

T h e S o u n d o f S i l e n c e :

Singin' in the Rain
as Postmodern Pre-text

C h r i s B o u l t o n

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“Ye shall know that the truth is not what it seems and *that* truth shall set you free.”

Stanley Fish in Hutcheon pg. 13

“Can’t a girl get a word in edgewise?!”

Lina Lamont in *Singin’ in the Rain*

Filmmakers and Historians face a similar dilemma: they must create a world into which their audience can enter but has never been. They are image-makers who provide lenses to the public so that they might witness something important and/or spectacular. *Singin’ in the Rain* offers the viewer access to a history that is both familiar and foreign, the film industry's shift from silence to sound. I wish to argue that the filmmakers accomplish this task with a distinctly postmodern method. First, the film communicates through a language of pre-texts that simultaneously exploit and parody the musical and silent film genres. Second, by focusing on identity as a construction of voice and History as a product of subjective memory, *Singin’ in the Rain* questions boundaries between art and life, poses fluid subject positions, and de-stabilizes objectivity. While I don’t intend to argue that *Singin’ in the Rain* was released in 1951 as a subversive piece of postmodern propaganda, I do believe that the film presents postmodern themes through the foil of image-making in American culture.¹ By silencing Lina as a constructed image and practically screaming that “the truth is not what it seems,” *Singin’ in the Rain* achieves an ironic tone towards Hollywood and is an essential pre-text for films like *Bladerunner*.

¹ I am not concerned here about the filmmakers intent, because they cannot control how the text they produce will be read. I think a more interesting question to ask is how does that text negotiates the dominant cultural discourses of its era (ie: containment, gender roles etc.) I argue in this essay that the makers of *Singin’ in the Rain* did it with postmodernism.

Singin' in the Rain opens with silent film stars Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) and Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen) arriving at the premiere of their latest movie. Gossip Columnist Dora Bailey pronounces "Lockwood and Lamont" to be as famous as "bacon and eggs." Their names have become icons that circulate in conversation as recognizable words. Theorists refer to this network of meaning as transactions of cultural capital. These transactions allude to pre-texts, so whoever participates in this network develops an intertextual knowledge base. Included in this base would be silent film stars such as Rudolph Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks and musicals by Buzby Berkeley. These pre-texts are essential for Lockwood's silent movie performance and the "Beautiful Girl" sequence to make sense to the viewer.² Thus, we can see how the network of meaning in *Singin' in the Rain* relies on what Hutcheon has called "the presence of the past"(4).

The filmmakers use the past as a form of self-reflexive satire. Exaggerated allusions to Fairbanks and Berkeley exude a postmodern tone of "ironic dialogue with the past" that "paradoxically incorporates and challenges that which it parodies"(Hutcheon 4, 11). Although *Singin' in the Rain* pokes fun at silent film acting and lavish musical production numbers, it also gains a lot of entertainment mileage from these "out-dated" forms. Through its dependency on what it is critiquing, the film illustrates what Hutcheon has called "a dialectical relationship between identity and distance"(quoted in Feuer 145). *Singin' in the Rain* functions both inside and outside the genre pre-texts that it simultaneously exploits and parodies.

The plot of *Singin' in the Rain* revolves around how Lockwood and Lamont will adjust to the shift from silent to talking film. The twist, introduced in the first ten minutes, is that Lina has a high pitched and annoying voice. While explaining to Lina why Don has

² Near the beginning of *Singin' in the Rain*, Lockwood's piano playing buddy Cosmo does a sneaky impression of Al Jolson's "Mammy" sequence from *The Jazz Singer*. Since *The Jazz Singer* first introduced "talking movies" to the public, this intertextual reference is an anachronism when considering the chronology of *Singin' in the Rain*---as in sound hadn't arrived yet. Therefore, though a recycled text to the 1951 viewer, this impression actually constitutes a pre-text in the diegesis. Non-chronological circulation of media texts is often considered a condition of postmodernism.

done all the public speaking for the duo, the studio's publicist reveals how Lina's image has been constructed: "*Lina, you're a beautiful woman. Audiences think that you've got a voice to match. The studio's gotta' keep their stars from looking ridiculous at any cost.*"

Lina represents the double-bind of women in a heterosexual patriarchy; she is both worshipped as a work of art and contained like a dangerous animal. The studio's control over Lina's image recalls Judith Butler's work on gender as a performative act. Lina's voice does not compute as "feminine" so the studio replaces it with the voice of Kathy Seldon (Debbie Reynolds).

The resulting hybrid on the screen of Lina's face and Kathy's voice poses a postmodern problem of identity and authorship. WHO owns the image? WHO is imitating WHOM? In the Abbot and Costello routine "Me and My Shadow," Ted Lewis is clearly the author of the song because the black dancer is not moving his lips. In the tradition of blackface entertainment, this performance does not blur boundaries between black and white, but rather accentuates them. Yet, could the black dancer be mocking the white band leader? The answer to the question "who's got the power?" is contingent on the perspective from which it is read. "Me and My Shadow" presents such a crude display of race relations that Ted Lewis' dependence on the dancer for *his* identity is exposed. Similarly, the "dubbing" of Lina in *Singin' in the Rain* reveals, perhaps unwittingly, how identity and authorship are constructed through voice in order to satisfy the ideology of patriarchy.

Even in 1996, with the benefit of critical retrospect, I find it difficult to distinguish between the genuine and the artifice in *Singin' in the Rain*. Lina seems to have a similar problem separating her "reel" life from her "real" life.

Lina: "*I'm your fiancée!*"

Don: "*Now Lina, you've been reading those fan magazines again. You shouldn't believe all that banana oil that Dora Bailey and the columnists dish out. There is nothing between us.*"

Lina: "*You don't mean that!*"

Because she believes in what Don later calls a “*cooked up romance just for publicity,*” Lina is coded as dumb and obsessive.³ Just like the screaming fans at her movie premier, Lina has become emotionally caught up in the illusion, the fantasy world created by the studios of the entertainment industry. In a crucial scene, the filmmakers show how a movie audience inside of the diagesis is completely fooled by the Lina/Kathy image--something the viewer of *Singin' in the Rain* knows to be a trick. Yet, if this film is self-reflexive, a parody of Lina and her fans amounts to be a parody of us, the viewers. We must also suspend our disbelief in order to gain pleasure from the consummation of Don and Kathy’s “love.”⁴ Thus, the makers of *Singin' in the Rain* parody their own means of image production at the peril of alienating the very consumers they wish to “fool.”

Don Lockwood also reveals how his identity is a construction designed to fool the public when he tells his personal story of origin. Don tells a great man and great event chronological meta-narrative that hinges on his moto: “*Dignity, always dignity.*” The sequence of images that support his story, however, provide strong dissonance.

<u>words</u>	<u>Images</u>
“ <i>Conservatory of fine arts</i> ”	a seedy bar
“ <i>Audiences adored us</i> ”	an audience booing
“ <i>My roles were urbane, sophisticated, suave</i> ”	a series of stunts
“ <i>Lina was warm and helpful, a real lady</i> ”	she rejects, kicks him

This sequence calls into question the normally assumed “unmediated relationship between words and things”(Scott 38). The viewer is granted what Robert Berkhofer, Jr. calls a "bird's eye view of the represented world" through visual cut-aways which contradict Don's

³ Though I don’t have space for it here, the vilification of Lina is especially disturbing when she is considered as “Rosie the Riveter.” Fighting against her containment by the studio, Lina exclaims, “*They’re my public too!*” Kathy simply waits for Don to provide her a job, while Lina claims it as her right.

⁴ Don confesses his love for Kathy in the only way he knows how--on a studio stage. While the apparatus for image-making (the lights, the fan, etc.) are exposed, this “behind the scenes” moment is backed by an invisible full orchestra. Thus, an ostensibly spontaneous confession of love relies on the very *misé en scene* it pretends to transcend.

story and thus puts his "point of view" into relief(177). Don's great man history, drawn from his personal "experience," is shown to be a constructed meta-narrative enabling his constructed identity as a star. Thus, because it portrays Don in humiliating circumstances, the sequence can be seen as proof that "subjects...are not unified autonomous individuals exercising free will"(Scott 34). Don was not "destined" to become a star, rather his success came from hard work, good luck, and most importantly, his ability to construct his own image.

In *Singin' in the Rain*, Don Lockwood is his own Historian and uses subjective memory to construct his identity. The studio contains Lina Lamont's image through silence--the sound of Kathy is dubbed over Lina's voice. This satisfies her fans, but also fools Lina into believing in a fantasy world of constructed images. The filmmakers then, not only tell the history of Hollywood's shift from silent to talking pictures, they also deconstruct how History, and consequently identity, are made.⁵ I believe that a film like *Bladerunner*, which also explores the construction of identity and the manipulation of memory, draws on the finale of *Singin' in the Rain*. When the curtain is raised, Lina is revealed to the audience as a replicant of the "real" voice standing behind her, Kathy. This act gives the audience "a vision beyond the visible" by exposing the "real life" backstage which produces the "art" on screen(Scott 35). This ironic critique of Hollywood, however, does not fit cleanly into the traditional binaries of good and bad, human and replicant, because Debbie Reynolds was not the author Kathy's voice. Thus, when comparing Kathy to Decker, I can only conclude that *Singing in the Rain* is a postmodern pre-text for *Bladerunner*.

⁵ Certainly *Singin' in the Rain* is not the only film from its era to offer a postmodern critique of history. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a newspaper editor callously informs Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) that, "This is the West, when the legend becomes fact, print the legend." In *Fort Apache*, York (John Wayne) is conscious of America's need for heroes and gives the reporter a legend to report as history about Thursday (Henry Fonda). Like *Singin' in the Rain*, these films express an anxiety towards identity and truth in a self-conscious method that I could only call postmodern.