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### **Changing the Lens: A Viewing Log on *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)**

The film being analyzed here is *Singin' in the Rain*, a 1952 American musical-comedy directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen. This viewing log will focus on the short sequence (0:55:40–0:59:35) where the previewing screening of "The Dueling Cavalier" turns into a disaster due to various technical problems and ... something else.

Please refer to the second page in this PDF to view the **mind map**.

I believe changing the cultural contexts when analyzing a film allows us to understand the subtexts and meanings behind the formalist elements of film language a lot more completely and fully. One of the easiest things when analyzing film and breaking down a scene is to get bogged down on one specific element or moment in the film and one interesting piece of history that connects with it, which is good for curious research and expanding our film knowledge, but not great for writing an analysis piece where we want to demonstrate our understanding of a film in a more all-rounded way. Changing the cultural context lenses we are analyzing the film from forces us to jump out of a certain pattern of thinking and stops us from ignoring all the other meanings embedded within the formalist elements of a film, allowing us to gain a fuller understanding of not just how film techniques are achieved, but why they are done in a certain way. In the specific example of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), just focusing on, say, the Socio-Historical context in the "The Dueling Cavalier" preview screening scene can make one just focus on how accents and class differences are manifested in films of the 1920s. However, this ignores the wider context, like how it attempts to depict the difficulty of sound projection and synchronization in the early days of 'talkies,' and the even wider context and trend of the economic interests of the rising studio system. Focusing on either one of these misses the point, and only by analyzing films from various perspectives can one truly understand the purpose of formalist elements in a film. After all, to be able to zoom in and analyze specific film elements, we must be able to see the big picture.

## Mise-en-scène and Sound

In the beginning of the sequence, where the film screen plays the preview of "The Dueling Cavalier," Kelly and Donen presents with the audience an awkward yet relatively decent-sounding "Good Speech" from Lina, albeit slightly comedic due to her high-pitched and harsh voice. This juxtaposition of a Southern-sounding voice to the supposedly elitist accent creates tension, as the film has been explicitly showing Lina's horrendous ability at replicating the 'proper speech' of Hollywood, foreshadowing that something is going to go wrong. This foreshadowing is further exacerbated by how Lina pronounces "France" (*Singin' in the Rain* 0:56:25), that is, with a very flat, almost "e"-like "a" sound, with the swallowing of the second half of the word to create a blend of New York and Southern accent. This seemingly incompatibility of Lina's character and the forced accent she is putting on further heightens the suspense, allowing the audience to empathize with the actors and directors of "The Dueling Cavalier," as the audience are experiencing the same uncertainty as them. The build-up eventually reaches the breaking point when Lina says, "can't stand him" (0:56:35), with the juxtaposition of the "can't" with an overly-exaggerated "anng" sound, and the flat, mushy Southern accent of "stan'im." This release of tension creates a comedic effect, almost explosive, with the jarring nature of it relieving the uncertainty on accent but exacerbating the uncertainty on the quality and reception of "The Dueling Cavalier": otherwise known as 'cringe.' To further emphasize the jarring nature of the intrusion of the Southern accent, Kelly and Donen immediately follows the line with the laughter from the theater audience, the first instance of laughter in the sequence. This not only indicates the comedic nature of the sequence, encouraging the audience to laugh along with the jokes, but it also foreshadows the train wreck that the preview of "The Dueling Cavalier" becomes. The later addition of Don's near-perfect "Good Speech" provides a genuine mockery of Lina's lack of talent besides her looks, criticizing how Hollywood selected actors before the advent of sound.



## Socio-Historical Context: Accents

The film takes place around the mid-1920s, there was a massive shift in the U.S.'s accent as she tries to distance herself from her British colonial past. However, being a society plagued with clear social class divisions, the U.S. started to develop an accent for the elites, as they believed a certain way of speaking – halfway between the British, which represented elitism and wealth, and the 'common' American accent – was superior than the rest. Hence, the "Good Speech," literally by that name, was born, sometimes inappropriately called the Mid-Atlantic accent, and was adopted by cinema when "talkies" were surging in popularity, with their "ahs" when reading "r," and sometimes excessive rolling "r." Now, this elitist speech stands in stark contrast to those spoken by the 'laymen', in other words, the South. This is the odd blend of the Southern accent, brought over by the African Americans (because racism was quite popular then), and the remains of the British Accent, creating the 'New York accent' that is still prominent today. The accents people spoke not only represented their geography, but also their social status, so the riches would often frown upon the 'peasant's accent,' which was reflected in cinema: dialect coaches were so popular in drama that actors and actresses had them to (Nosowitz). Hence, in *Singin' in the Rain*, the harsh tones and New York accent of Lina Lamont was a representation of the uneducated and untalented, which, when juxtaposed with Don Lockwood's much better-sounding "Good Speech," highlights the social-historical contexts and the power of accents.

## Mise-en-scène and Cinematography

The devastation that the failure of "The Dueling Cavalier" brings in its preview is best demonstrated by Kelly and Donen right after the scene containing the screening of the film (*Singin' in the Rain* 0:59:04). To begin, the directors blocked the 'crew' of the film to a corner outside of the theatre viewing room, metaphorically symbolizing how they are both trapped (by the public reception of the film) in a corner with little choices and are in a dire situation without an 'exit.' This creates a sense of claustrophobia for the audience, sympathizing with the 'crew' of the film their isolation and devastation after watching the disaster that is their own film. Additionally, the short sequence rarely employs camera movements, and the two moments that that there are (pans), they are all motivated by the audience themselves instead of the crew, like how the teenage boys mocking the film's "I love you, I love you" walks out of the theatre, and the camera only then pans with their movement as they walk across the camera to reveal the 'crew' at the corner of the room (0:59:08). This hints that the audience is 'in control' of the situation, as economically, with new technologies like talkies, audience reception can make or break a film studio's reputation instantly, potentially causing them to go bankrupt. In fact, Kelly and Donen placed so little 'crew-motivated' camera moves that, when they look over to see an audience claiming she "never wanna see Lockwood and Lamont again," (0:59:21) the camera does not move but abruptly cuts to show the source of the dialogue, almost poking fun at how little power the 'crew' has over the situation, emphasizing the dramatic irony that R.F. just claimed Don and Lina's star-power is able to let the film pass. Through this short sequence, without much fancy camera movements or editing, just by character-blocking and precisely planned pans & cuts, Kelly and Donen well demonstrated the dire situation the 'crew,' and subsequently the protagonists are in due to the initial failure of "The Dueling Cavalier."

## Sound and Editing

While the dialogue of "The Dueling Cavalier" continues, Kelly and Donen makes several references to the awkward placements of microphones and Phonograph's technological limitations. For instance, reminding the audience that the jarring flower prop on the shoulder of Lina hides the microphone, Lina's dialogue is automated to a lower volume when she turns her head away from the microphone, and higher volume when she turns back to it (*Singin' in the Rain* 0:57:03). This not only replicates the awkwardness of recording audio on-set when studios started filming 'talkies,' but also mocks Lina's half-hazard performance, as both the audiences in the film and outside of the film realize the stiffness and awkwardness of her acting when they start to expect realism from the addition of sound. This desire for realism is further exacerbated with Don's throwing of his cane, with the loud, disruptive sound criticizing a problem plaguing the silent film industry: the lack of sound allows them to hide ridiculous character actions. The comedic effect of the limitations of microphone technology is further demonstrated with Don's cloth-rustling sound from the microphone under his cloths, which is exaggerated with the sound design of plastic tightening and elastic noises, mocking the tight, uncomfortable costumes of the characters, indicating the absurdness of both the plot of "The Dueling Cavalier" but also the sound capturing method itself. The comedic effect of the technological problems of microphones, having to turn up their volumes really high to record dialogue remotely distant, is emphasized by Lina's hitting Don's shoulders (0:57:34), making a loud thumping sound resembling that of slapstick comedy, suggesting that the concept of "The Dueling Cavalier" itself is just like slapstick comedy, just that the audience do not notice due to the lack of sound, but dialogue exposes the mundane and plainness of the film.

The mockery of the actors, and "The Dueling Cavalier" as a whole, heightens when the technological problem of out-of-sync audio occurs, offsetting the exchange of Lina and the film's villain by just a few seconds that it creates a hilarious, comedic effect of Lina's squeaky, high-pitched voice saying "No, No, No" with the villain's nodding, and the villain's deep, menacing voice demanding "Yes, Yes, Yes" with Lina's dramatic shaking head of fear (0:58:48). In fact, following this is the sudden slowing-down of the playback of the film, distorting the audio to make Lina's voice comically low, which is ironic, as the purpose of slowing down the film is to re-sync the audio and visuals, but achieves the opposite. Not only is this a comedic moment that demonstrates the technological failure and instability of the Phonograph, it also mocks the childishness and blandness of the dialogue of "The Dueling Cavalier," demonstrating how sound exposes the cliché nature of traditional silent films, referencing Kathy's criticism of the 'sameness' of films of the time. By doing so, Kelly and Donen communicates that the transition from silent to sound is not just overcoming the technological hurdles of sound recording, which lays a foundation for the mockingly comical nature of the scene, but studios also need to reconsider their assembly-like process of making films and begin writing good dialogue that does not require 'star power,' which has proven to fail in this sequence.



## Technological Context: Sound

The film mentions several instances of 'recording to wax,' which is a reference to the widespread recording technique of sound film experiments before the Vitaphone was invented and adopted by the major film studios. Although this is later refined to recording on disks, which allowed for longer takes and a larger dynamic range for sound, the physical limitations – literally, these recording technology was characterized by making physical dents and grooves as 'storage' for sound, kind of like embedding the 'sound wave information' that we enjoy in the digital age onto a wax cylinder of 12-inch disk that can be read later – of these techniques created various problems. To begin, the recordings required either a very loud or very directional sound source due to the lack of amplification of the recording medium, which for voices meant that actors could only speak in one direction. Additionally, since both the recording and reading of the sound information is physical, the stylus on the phonograph and easily skip a groove, or the film itself can be suddenly slowed down due to technical difficulties, resulting in out-of-sync audio. Although this problem of syncing will be largely solved when the Vitaphone recording system allowed audio information to be recorded straight onto the film itself (which actually 'cropped off' the top and bottom of 35mm film to create the 'Academy Ratio' of 1:1.37 instead of the old 4:3 or 1:33 film ratio) (Filmmaker IQ), as *Singin' in the Rain* depicts the rival film studio of 'Monumental Pictures,' late to adopt the Vitaphone from Warner Bros., the technical limitations of the Phonograph systems are incredibly prevalent in the film.

## Economic Context: Studio System

The film depicts the emergence of the Hollywood Studio System as sound became a large role of cinema and advertising of films no longer relied on the actor's appearance but also their voice. This is a shift of the economic model of Hollywood, finally ending the 'experimental films' era and 'every film is the same' era, settling on a workflow of visuals and audio that would continue for years to come until audio recording technology became more convenient. However, the transition period of this, especially from silent films to talkies, meant that a lot of studios were taking a gamble at a new workflow of sound films. Hence, the stakes of these first sound films for all studios, regardless of size, can be that of a life-and-death one. Additionally, having a new medium also meant that audiences are now much more judgmental of new sound films due to their attempted imitation of reality, painting the fall of an old wave of star power and the rise of a new one. The increasing importance of audience reception meant that these films are of large financial interest to studios, which is exactly the role of "The Dueling Cavalier" depicted in *Singin' in the Rain* (Cook and Robert; Filmmaker IQ).

Mind Map by  
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IB Film SL

Directed by Stanley Donen  
and Gene Kelly (1952)



Sequence: 0:55:40–0:59:35

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