

# Singin' in the Rain

## (1952, Donen & Kelly, USA)

### Component 1

### Key Developments in US Film

### Focus Areas

### Genre, Narrative, Context

### PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

#### Sequence

'You were meant for me' (4 min 27 secs)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqsrVQfNYPc>

### PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography (including Lighting)

- This sequence is interesting for its knowing, playful use of the conventions of the musical. Baz Luhrmann discusses this effectively on the audio-commentary to the DVD version of the film.
- Don Lockwood wants to tell Kathy Selden how he feels about her while they stand on the street of the Monumental Pictures lot but finds he cannot do so. He strikes on the idea of taking her into a sound stage so that he can utilise the resources of the filmmaker to heighten the moment and seduce her (and us) with the mechanics of his star power.
- The initial wide shot of the setting dwarfs the couple as they enter the dark, cavernous space.
- The second shot cuts to a two shot from below, which immediately suggests the power of our characters to shape this space while allowing us to see 'the workings' evident on the ceiling.
- It is dark until Lockwood switches on the lights to provide the sunset, the garden lights, the moonlight and the 'stardust'. Kathy (and we) are being shown what is behind the curtain and the elements that combine to create the image she desires to fulfil and we are eager to see.
- Once the song begins there are only a handful

of shots which tend to maintain a distance from the characters to allow us to fully appreciate the movement of the dance.

- During the dance it is still evident that the lighting has been 'staged' artificially by Lockwood and the characters are not consistently perfectly lit. They occasionally move through dark space but are perfectly lit at significant moments such as when Kathy stops in the foreground of the shot.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- As has been indicated, the mise-en-scène in this sequence is self-consciously artificial. It is a typical sequence wherein the male protagonist makes his 'pitch' to the heroine. In order to do so, he doesn't just have the trappings of the glossy Hollywood musical as his backdrop, he explicitly draws Kathy's and our attention to the lights and the smoke and wind machines. This 'wink' in the direction of the audience is possible because this is a Hollywood musical about Hollywood musicals within which a Hollywood star is playing a Hollywood star.
- Costume is deliberately evocative of the 1920s setting but is at once both stylish and informal, to suggest the actors' off-screen personas. Lockwood's white sweater and slacks with rolled up shirt sleeves are consistent with Gene Kelly's athletic and more rugged version of masculinity than that of the more elegant Fred Astaire.
- A key prop is the step ladder which allows the audience to actively contribute to the process of imagining the romantic setting of the Romeo and Juliet style balcony.

#### Editing

- There is little editing in the sequence as it is characterised by wide shots and long takes which allow for the focus of the audience's attention to be on the movement of the two dancers.
- There is a shot/reverse shot pattern, briefly, as Kathy and we anticipate Don now being ready to 'say it'. This could be a way of bringing us closer to affective alignment with both characters (but

particularly Kathy) after the reflexive process of playing with the apparatus of image-making.

### Sound

- Sound initially is a naturalistic evocation of the cavernous space of the empty sound-stage through the use of echo on Don and Kathy's speech and the mechanical clunks of apparatus being turned on.
- Non-diegetic musical motifs then accompany each effect that Lockwood adds. This emphasises his control over the setting and provides his physical actions with a slightly magical dimension.
- As the song develops the music provides the context for movement and spectacle and the lyrics provide the perfect articulation of Lockwood's feelings for Kathy at this point.

## PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Social

- Although the silent film era was quickly overshadowed by the talkies their influence was enormous.
- As the silent film era receded into memory, film historians began to realize that we were losing an important part of our cultural heritage.
- The 1950s was an era for reflection by the film industry as the pre-eminence of the Hollywood studios was threatened by their requirement to sell their theatre chains after the Paramount Decree of 1948, and by the combined impact of the rise of television ownership and suburbanization.
- The scenes in *Singin' in the Rain* depicting the wildly innovative, anarchic beginnings of the film industry are actually very accurate and informed by anecdotes provided by MGM staff that had experienced them.
- Although *Singin' in the Rain* is not designed to be a pretentious piece of history, it serves as both a heartfelt acknowledgment of a generation of filmmakers which were passing from the scene and an introduction to the silent era for a new generation of film-goers.

### Historical

- *Singin' in the Rain* is the product of the Hollywood Studio System at the height of its power and dominance.
- MGM was one of the original 'big 5' Hollywood studios who consolidated their

dominance over the domestic film market in the US before and after the transition to 'talkies' was made in the late 1920s.

- The investment in making this technical transition both in terms of production and exhibition (the studios were vertically integrated and owned the cinemas into which they could block book their own films) ensured studios like MGM established a monopoly over the film business they maintained during this golden era of the 'Hollywood Dream Factory'.
- *Singin' in the Rain* was one of a succession of musicals produced by a specific production unit at MGM under the leadership of producer Arthur Freed.
- Freed had developed his reputation with the musical genre by identifying the potential and stewarding the production of *The Wizard of Oz* in the late 1930s.
- Freed was an expert at bringing talented people together and allowing them to flourish. In 1951 he had produced another Gene Kelly vehicle including a long ballet sequence called *An American in Paris* which won 8 Oscars, including Best Picture.
- Perhaps it was because of this critical acclaim the response to *Singin' in the Rain*, which was released soon after *An American in Paris*, was more low key. However, in time, the status of *Singin' in the Rain* has overshadowed that of *An American in Paris* and *SITR* regularly features in lists of Best Films Ever.

## PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Genre Comparison

- *Singin' in the Rain* was written by MGM contract writers, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, who had been asked by producer Arthur Freed to develop a script as a vehicle for a selection of songs he had co-written with Nacio Herb Brown in the late 1920s. These songs, including the title song, had been used previously in some of the earliest MGM musicals. Comden and Green found this task extremely challenging, until they hit on the idea of utilising the historical roots of the songs and setting the film around the time of Hollywood's transition to sound.
- Hollywood musicals had achieved initial success in the early sound period as a form where songs were interruptions to the loose narrative thrust of the drama. They were 'Revues' or 'backstage musicals' of the kind directed by

Busby Berkeley. *Singin' in the Rain* is a kind of hybrid as it draws on this tradition but also exemplifies the 'integrated musical' where musical numbers are integrated to character and plot. Freed and MGM were instrumental to the development of the 'integrated musical' – previous key examples of the form being *The Wizard of Oz* and *Meet Me in St Louis*.

- The special features on the DVD version of *Singin' in the Rain* include good detail on this context and (particularly in the contributions of Baz Luhrmann) on the importance of dance as something that must be shown as 'un-faked' through the use of long takes and wide frames. This can allow for MGM musicals to be seen as a point of contrast with other genres of the studio era (in that the male 'athletic' body is

the primary object of the spectator's gaze); and with contemporary musicals (where the dancing can be faked by segmenting or editing).

### PART 5 – Further resources

- <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/empire-essay-singin-rain/review/>
- <http://www.filmsite.org/sing.html>
- <http://www.shmoop.com/singin-in-the-rain/genre.html>
- <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3303&context=cq>
- <http://bit.ly/2rymzRK>
- <http://bit.ly/2qHAPo7>