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Introduction to Cinema Studies

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Scene Analysis: Make 'em Laugh

Singin' in the Rain is a film about a silent film studio facing challenges as sound technology emerges in the film industry. Musician Cosmo Brown (Gene Kelly) in this film is the best friend of lead actor Don Lockwood (Donald O'Connor). After Don's encounter with Kathy (Debbie Reynolds) who told him that he is "just a shadow" as a silent film star, Cosmo attempts to cheer him up and performed his solo the "Make 'em Laugh" sequence. The director, choreographer and lead actor Gene Kelly used this sequence to introduce and highlight the motif of Don and Cosmo's comical and musical original performance style which brings a sort of exuberant energy to the screen that can solve their career problem.

The use of sound in the sequence suggest the character temporarily taking over the world of the film. The soundtrack consists of three elements: Cosmo's singing, sound effects, and background music. All three elements are consistent in volume throughout the musical sequence and give the audience no perception of distance or direction of the sound source. This mise-en-scene choice is coherent with the time in the story when the technology of sound in film was not advanced enough to create dimensions, and it also serves to let the viewers think that his voice surrounds the space of the scene. The use of diegetic and nondiegetic sound suggests that that Cosmo's energy takes over the film, that every part of what can be perceived in the film is drawn to his performance. At the start of the sequence, the sound behaves similarly to stage plays with

diegetic sounds such as the piano and Cosmo's head banging against the wood. As the scene goes on, non-diegetic sound effects gradually dominate the soundtrack as Cosmo's energy is unleashed in the performance. For example, there are unnatural cracking sounds when Cosmo acts like his face is twisted after he smashed into the wall, and the clicking sound accompanying the rag puppet's hand movements to guide the audience to perceive it as something that it is not. The comical background music also gets louder and more exaggerated as the sequence progresses. These acoustic decisions contribute to the perception that Cosmo's performance energy is gradually filling up the soundtrack.

The soundtrack provides a delightful atmosphere which complements the unexpected lightheartedness of Cosmo, creating a surprising and disbelieving world. It compliments with Cosmo's surprisingly lighthearted attitude when he is supposed to feel the difficulties and the pains when doing the tricks. Often times this kind of energy is generated because a character is trapped or hindered. In this case it is the troubling reality that the characters wish to escape. In the story world, the characters Don and Cosmo seek to escape from the tedious old-schooled screen acting and their depressing outlook of the studio. For the audience of when this film *Singin' in the Rain* was first shown, it offered an experience of escaping from the World War II reality that they were in. This energy brings everyone hopes for a more successful and delightful future.

On the visual side, the main part of the sequence consists of one long take that contains all of Cosmo's energy in the performance. We see in the sequence that the only cut in the sequence is when Cosmo leaves the room where Don is and starts the musical number. Once the song starts, the camera follows Cosmo to different parts of the set and shifts angles to get the best view of him. The long take makes the audience concentrate on his breathtaking

performance. Cosmo jumps around, travels, and does an assortment of fancy tricks to create the rhythm that would otherwise be created by cuts.

In one scene, the camera lifts up and tilts down to see Cosmo spinning on the floor as if he is walking in an invisible circular floor. Not only does this camera movement guide the audience attention towards Cosmo, but it also creates visual illusions by capturing the most interesting viewing angles, such as when Cosmo fell behind the sofa with the muppet, he throws his body and the muppet off the ground and the angle of the camera makes it look as if they are engaged in a fight from the angle of the camera. Reflecting on the role of film as a controversial medium in the story, the visual illusion capability of film challenges Kathy's criticism towards screen actors like Don that they are "just a lot of dumb shadows". It also makes the audience question the definiteness of reality, whether the world they see is the world that is real. Don and Cosmo's realities is like a dream, where they try to create new worlds for people to see and making things look real. A central discussion amongst the characters in this self-reflective movie is what captures the audience, and Cosmo suggests to Don in this sequence that the exuberant energy is the way to go.

Cosmo's performance also shows his commanding of the space.

The performance style as choreographed and directed by Gene Kelly brings catches the audience by surprise, capture their attention and take them on an emotional journey. Many moves in this sequence contradict the common perception of senses. For example at one point in the sequence, Cosmo is thrown down to the floor by two workers carrying a block of wood he was sitting on. The audience can sympathize with his pain and anticipate an angry and grumpy reaction, but instead he gracefully recovers as if nothing had happened and takes the audience by surprise.

In the reality of the story, Cosmo might just be Don's best friend and emotional support. But as a character in the film he means much more. In other parts of the film, we see Don and Cosmo perform musical numbers synchronically and at times with matching outfits. Cosmo embodies Don's intuitive style and capability of performance, his talent that would work regardless of the shift in the industry, something that Don had drifted away from because he was distracted by what the industry demands of him. As demonstrated in Kelly's performance, sound and cinematography, Don needs to understand that in order to succeed he has to be his original self, to lead with his comical and musical energy rather than be led by the trends of the industry.