's first feature with sound. Adding sound in the first instance was no easy job. Even though the movie was originally silent, but the arrival of sound technology was too tempting for Hitchcock to resist and he figured out that it is worth the effort to add it for enhancement of the

project. The most striking thing was that leading actress voice was not original who was originally German and it was hard for her to speak English in British accent. Due to the lack of dubbing technique, Hitchcock asked British actress Joan Barry to stand off screen and read into the microphone as the scenes were captured. The technique is crude, but imagine it trying in the first sound movie, it worked perfectly well due to Hitchcock innovative and creative approach.

Hitchcock was against direct portrayal of violent scenes. In one scene, he has to illustrate a rape scene, where he overcomes by depicting the action with shadows and then scene takes place behind the curtain, however he is able to convey to the audience what he wanted to convey without portraying visual violence. Another captivating scene is, where Alice is looking at Gordon's London Gin that features an animated cocktail shaker, which resembles a knife. Both Alice and viewer could see the knife in stabbing motion relevant to the scene and shows what's happening in scene. Another creative touch can be felt in the scene where landlady finds the dead body, while Alice is shown walking down the street, she passes a homeless-man, his arm stretched out, portrayal of lifelessness after the act which committed. The effect is further amplified by sudden scream, not by Alice, but Landlady screams which adds flair to the story.

The Black Mail stands out for the willingness to utilize the new sound.

Despite being new to the sound medium and having limitations, Hitchcock is successful in incorporating sound and visual with great success. Unlike the other talkies that were full of songs and music, he didn't play gimmick, but

worked hard to make it as realistic as possible. For example the addition of sound enabled characters to set the mood of the viewers in perfect sequence keeping the viewers guessing, what will happen next. The repetition of word knife also creates a chilling effect of murder again and again. All of these techniques show that Hitchcock even in his first (sound) movie was successful to use sound technology effectively at a time, when others were lagging in techniques and creativity. Black Mail shows his ability to think out of box and see the potential of sound in the coming years.

Even though Black Mail does not have as much suspense as expected from Hitchcock, but the movie over all has story telling genius with a pervading sense of fear throughout, which captivates the viewer's attention. It is also an essential movie to see, Hitchcock progress as a filmmaker from silent to sound movies.

THE SKIN GAME (Juan and McDevitt, 2005)

The Skin Game (1931) is based on John Galsworthy play. The story revolves around the feud between two rival families, the Hillcrests and the Hornblowers. A battle starts between the two families for the land auction that ends in disastrous result. The Skin Game shows Hitchcock dramatic style in many ways. His first experiment with Black Mail and then use of sound in Murder provided him enough experience to play sound tricks skillfully showing him not as amateur, but a master of the art who knows, how to exploit the sound technology.

The plot of the movie is pushed through a lot of talking. The reason for this excessive use of sound technology is mixed with a lot of 180-degree visual cuts. The camera is pulled and pushed into the scenes dramatizing the events and characters in an engaging way. The most noticeable example can be felt, when Hornblower and his daughter are left alone in a room and her status as a prostitute is revealed. The sense of shame is dramatically amplified through camera pulls back showing the extra emptiness around them, perhaps a reference to the emptiness inside the characters.

The dispute in the movie is about land; it is natural to show hills and scenery. In a scene as the actors discuss land dispute, the camera cuts to a shot to the hills and trees and then back at actors and again to hills, however this time, the hills are not real, but a picture mounted on a stand is quite inventive technique creating a shocking effect for the viewers.

There are critics, who mention that the movie is over-talkative, but the dialogue is driving the plot forward and suspense is created through words and drama rather than action. One main issue during the dialogue is the element of blackmail that is depicted in a very powerful way, even though it was not central element of the story like the earlier movie (The Black Mail), but the movie effective dialogue makes it working. It would be not wrong to say in the movie is a wonderful combination of sound and dialogue showing the expert hand of Hitchcock. We can say that the Skin Game is an admirable effort by Hitchcock, and has been successful in combining audio and visual cinematic effects in an artistic way showing his growth as a director.

CONCLUSION

There are critics who mention that the arrival of sound ended the silent movie genera, but in reality it was natural to proceed from silent to sound movies. This progress shows the will to go forward and blend the best of audio and visual techniques. The early directors like Hitchcock pioneered their way despite limitations giving viewers the best movies through the camera lens. For Hitchcock nothing is more important than capturing attention of his viewers by any means, be it best visuals or dazzling sound effects, he is best in his work. In Hitchcock's hands camera is not some thing static, but it keeps on moving, shooting characters from different angels, showing their feelings and expression and inner thoughts. Starting from his silent movies, he was able to tell stories through succession of images. When sound arrived, he blended both mediums and presented his movies in a lucid and convincing manner proving his genius and the transition from silent movies to talking movies successfully

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