

Self reflexive aspects of singing in the rain



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Singin' in the Rain (MGM, 1952) is an American musical comedy directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen. The film comically emulates the transition from the production of silent movies to 'talkies' in Hollywood during the 1920s. The narrative follows a successful silent film star named Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) and his glamorous blonde on screen partner Lina Lamont as they attempt to adapt *The Duelling Cavalier* a silent film, into a talking film.

However, the shrill sound of Lamont's voice cast serious doubt of the potential success of the film. Lockwood's musically talented sidekick Cosmo Brown (Donald O'conner) suggests that the film be turned into a musical, and recommends Lockwood's love interest Kathy Seldon (Debbie Reynolds) perform the musical numbers to be dubbed in place of Lamont's ungodly voice. Ultimately, their plan unites Lockwood and Seldon and leaves the audience with a text book happy ending.

The text provides an autobiographical look at Hollywood itself and the introduction of recorded sounds during the 1920s. The text ultimately becomes the subject and calls attention to its own fictional condition. This essay will analyse the texts self-reflexivity with specific reference to genre and adaptation. Self-reflexivity is a term used to describe a text which refers to its own making and composition. A self-reflexive text emulates its own generic make up and makes talking about or referring to itself the key focus of the unfolding narrative.

Self-reflexivity has been used as a framework to analyse film genre and narrative, highlighting the conventions that make up textual and stylistic

constructs (Altman 1999, p. 102). Self-reflexive texts remind the audience that they are not watching 'reality' it is purely a reconstructed representation of reality. Arguably, *Singin' in the Rain* is one of the most notable examples of self-reflexivity at work. The narrative of this text is based on the making of a Hollywood film and the trials and tribulations that go hand in hand with staging a production.

The audience's attention is drawn towards the link that exists between the show musical and Hollywood and through self reference legitimises it as entertainment (Ames 1997, p. 57). The text refers to its own artistic composition by permitting the audience to go back stage and have access to set construction, rehearsals and preparations and also alludes to Hollywood representations and facades. The relationship between Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont alludes to the false characters that some Hollywood actors are pressured to adopt in order to maintain their public persona.

During the opening scene of the text, the press speak of Lockwood and Lamont as though they are in a real relationship, however through Lockwood's flashback it revealed that the couple's relationship which is reinforced by the media, is a merely fabricated to ensure the success of their careers and public image. The example demonstrates how the text unmasks the Hollywood film star persona, and refers to its own industry as somewhat phony and shallow. The narrative structure of *Singin' in the Rain* centres on the making of a Hollywood musical film *The Dancing Cavalier*, positioning the text as a film within a film.

The narrative structure mirrors that of the making of a Hollywood film therefore adding another layer to the film's deep self-reflection. According to Ames (1997, p. 55) "The backstage musical is reflexive by nature and doubly so in a film about making musicals". The film being made within the text refers through artistic and narrative conventions to the real film being made *Singin' in the Rain*, this hall of mirrors effect technique is referred to as *mise en abyme* (Chumo 1996, p. 41). The means of production and process are brought to the foreground as the audience is exposed to set construction, backstage crew and film equipment.

A prime example of this is the musical number *Make 'Em Laugh* performed by Donald O'Connor's character, Cosmo Brown. Throughout his performance, Brown comically interacts with props such as a life-sized headless dummy as he moves through various sets and backdrops. At the conclusion of the musical number Cosmo flips off the illusionary backdrop of a hallway. This example demonstrates how the text reflects its own making and works to demystify the illusions of Hollywood. The backstage pass that is granted to audience uncovers the modes of Hollywood production and replaces it with musical performances.

Throughout *Singin' in the Rain* self-referential techniques are employed to signal to the audience that the film is a metafictional text. The text consciously advises the audience that what they are watching is not real, consequently disrupting the illusion of the fourth wall. Ingersoll (1999, p. 385) describes metafiction as "a fictional text that draws attention to itself as a text in a variety of ways". An example of this can be identified during the opening scene when Don Lockwood explains his rise to fame story.

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The character looks directly into the camera as he speaks, breaking the illusion of the fourth wall and acknowledging the audience's existence. This technique is markedly different from the established convention of the audience 'eavesdropping' on characters that ordinarily function within a three-walled environment (Auer & Davis 1991, p. 165). Singin' in the Rain acknowledges the audience and itself as a work of fiction self-referentially, as a result the audience are no longer voyeuristically watching, they are being spoken to.

The term genre is used within film studies to refer to the classification or grouping of the common features that make up a text such as narrative or setting. Genres are a product of the film-making world which works to serve audience tastes and demand. Schatz (1981, p. 16) suggests that film genres "are the result of the material conditions of commercial film-making itself, whereby popular stories are varied and repeated as long as they satisfy audience demand and turn a profit for the studios". Hollywood cinema relies heavily on generic conventions that have been established over the many years of storytelling.

Cinematic themes are continually recycled with various levels of tweaking to suit audience demand (Kolker 2006, p. 4). The film maker and the film viewers have a complex contractual relationship with genre as it naturally builds up certain expectations as to what will and will not be included. For example, as the name suggests the musical genre is characterised by the inclusion of musical numbers performed by the characters within the text as the narrative unfolds. Therefore, a film such as Singin' in the Rain which is

classified as a musical, sets up an expectation that the text will include song and dance elements.

The narrative structure of a musical is generally organised around some kind of production or show as the genre stylistically emerged from Broadway productions. Feuer (1980, p. 23) suggests that musicals are not only entertainment but are also frequently about the production of entertainment as well. Therefore, the musical genre can almost automatically be classified as self reflexive. The narrative structure of *Singin' in the Rain* highlights the self reflexive characteristic of the musical genre.

The text explores the making of a 'talking' movie *The Duelling Cavalier* and frequently refers to the difficulties associated with recording and matching sound with film. The text encourages the audience to see the humorous side of this process during the scene when the character of Lina Lamont has a microphone sewn into her costume and is later knocked from her perch as the director trips on the microphone wire. As a means of self-reflection, the problematic 'talking' movie is turned into a musical *The Dancing Cavalier*, which in turn champions the musical genre.

Ames (1997 p. 4) suggests that "this strategy solves their problems, not only by allowing for modern musical numbers but also ensuring a principle character who can sing and dance". According to Schatz (1981, p. 16) Hollywood films can be reduced down to just two overarching generic styles, genres of order and genres of integration. Generally speaking, genres of order focus on a male protagonist that finds resolve in external violence promoting self reliance. In contrast, genres of integration focus on a couple

or collective group which find resolve through verbal communication and integration promoting a utopian society.

Singin' in the Rain can therefore be classified as the later, as the text focuses on the developing relationship between Don Lockwood and Kathy Seldon as well as the collaboration required of the characters to achieve the end goal, in this case successfully producing The Dancing Cavalier. Within a self reflexive musical the success of the 'show' is dependent on the successful collaboration of the characters involved, emphasizing the inclusionary effect of musical performance (Feuer 1995, p. 448).

In this sense, musicals act as a kind of metaphor for social cohesion as it alludes to the Utopian idea that working together will always lead to a happy ending. This is evident in Singin' in the Rain during the closing scene, the two main characters Don Lockwood and Kathy Seldon unite as a couple in front of the billboard for Singin' in the Rain, thus alluding to the idea that the film the audience has just watched is the one being advertised. Feuer (1995, p. 467) suggests "this hall of mirrors effect emphasises the unity giving function of the musical both for the couples and the audience in the film and the audience of the film".

The text becomes the subject and as a result emphasise the value of social cohesion. Singin' in the Rain is also an example of an adapted text as it re-uses songs from other films within the musical Genre. The term adaption most commonly refers to a film or even a television series that is derived from a modified version of a written text. However, Singin' in the Rain adapts songs from other musicals as a means of self reference. Adaptation can be

viewed as a form of intertextuality as it borrows ideas, styles etc. from other texts to be woven into new ones.

This paradigm also lends itself to the notion of hybridity and the idea that thoughts are forever recycled and transformed and are capable of stimulating imagination and expression (Sanders 2005, p. 17). Singin' in the Rain demonstrates this notion as it recycles musical numbers from other films as a means of commenting on the musical genre and creative expression. For example, the song Singin' in the Rain was originally from the 1929 MGM film, *The Hollywood review*. This song not only provides the title for the 1952 MGM film, it is also performed twice throughout the text.

By incorporating songs from previous films the text self referentially acknowledges the genres past and glorifies its entertainment qualities. Arguably, Singin' in the Rain is one of the most notable examples of a self-reflexive text. The film consciously acknowledges its status as a fictitious artefact, and invites the audience to view what goes on back stage of a Hollywood production. The text takes a look at its own status as a musical and in doing so heightens the transparency of the genre and celebrates its status as Hollywood entertainment.

The text emphasises the value of social cooperation and promotes a utopian social space by basing the narrative on the production on the film itself. The inclusion and adaptation of musical numbers from previous films pays homage to the musical genre, commenting on its own artistic composition. The film works to demystify the illusion of Hollywood practices and processes yet reinforces them via song and the ultimate utopian happy ending. The

text incorporates self-reflexive devices into multiple levels of the film, providing the audience with a different perspective on Hollywood and reinforcing the purpose of the musical genre.