

# THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE: *THE ARTIST* AS A CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY FILM METHODS

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Nonverbal communication is a part of everyday communication whether one realizes it or not. There are more messages being sent nonverbally from sender to receiver than one might initially think through forms such as choice of clothing, lack of speech, environment, and more (Calero, 2008). While humans directly communicate to each other nonverbally, there is nonverbal communication in the art forms humans create to express themselves or emotions at the time. Expression through art began as paintings, concrete sculptures, or theatre throughout the different art movement eras, but, within the last century, the creation of film has introduced another medium for humans to express their emotions. Filmmaking has become one of the most popular art forms of today and continues to bring in audiences of all backgrounds. While filmmaking began as an art form for people to express themselves and tell a narrative, today's Hollywood films fall short of the meaningful and carefully created films that filmmaking grew out of.

In the cinema and theatre realm, there is discourse about communication in films; specifically, how dialogue plays a part in communicating a narrative to audiences. Stemming back to the 1930s, Antonin Artaud's *Theatre and Its Double* begins the discourse between visual communication and dialogue, focusing on the premise that

theatre must evoke emotion within its audience through visuals, which therefore convey concrete meaning. Artaud's position on the use of dialogue in theatre is implied through his interest and belief that facial gestures communicate more than words ever could. Even though Artaud was discussing stage theatre, the same idea applies to film in the way that filmmakers must use visual, often nonverbal, communication to communicate the emotion of the scene to the audience. Independent filmmakers today are more conscious of the art of filmmaking and continue to create films as an art through the use of more nonverbal cues to communicate their narrative to audiences.

This paper focuses on the film *The Artist* (2011) as an artifact analyzed through the lens of nonverbal communication in order not only to understand how humans understand nonverbal communication through silent films, but also to explain how nonverbal communication in the film communicates the intent of the filmmakers. Filmmaking takes copious amount of preproduction and planning in order to create a world in the film that is believable to audiences. This means everything from the props to the lighting to the actor's clothing are chosen to control how the audience perceives emotion.

*The Artist* (2011) is a film about two actors in 1927 Hollywood during the change

from silent films to sound films. Peppy Miller is a rising star who just began her stardom and embraced the idea and implementation of talkies, which are films with both voice and music sound. Whereas George Valentin, an established and wealthy star in Hollywood's silent films, begins to stray from talkies and decides they will not amount to anything. George and Peppy have feelings for each other, but George is reluctant to cheat on his wife throughout the film. Kinograph Studios signs Peppy Miller where her fame escalates through the creation and rising audience demand for talkies, while George Valentin's fame declines from his hubris and unwillingness to adapt. Over the course of the film, Peppy is empathetic towards George and tries to help him through anonymous monetary contributions, until one day she saves George from taking his own life.

Although *The Artist* (2011) is set in 1927, the film was produced and released during the postmodern period. An article from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes post modernism as “a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power” (Duignan, 2018). The postmodernist period questions the modern period of reason, logic, and absolute truth, and focuses more on critiquing the conceptual constructs of our society. The discourse in film and theatre stems from the argument of whether or not dialogue is beneficial to the art of filmmaking or hinders it. Audiences heavily rely on

dialogue to understand and push the plot forward rather than understanding the narrative via nonverbal communication through acting and filmmaking techniques. From the book *Visual Communication: Integrating Media, Art, and Science*, the authors state that “messages produced by symbolic prose or visual craft have the power to communicate instantaneously and profoundly to both the conscious and nonconscious” (Williams and Newton, 2008). Williams and Newton emphasize the benefits of visual communication in film because visual communication quickly transfers messages from sender to receiver and can communicate on conscious and nonconscious levels. *The Artist* (2011), being produced in 2011 but set in 1927, nonverbally expresses the filmmakers' intent to challenge the modern audience and its reliance on dialogue in films. The decision about the setting of the film was not by chance, but intentional in a way that reminisces about the art of filmmaking before sound. In addition to the nostalgia of the era of shifting from silent to sound cinema, the filmmakers nonverbally are critiquing current movies and their reliance on dialogue to tell a story.

In *The Artist* (2011), towards the beginning of Peppy and George's relationship, they are shooting a dancing scene in one of George's films where Peppy is an extra on set. The filmmakers in this scene were portraying the playful, slightly romantic relationship that recently started between the two. The environment was supposed to be serious because they were filming, but Peppy and George found themselves unable to stay in character

through several takes, which portrayed nonverbally the lighthearted and blooming nature of their new relationships as friends. In the book *Nonverbal Communication* by scholar Burgoon et al., he states that “certain environmental cues imply sets of different rules and guidelines for behavior” (Burgoon et al. 2016). Peppy and George violated this environmental expectancy, which better shows them and their personalities to the audience in a deeper form. The proxemics of Peppy and George help express their emotions towards one another because when they have to dance together, they end up breaking character which shows their chemistry when close together. Even though the dance is part of the movie, they are shooting their kinesics, gazes, and facial reactions, from having to dance together plays a role in expressing their lively relationship every time they come together to dance but end up laughing and having to start over.

Birdwhistell from his book *Kinesics and Content* states that “kinesics is concerned with abstracting from the continuous muscular shifts which are characteristic of the living physiological systems those groupings of movements which are significant to the communication process and thus to the interactional systems of particular groups” (1970). The filmmakers intended for audiences to separate the nonverbal cues from their acting and thus are able to learn more about their relationship from the kinesics portrayed. From the filmmakers’ use of nonverbal expressions, the audience is able to understand that there is chemistry and a quirky friendship between the two.

On the other end of the spectrum, filmmakers portrayed George’s inner turmoil, contemplation of suicide, and descent into depression in the scene when he sets fire to his film reels in his house. George unravels and sets fire to the film reels because he is at his breaking point where he experiences the gravity of his situation and the feeling of hopelessness. The chronemics of this scene, after he sold all of his personal belongings, and of his actions, nonverbally express how deep in depression and disheartened he feels when he turns to lighting his personal film reels on fire and watching them burn at his feet. An article about time, change, and sociocultural communication from Radford University states that “all communicative behavior has an underlying temporality, as time in its many forms is central to human beings and their lives” (Bruneau 2007). George’s decision to set fire to his film reels contained this underlying temporality and gave audiences deeper nonverbal communication as to why he decided to burn his films at the moment he did. Also, during this scene, his kinesics while standing over the pile of unraveled films holding the match provide nonverbal communication of the contemplation in his mind, but his gaze provided almost tranquil feelings about setting fire to his films. The environment of his empty house, due to selling his personal belongings to live, and being alone shows audiences how one’s environment can affect a person’s behavior. Burgoon et al. states that “we can interpret meaning from the environment” (Burgoon et al. 2016). The filmmakers intended for George to be in this environment in order to nonverbally show the audience the state of George’s mental

health and inner emotions of anger, sadness, and hopelessness.

After George's first attempt at suicide, he finds out that Peppy had bought all of his belongings from the auction he held. The chronemics of finding out this information, after being taken in by Peppy following his first attempt at suicide hurts and pushes George to going back into the house where he set fire and contemplates finishing what he half-heartedly tried to do earlier. When George sits at the kitchen table, the thoughts of what others were saying were running through his head and through his kinesics, such as holding his head, sweating, and eyes closed in deep thought, the audience understood George's mental turmoil. It is after he sits at the kitchen table that George gets his gun and returns to the room he set fire to where he opens the box his gun is held in. This environment that George placed himself in reveals to audiences not only that he is still struggling with inner turmoil, but by coming back to this room his interactions with this environment again may be different. Burgoon et al. also found that "certain contexts prompt different kinds of interaction" (Burgoon et al. 2016). The environmental nonverbal communication of the filmmakers by having George in the blackened room shows the audience that he is serious this time about committing suicide.

The filmmakers for *The Artist* (2011) exceptionally expressed their intents to the audience through nonverbal communication, which many movies in the twenty-first century is not able to do due to their reliance on dialogue. Through watching and understanding silent films we have a better grasp of how the nonverbal communication

in the film communicates the intent of the filmmakers. By doing these exercises and understanding nonverbal communication on a higher level, we are better able to pick up nonverbal cues in our everyday lives, which help us connect, empathize, and sympathize with humans around us. We are also able to strengthen the way we nonverbally communicate our own emotions in the art we create. Nonverbal communication between humans expresses so much more than our language could ever tell in such a small amount of time.

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