

Dear Professor Fuchs,

This semester has been a time of constant change. It is hard to believe that it has been a full year since the pandemic started and honestly it is a little overwhelming to think back to all that has happened.

For most of my college career as well as high school, I would write a paper and as soon as I turned it in, I would never look at it again. Most of my papers would be lucky if they got a read through before I submitted them. I have finally come to a point in my writing where I care more about the topics I have to write about. Taking my time writing these papers was fun for me even when I was not sure of the direction I was going to go. I was still a little hesitant to look at my feedback and revisit my essays, but I think the instant feedback I got after presenting my first essay to the class gave me a little boost of confidence. I did not do a complete overhaul of any of my essays, but rather tweaked them as to keep their original ideas with some additional support.

I started discovering my voice in writing because of the pandemic. I was in London at the time when my schooling suddenly shifted from daily museum tours to writing lots of papers back in my childhood bedroom. While writing each of the papers for this class, I thought I was going to have a much harder time having a clear topic for each paper. In the past, I have struggled with having a main point for an essay that results in vague and directionless papers that barely met the required length. I had a process for my papers this semester that has been different from the rest of my college career. After watching each film, my desk would be covered in a pile of sticky notes about my thoughts or potential topics. I would reread them all and organize them and then take a few days to think about what I wanted to say. Spontaneous thoughts I would have about the films ended up being the main points of my papers. I could then sit down and write without needing to find a direction. The second essay for me was the most challenging. The middle of the semester seemed like it did not even happen, and I cannot believe that the month of April actually happened this year. Comparison essays have always been a bit more difficult because I always end up talking about one film more than the other. This essay was harder for me because I did not write the entire thing in one sitting. If I have to come back on a different day, a good flow is harder to achieve.

I am not sure of my exact strengths when it comes to my writing other than my typing speed allows me to crank out essays quickly (this does not help my procrastination). I do love the research part of creating an essay. Rifling through different sources and finding connections is like putting together a puzzle that can be whatever I want it to be. I like to write in a less formal style but find it difficult to write in the first person because it was so frowned upon while I was in middle and high school. I have been told that I have a strong voice when it comes to my writing and I think that is because I have a strong voice in my head that seldom takes a break from reminding me of all the embarrassing things I have ever done.

Thank you for all of your feedback and for creating a space for me to think critically about all of these films. I had a really fun time doing it.

Natalie Bono

Essay 1:

Deafening Silence

The term ‘silent film’ never really means silent. Films from the early 20th century are accompanied by pianos and orchestras that add emotion to the action on screen while “erasing the reality of the theater.”¹ However, the use of silence is arguably just as effective as a trumpet fanfare in conveying a turning point in a character’s story or the gruesomeness of a battle. In Michel Hazanavicius’ film *The Artist*, the modern-day silent film combines the world of old Hollywood with early French cinema in a retelling of *A Star is Born*². The film’s score by Ludovic Bource effortlessly alternates between elaborate and flowing soundscapes while the characters are watching themselves on film to bouncy jazz melodies that accompany their busy daily lives. Although the line between the screen and the character’s reality is frequently blurred, the turning point for George Valentin is accompanied by silence.

Played by Jean Dujardin, George Valentin is a charming and deeply egotistical movie star who finds himself resisting the start of ‘talkies’ in the film industry. After he laughs in the face of his producers, a nightmare sequence takes place where the film score drops out for almost two minutes. Instead, we hear only the art of foley as he realizes everything around him makes noise except for him. He screams and screams into his reflection but can produce no sound. It is not until a feather falling on the pavement creates the noise of a loud explosion that he wakes from his dream in a cold sweat. Even after he wakes, we see him get out of bed and walk out of the bedroom and the score does not come back until a full thirty seconds later when the scene changes.

A cup being placed on a table, the creak of a chair, or a ringing telephone are all sounds tormenting George. In the world of cinema these every day noises are known as the art of foley because they are recorded and placed over the film in post-production. The art of foley began in the early 1920s as sound effects during live broadcasts of radio plays.³ Jack Foley was the most well-known sound effect artist and moved over to the film industry where he pioneered the techniques and methods of creating sounds that are still used today. According to MasterClass’s *Film 101: Understanding Foley Sound and Why Foley Sound is Important*, “sound effects create a sense of atmosphere and draw viewers more closely into the story.”⁴ The sounds of Valentin’s glass, his telephone, or the laughs of the group of dancers are amplified even more because of the lack of music being played. All of a sudden, everyday noises become amplified to the audience’s ears because they are not used to giving those sounds attention. Valentin’s lack of voice reinforces his own decision to reject ‘talkies’ as he becomes trapped in a dying business. It is not until the end of the film when he has found a new career opportunity with Peppy that he is finally given a voice.

¹ Alvin, Rebecca M., and Michel Hazanavicius. "The Silent Treatment An Interview with Michel Hazanavicius." *Cinéaste* 37, no. 2 (2012): 7.

² A. O. Scott, “Sparkling, Swooning and Suffering Wordlessly,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 24, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/movies/the-artist-by-michel-hazanavicius-review.html>.

³ MasterClass, “Film 101: Understanding Foley Sound and Why Foley Sound Is Important - 2021,” MasterClass (MasterClass, November 8, 2020), <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/film-101-understanding-foley-sound-and-why-foley-sound-is-important#4-ways-foley-effects-enhance-a-film>.

⁴Ibid.

Although using silence as a compositional device has been done for years by directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and John Krasinski; the silence found in their films are carefully curated with drones or ambient sounds. As Danijela Kulezic-Wilson puts it in her article *The Music of Film Silence*, “absolute silence in cinema is very rare because it is like dead air on the radio, a black hole...and that makes silence quite an elusive and complex subject for investigation, because whether derived from a direct sound recorded on the set or artificially produced, cinematic silence is as layered and often as carefully designed as any film soundscape.”⁵ Valentin’s nightmare is a carefully layered collection of sounds that overwhelm the audience because of their volume and inappropriate use in this style of film, while they are overwhelming to Valentin because he cannot contribute to them. In films such as *The Birds* or *A Quiet Place*, silence plays a huge role in setting the tone for the story. However, in both of these examples, there are no instances of absolute silence. Each film uses a combination of a low volume of music score, specific hums, or layers of expected diegetic sound that “stand for the silence.”⁶ In the thirty seconds of silence that follow the dream, there is a rare occurrence of absolute silence in cinema. There is no humming noise, or subtle wind. It is true silence that signals the beginning of the end for George Valentin’s career.

The importance of George’s downfall is something picked up by director and writer Rebecca M. Alvin. She prefaces her interview with director Hazanavicius by discussing the importance of the nightmare sequence. Alvin writes, “the mere sound of a glass being placed on a table, the ambient sound of a room, these become unwelcome interlopers, disrupting our cinematic fantasy.”⁷ With each added sound, the audience becomes more aware of how out of place it sounds. The nightmare occurs thirty minutes into the film and up to that point, it was not necessary to hear anything but the musical score. Alvin goes on to say, “in essence, the craziness of sound reveals itself the way it must have to Rene Clair, who criticized this very type of sound usage in his 1929 essay, ‘The Art of Sound.’”⁸ For Alvin, the sequence is Hazanavicius’ way to capture the world before ‘talkies,’ but to Hazanavicius, he believes that sound is the antagonist of the film and that the “movie *knows* it’s silent.”⁹ The choice to include the nightmare sequence had to be done because it was such a shock to the audience. In the beginning of the 20th century, directors were simply making films that just happened to be silent because that is all they could create. But in 2011, the choice to recreate the feeling of an early 1930s film comes with deliberate choices around the use of sound. Hazanavicius also mentioned, “I put the sounds back in the movie in the last sequence, when he says, ‘With pleasure,’ because finally, with his feet, with his dancing, he has defeated his antagonist.”¹⁰ Valentin is finally set free.

As with all sound that accompanies film, the choices that are made are always a deliberate way to move the story along or show the internal struggle of a character. Not only does the nightmare sequence in *The Artist* illustrate the fears of George Valentin, but it also recreates the awe of hearing ordinary sounds on screen for the first time.

⁵ Danijela Kulezic-Wilson. "The Music of Film Silence." *Music and the Moving Image* 2, no. 3 (2009): 2.

⁶ Ibid. 2

⁷ Alvin, Rebecca M., and Michel Hazanavicius. "The Silent Treatment An Interview with Michel Hazanavicius." *Cinéaste* 37, no. 2 (2012): 7.

⁸ Ibid. 7

⁹ Ibid. 7

¹⁰ Ibid. 7

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Essay 2:

An Accompaniment for Grief

There is something about a grief that shows the truth of a person's character. In the movies *Philadelphia* and *A Single Man*, each main character finds themselves going through the stages of grief accompanied by "Ebben, ne andro lontano" from Catalani's *La Wally*. Whether it is for love or through illness, Wally's lament of leaving her "mother's cheerful house" for the one she loves accompanies the love each of these characters have for the people around them. Andrew Beckett is aware that his death is approaching quickly, however, George, like Wally, is ready to throw himself into an "avalanche" to be with the one he loves even in death.

Johnathan Demme's 1993 *Philadelphia* follows the trial of Andrew Beckett, played by Tom Hanks, as he fights against his old law firm for firing him after they found out he had AIDS. As the trial unfolds, Andy's illness is progressing quickly. The night before he takes the stand, there is a costume party at Andy's apartment and afterwards, he and his lawyer, Joe Miller, played by Denzel Washington, are supposed to go over the questions for the following day. Andy gets distracted by his favorite aria "Mamma morta." As the aria envelops Andy, the cinematography changes completely, rotating around Andy as he translates the Italian to Joe. It is as though he is finally revealing his true self and Joe sees him for the first time as an equal. Not only does Andy see himself in the lyrics of the aria, the use of opera also adds a dimension of dramatization to the film that might reinforce gay stereotypes. His love of opera could be seen by other characters in the movie as a trait he has because he is gay.

The theme in *A Single Man* is as romantic as the main character George. As he is going through the loss of his partner Jim, a deep depression has overcome him, and he prepares to commit suicide. Throughout the film, George's dialogue reflects the lyrics in the aria from *La Wally*, when he speaks to Carlos, Kenny and Charlotte the topic of conversation tends to drift toward George mentioning he is going away. Each of these characters already sense that George's mind is elsewhere. He wants to distance himself from his life, but it has a way of reeling him back in every time. George is very carefully curated man. We see him spending time to arrange his documents and his suit on his desk. Everything is perfectly organized, down to a note specifying the kind of knot he would like for his neck tie. Unlike the suddenness of his partner's death, he does not want the people in his life to flounder with arrangements for him. The scene is accompanied by "Ebben, ne andro lontano" quietly playing in the background. It was intentionally put on by George as a way to accompany this planned out act. It is telling of George as a character that he would put on this specific aria as he is laying everything out so perfectly. He has a certain formality and intimacy with every person with whom he interacts. With each new conversation, the audience sees a color change that happens in George's mind, the shorts bursts of joy he experiences. Sometimes, even George is surprised by the way characters interact with him. The color change happens when he himself believes the front he puts on since Jim's death and can enjoy the company of others without feeling hidden behind his own mask. The aria adds drama. The audience and George know that he has plans later that

night, and the scene is a bit comical. His indecision and constant movement on where to pull the trigger has him end up curled in a zipped sleeping bag on his bed.

The situations George and Andy find themselves in are emotionally taxing in drastically different ways. While George is struggling with the continuation of his life after the loss of his lover, Andy is struggling with the fact his life is ending and there is nothing he can do but try and be strong for the people around him. George does not find comfort in the aria the same way that Andy does. Although it has been months since Jim died, George thinks he has a choice about his life unlike Andy. Assuming that George knows the translation, I think he resonates with the lines “I shall go away alone and far, like the echo of the pious church-bell goes away.”¹¹ Ever since Jim died, he has felt utterly alone and sometimes music can perpetuate feelings of helplessness. He finds himself in a similar situation as Wally, for George leaving his house to be with his love meant that he thought he needed to die. Little did he know that his death was inevitable and would be caused by something he was not expecting. Instead of dying in a mental place of sorrow and loneliness, he finds the joys in his life that he had so much trouble seeing.

Andy is faced with adversity everyday and much like George, he finds that he must keep parts of himself hidden in order to fit into a heteronormative society. His love for opera was never a secret. He was listening to La Wally when we first see him in the hospital, then again when he breaks through to Joe Miller, and again at the end of his life when he finally accepts his death. Since his diagnosis, he knows that he will be going to a place “amongst the clouds of gold.”¹² As Andy is translating the meaning of the aria, he says the line “I bring sorrow to those who love me.”¹³ This is the turning point for Joe to see how much Andy is hurting. Here is a dying man fighting for his place in the world and the thing that hurts the most is that he has no power to change the outcome for the people he is leaving behind. The aria lyrics foreshadowed his journey at the beginning of the movie, allowed Andy to show his true self to Joe as his illness progressed, and narrated his death at the end of the film.

The use of opera in both of these films adds a level of sophistication to the characters. Their lament is not accompanied by a sad pop song about a break up or a loss but by a timeless Italian aria about a woman choosing love over her home.

¹¹ JC London, “Aria Database - Search the Database,” Aria Database - Search the Database, 2010, <http://www.aria-database.com/search.php?individualAria=605>.

¹² JC London, “Aria Database - Search the Database,” Aria Database - Search the Database, 2010, <http://www.aria-database.com/search.php?individualAria=605>.

¹³ Nyswaner, Ron. *Philadelphia*. USA: TriStar Pictures, 1993.

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Nyswaner, Ron. *Philadelphia*. USA: TriStar Pictures, 1993.

Essay 3:

Reclaiming the Past

Call Me by Your Name is told from the point of view of Elio, the teenage son of a prominent art history professor who hosts students every summer. For this particular summer, Oliver comes to study Greco-Roman art in northern Italy. In the book, the story is told by Elio as he recounts his magical summer with Oliver. For me, every watch of the film becomes more like recounting a memory just like Elio. For the 17-year-old, music is an integral part of who he is and how he spends his time during the hot Italian summers. Like Elio, music is intertwined with who I am as a person. When certain songs come on, I am instantly transported back to a memory that is associated with that song and I am sure that Elio's soundtrack full of romantic and turbulent piano pieces is how he recalls every day of that summer of Oliver.

Memories are frequently tied to the sounds that accompany them. Everyone can remember a time in their life when a random song comes on in a restaurant or store. For musicians, it can be an intense way to recall the past when music is such an integral part of their lives. When learning a piece, it can either help you fall in love with that moment or fuel the rage and frustration you feel. As Elio is remembering the summer, the music that accompanies each memory is a core way he is able to recall that moment. Different instances like when he plays *Satie Sonatine Bureaucratique* first on the guitar and then in different styles on the piano for Oliver was early on in their relationship. Elio was still figuring out his feelings for Oliver and defies his every request to play it simply, just as he did on the guitar when he thought no one was listening. Towards the end of their relationship, as Oliver and Elio are out in Bergamo and a pop song is playing out of a car. Oliver is drawn to the music and dances freely, while Elio is not as connected to that song in the moment, it will forever make him think of that time whenever he hears it again throughout his life.

An article in the BBC, "Why does music evoke memories?" discusses the emotions that accompany music that do not accompany other memories. Even when we are young, we learn to associate information with music because it makes it easier to recall, like the ABC's. "It's often pop music that evokes memories from this time in our lives. Why? Well, for a start this music played in the background, whether we selected it or not."¹⁴ However, there is a difference between music that is tied to a specific time in our lives when we have no control over it, popular radio songs, and the music that we choose to listen to as we go through our daily lives. As Elio goes through the summer, there are different pop songs that will remind him of when they were all dancing together, but he will feel more emotion and even pain when he hears the music he was transcribing at the time or what he was playing for the dinner party right before he went to go meet Oliver.

In this new era of streaming services and music platforms, I rarely listen to the radio anymore. When I am home, in the car, studying, or with friends, we have total control over the music we hear through our Spotify and apple music accounts. My time in college has not been associated with pop music as much as my years of high school. I have deeper connections to the music that I choose to listen to. Like Elio, I had a short and sweet relationship that had a huge impact on me. During that time, I had a specific playlist that I was constantly listening to and

¹⁴ Tiffany Jenkins, "Why Does Music Evoke Memories?," BBC Culture (BBC, October 21, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140417-why-does-music-evoke-memories>.

although I have now forgotten its original title, it was quickly renamed “Do Not Listen” after the relationship ended. I was not avoiding those songs because the relationship ended badly, but mostly because that was a wonderful time in my life that was over, and it hurt to think that all of those happy times were in the past. Sometimes a song on the playlist would come on when I was not expecting it and the emotions would all flood in again and I would remember everything. I had a similar experience right after I watched *Call Me by Your Name* for the first time. It was my freshman year of college and I had just gotten to Syracuse after spending my first semester abroad in Strasbourg, France. Just seeing Italy and the European lifestyle made me remember all of the times I had with my French host family and the amazing people I met while there. *Mystery of Love* became another song that was almost painful to hear because it reminded me of that time and because of the story of Oliver and Elio. Elio’s heartbreak reminds me of my own, and it was not something that I wanted to revisit often, or ever.

Slowly, I have begun reclaiming those songs so that they can be mine again. The more time that passes, the more irrelevant it seems to hold on to that pain. Just as Elio’s father said, “to make yourself feel nothing, so as not to feel anything...what a waste.”¹⁵ I was running away from feeling that loss and as a person that typically pushes away their feelings, bringing those songs back into my life has helped me heal. As we get older and gain new memories, the old ones we have get sweeter. We no longer remember the bad times or the frustrating moments, not to live in ignorant bliss, but because it does us no good to hold on to that pain any longer.

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