

ROUBEN MAMOULIAN: EXPERIMENTATION, INNOVATION AND THE AVANT-GARDE IN HOLLYWOOD THROUGH THE NARRATIVE AND EXPRESSIVE USE OF SOUND*

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CONTEXT, EVOLUTION AND AUTEURIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ROUBEN MAMOULIAN'S WORK

Rouben Mamoulian's image as a filmmaker is inextricably associated with the golden age of classical Hollywood cinema, and specifically with the early years of sound and the consolidation of film genres in the 1930s, when he directed a series of films of notable interest in aesthetic, technical and narrative terms. Nevertheless, Mamoulian continues to be a difficult filmmaker to analyse due to his location on a rather ambiguous middle ground between those considered to be the great directors of the period and those who might be referred to as talented craftsmen responsible for the odd picture of historical importance—a brilliant technician, in the words of Weinrichter (1993: 52). This explains why his work seems to waver constantly between oblivion and repeated, sporadic vindication, an occasional focus of attention in certain studies and

articles, both internationally¹ and here in Spain,² while generally dismissed by critics, albeit with a few exceptions (Vila, 2001: 20-22).

Born in 1897 in Tbilisi (Georgia, then part of the Russian Empire), Rouben Mamoulian belongs to the generation of American pioneers born in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, like Raoul Walsh, King Vidor, John Ford and Howard Hawks, and to a group of filmmakers who left the turmoil of Europe for Hollywood, like Fritz Lang and William Dieterle, with the substantial difference that his first films would be made after the introduction of sound and well after his arrival in the United States in the mid-1920s, following his success as a theatre director in London. It was his popularity as a stage director that opened doors for him in Hollywood, and it was the chance to make films—sound films, to be precise—that ultimately drew him there.

In the three decades that followed, Mamoulian would alternate his work as a theatre direc-

tor with the direction of films under a contract with Hollywood's major studios. His stylistic intention was most evident in his creation process, more important than the themes of his pictures (which for the most part were remakes of earlier silent or sound films), and even than the tangible overall results of his filmography, subject as it was to the conditioning factors of the industrial and narrative conventions of Hollywood cinema. Mamoulian broke those conventions in a project of intellectual abstraction—clearly influenced by European avant-garde movements—and of technical experimentation associated with that stylistic quest, based on the development of the mise-en-scene, and the use of sound and of colour. He is notable not only for making the first film shot entirely in colour in the history of cinema, *Becky Sharp* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1935), or for his explicitly painterly style, but for his intellectual intention to reflect on his style in print in an article in

1935 that could be considered a kind of manifesto on colour in cinema—"Some Problems in the Direction of Color Pictures" (Mamoulian, 1976: 288-293)—in which he concludes with an assertion about sound somewhat analogous to that of Sergei M. Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Aleksandrov (1989: 476-479) in their "Statement on Sound" (1928), after assessing the new technology: "The cinema must not fall into another trap and must not go about color as a newly-rich. Color should not mean gaudiness. Restraint and selectivity are the essence of art" (Mamoulian, 1976: 293). In varying degrees of intensity, more revolutionary initially or mannerist, his auteurial dedication to style formally permeates all his work.

Mamoulian shot his first five titles under a contract with Paramount Pictures: the musical drama *Applause*, the gangster film *City Streets* (1931), the fantasy *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), the musical comedy *Love Me Tonight* (1932) and

Image I. Rouben Mamoulian at the shooting of *Becky Sharp* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1929)



the romantic drama *The Song of Songs* (1933). Later, for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and at the service of Greta Garbo, he would film one of the biggest successes of his career, the historic picture *Queen Christina* (1933). His next film, the adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *We Live Again* (1934), would be something of a critical and commercial failure that he would recover from with *Becky Sharp*. His next three pictures, all made for different studios, are the least-known works of his career: a musical comedy set in Mexico titled *The Gay Desperado* (1936); a strange hybrid between adventure, drama, western and musical with a circus air titled *High, Wide and Handsome*; and an adaptation of Clifford Odets' play set in the world of boxing, *Golden Boy* (1939).

In 1940 he began his period as a director at Twentieth Century-Fox, for whom he would make three films: the adventure film classic *The Mark of Zorro* (1940); his full-colour remake of *Blood and Sand* (1941), with an aesthetic idea inspired largely by the great works of Spanish painting since El Greco, including Velázquez, Goya, and Sorolla, as well as other minor nineteenth century painters known for their depictions of bullfighting; and finally, the screwball comedy *Rings on Her Fingers* (1942). His time with the studio ended when he was fired as director for the legendary noir film *Laura* (1944), which would be completed by his producer, Otto Preminger.³ The last two titles of his career, *Summer Holiday* (1948) and *Silk Stockings* (1957), made nearly a decade apart, were musicals produced by Arthur Freed for MGM. Despite confrontations with the film crew, the producer respected Mamoulian's artistic independence to experiment with the use of colour in both cases and with the use of the CinemaScope wide-screen system in the second.

Mamoulian's desire for autonomy partly explains his semi-failure to establish an enduring career as a filmmaker; he found it increasingly hard to stake a place for himself in the studio system (to which he had been introduced as a "won-

der boy", like Orson Welles would do a decade later [Bourget, 2007: 72]), particularly after the mid-1930s, and was unable to complete several of his projects even after filming had begun. It also constitutes a simple explanation for his gradual abandonment of the cinematic medium, due both to his disillusionment with the industry and the industry's increasing reluctance to entrust film projects to him because of his complex artistic nature. In this respect, Mamoulian's personal style continues to pose certain enigmas in relation to how his indisputably creative and innovative approach impacted on the performance of his films, which make up a remarkably short list compared to the filmography of many of his contemporaries: only sixteen films over a period of nearly thirty years, more than half of them completed in the first decade of that period.

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Based on these considerations of Mamoulian's status as an auteur and his aesthetic and narrative trademarks, which appear consistently throughout his work, the objective of this article is to analyse the specific expressive elements identifiable in most of his pictures which challenge or deviate from the conventions (aesthetic and narrative) of Hollywood's classical period.

These expressive elements are many and varied, but we will focus mainly on Mamoulian's contribution in the area of sound, taking into account his symbolic and experimental approach to nar-

ration and with occasional references to his other cinematographic innovations (such as the use of colour or editing), also associated with earlier avant-garde movements, such as Expressionism or even Surrealism.

This study, based on a filmic analysis of his work, will focus particularly on his first feature films, *Applause*, *City Streets*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Love Me Tonight* (films in which his use of sound is more experimental and innovative), while also referring to other works in his filmography that enhance or repeat some of these elements.

SOUND INNOVATIONS: AESTHETIC EXPERIMENTATION AND CREATION OF NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS

The intuitively experimental relationship between sound and image is a substantial feature of Mamoulian's first films. When he first entered the world of cinema—a medium which was still new to him, and which was also in the midst of a period of profound technological and artistic changes—Mamoulian, a veteran of the theatre, sought precisely to develop an *anti-theatrical* mise-en-scene, using every device the medium offered: set design, editing, and the use of sound. Although he would claim that he considered film primarily a graphic medium (Higham & Greenberg, 1969: 129), and in an effort to maintain the independence and aesthetic autonomy of the images, Mamoulian would become one of the biggest innovators with sound technology in the transition from silent film to talkies, and it is especially interesting to note that he would do so in an absolutely conscious, almost obsessive way, as an auteur interested in moulding the new technology: "I thought that the fascinating part was to use sound imaginatively. I don't believe in naturalism on the screen or the stage. I believe in stylization, which if properly done comes over as greater truth than reality" (Gallagher & Amoruco, 1982: 16).

In this respect, his first motion picture, *Applause*, a drama about the show business world, unique for its exploration behind the scenes of burlesque theatre,⁴ focusing on the relationship between a fading actress (Helen Morgan) and the daughter she has kept away from her seedy environment (Joan Peers), is an unusual work for this era of transition (like many other films of this period, it combines silent and sound scenes). Mamoulian, who was under contract with Paramount, shot the film in the company's studios in New York, where he constantly explored different ways of using the sound technology, coming up with the idea (prior to the advent of stereo, which he would later use in *Silk Stockings*) of recording sound on two tracks (to be able to capture the noises of the objects held by two characters in two different places in the same scene), an idea that was not ultimately realised (Robinson, 1961: 125). But in particular—and this continues to be the great milestone of the film—he sought to develop a *mise-en-scene* with the camera in constant motion, in both the silent and sound sequences, as the filmmaker himself would explain: "In those early days of sound, people just thought of films as being all dialogue—talk, talk, talk. I wanted to do things you couldn't do on the stage. I wanted to use a mobile camera" (Robinson, 1961: 125).

In a purely technological level, Mamoulian had an insulating cabin created that would allow the camera to move around freely without interfering with the sound takes (García Fernández, 1982: 626); on the level of the *mise-en-scene*, he shot all the intimate scenes with dialogues in dolly shots moving from a wide view into a close-up. And the dialogue between the daughter (Joan Peers) and the sailor with whom she falls in love is filmed with a tracking shot that shows only the characters' legs. Thus we have an example of how the intention to keep the camera moving during the dialogue and the technical difficulty it posed in conventional terms results in an avant-garde

scene in which we never see the faces of the characters who are speaking.

In the musical scenes, the burlesque performances are filmed in an almost frenzied manner: the camera pans over the scene in a continuous shot, with minor insertions verging on expressionism (or a kind of extreme naturalism that goes as far as hyperrealism) that portray the vulgar nature of the show and of the dancers, through shots of the chorus girls' rotten teeth and stocky figures, images quite at odds with the standards of glamour. The range of different angles can also be appreciated by comparing the early scene, with wide overhead shots, of the female protagonist having just given birth, and the sequence shot of her suicide, with the camera moving through the room from a wide shot to a close-up of a glass full of sleeping pills. The physical movement and variety of the shots ultimately evokes the poetic and symbolic idea of a cycle, from the birth to the death of the two main characters, mother and daughter, who have also shared the (bitter) experience of life as burlesque stars. In short, the idea of motion does not in itself end up taking precedence over motionlessness. Mamoulian is aiming for an expressive and even in some cases symbolic idea that could also facilitate his initially complex use of sound technology in the film. The filmmaker's almost avant-garde experimentation—also using editing as an important tool—appears as well in the depiction of the daughter's traumatic dream in which the images of the show are interwoven with images of her past in a convent, thereby establishing a unique thematic and aesthetic relationship evocative of surrealism and constituting the director's first *soliloquy-collage*, a technique that would be refined in his subsequent films.

Taken together, the creation of the film's sound architecture—without ever abandoning the narrative context—seems almost like a response to the “orchestral counterpoint” described a few



Images 2 to 5. *Applause* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1929)



Images 6 to 8. *City Streets* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1931)

years earlier by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Aleksandrov (1989: 476-479). *Applause* uses sound effectively as a visual counterpoint, introducing all kinds of unusual expressive devices, from the oneiric in the aforementioned dream sequence to the almost documentary-style naturalism of the scene in which the actual flight of an aeroplane interrupts the dialogue between characters high up in a skyscraper. Mamoulian knew and admired Eisenstein's work, and there is also evidence that *Applause* made a notable impression on the Soviet filmmaker, who attended a screening of the film during his visit to the United States in the early 1930s (Goodwin, 2001: 95).

Mamoulian's inventiveness and the aesthetic risk he assumed in his first film would continue in his next work, *City Streets*, a masterpiece of the gangster genre starring Gary Cooper and Sylvia Sydney. Indeed, this film practically launched the genre, together with *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), films that share its elusive and indirect depiction of the crimes—as can be appreciated in the opening sequence, narrated with ellipses, of the murder of a bootlegger—that have the effect of actually intensifying the atmosphere of violence and depravity.

However, quite apart from the establishment of the codes of the gangster genre, *City Streets* introduces some key features of the filmmak-

er's personal experimentation, associated with his creative interest in the use of sound, already demonstrated in *Applause*. As in the previous film, in the development of scenes with a profusion of dialogue Mamoulian tries to find an alternative to the convention of static shots for dialogues. But in this case, he comes up with a unique and notably surrealistic idea for a scene with a conversation between two supporting characters, as the images of two porcelain cat statues are presented in a shot-reverse shot dynamic while we hear the two characters speaking in a voice-over. This is a perfect example of counterpoint editing which, despite the director's own assertions to the contrary (Higham & Greenberg, 1969: 133), does not even contain any specific symbolism. It is merely a visual digression that is not explicitly associated with any narrative element; a random and absurd idea that is purely experimental.

Along these same lines, Mamoulian's narrative use of sound as an expressive and psychological device was quite revolutionary. He experimented with ideas that resulted in the very first use of a character's inner monologue, as in the scene where the female lead (Sylvia Sydney), unjustly imprisoned, reflects on her past and her situation. The character's voice-over, with earlier dialogues, is heard over a close-up of her face, with the camera moving in and out as if seeking to accompany this intermittent mental process. The filmmaker

has explained exactly how he came up with this idea: “Shakespeare used the soliloquy to give oral expression to thoughts. Since then, the soliloquy has become obsolete. But it was a wonderful device: so I wanted to use a close-up of Sylvia Sidney, alone, in prison, and superimpose over it all her impressions and recollections. Again, everybody insisted it was impossible and that the audience would never understand what was going on [...]. Now, of course, this use of audible thoughts over a silent close-up has become a convention” (Robinson, 1961: 125).

MAMOULIAN’S NARRATIVE USE OF SOUND AS AN EXPRESSIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVICE WAS QUITE REVOLUTIONARY. HE EXPERIMENTED WITH IDEAS THAT RESULTED IN THE VERY FIRST USE OF A CHARACTER’S INNER MONOLOGUE

The idea of the inner monologue, used for the first time in this film, would appear again in Mamoulian’s next picture, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as a way of reinforcing the whole notion of dual subjectivity that is central to this first sound adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson’s famous novella (1886), which, as Arquero (2015: 12) points out, introduces a series of “subjective sound shots” using, for example, echo as an effect to give memories greater intensity (an idea that would later become conventional but that was unheard-of at the time), or a heartbeat as a sound effect during the scene of Dr. Jekyll’s transformation, in which the combination of sound effects and counterpoints integrate all kinds of realistic and artificial recordings to create the atmosphere, including Mamoulian’s own heartbeat (Vila, 2001: 52). Subjectivity reaches a climax in this scene, when Jekyll transforms for the first time into Hyde. The visual depiction of the change is articulated in a

sequence shot in which the camera turns on its axis a full 360 degrees, symbolically showing the transformation through a mirror with the use of soft focus effects. The different mutations of Jekyll’s face until he has finally turned into Hyde are worthy of the most literal expressionism and even evoke the imagery of the FEKS school, the Soviet Factory of the Eccentric Actor. Mamoulian attained the height of his technical and poetic experimentation here, bringing into play every possible device, from the use of coloured light filters in the succession of close-ups to the inclusion of an atonal extra-diegetic soundtrack. In the culminating moment the camera pulls back and the shot of the character dissolves with superimposed shots from past scenes, suggestive of Eisenstein’s idea of the montage of attractions.

In this way, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* establishes its place in the fantasy genre in direct competition with the successful “monster movies” produced by Universal that same year, with the reconstruction of an explicitly expressionist atmosphere. However, Mamoulian’s intentions transcend the genre to aim for a psychoanalytical expression of the essence of the novel, going beyond the rational/atavistic duality of the human being through a focus that is subtle but remarkably explicit for the period on a perverse eroticism that is constructed between the repressive nature of Jekyll and the atavistic, unbridled passion of Hyde. This sexual dimension is the predominant feature of the beast, whose object of desire is the same as Jekyll’s: the prostitute portrayed by Miriam Hopkins. These two extremes result in a whole series of scenes that would have been unthinkable after the establishment of the Hays Code in 1934. For example, the scene in which Jekyll first meets the prostitute is a full declaration of intentions: the subjectivity of the repressed ego is represented by a frontal shot in which the female character removes her stockings and garters and throws them at the feet of the doctor, who picks them up with his cane. In the conversation that follows between

Jekyll and his friend about repressed desires, Mamoulian uses a superimposed shot to maintain the prostitute's leg, swaying like a pendulum over the two male characters, to symbolise that Jekyll is thinking about sex, despite the fact he is talking about something else; once again, the combination of sound and vision serve to construct the character's private thoughts. The director uses the isolated female limb—not for the last time in his career, as it would also have notable importance with different significations in several later films, such as *Song of Songs*, *Rings on Her Fingers* and, of course, *Silk Stockings*—as a symbol of eroticism and sexuality, presented in a surprisingly avant-garde way, as it becomes a transparent and explicit symbol of the protagonist's sex drive and his dual nature.

In addition to his determination to maintain the visual dynamism despite the complexity of

sound technology in its early stages, the idea of the inner monologue and the use of sound for psychological or emotional expression, Mamoulian also made poetic or musical use of synchronous sound effects. The most significant example of this in his career is the construction of a music soundtrack based on sound effects, i.e. on diegetic noises occurring in the scene. This is the surprising opening to *Love Me Tonight*, Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald's only musical comedy not directed by Ernst Lubitsch, which has the structure of a cheeky fairy-tale, where daybreak in the city of Paris, shown at first using an almost documentary technique (based on real outdoor shots filmed on the Left Bank), turns into an urban symphony when the different people of the city begin contributing to a rhythmic combination of noises, as a prologue to the appearance of the tailor (Maurice Chevalier) singing the movie's

Images 9 to 12. Urban Symphony. *Love Me Tonight* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932)



opening song. Mamoulian had developed this idea for the *mise-en-scène* in the play *Porgy* in 1925: “a man snoring, a hammer, a woman with a broom, [...] and I conducted the whole thing like a symphony: a four-four rhythm, then six-eight, then I syncopated it, and wound up with a Charleston rhythm” (Higham & Greenberg, 1969: 129-130). And this idea would be transferred to all the musical productions of George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* for the number titled “Morning Sounds”, which gives author’s credits, in addition to Gershwin and the writer of the original novel (DuBose Heyward) to Mamoulian himself. This sequence was in fact the only one shot by Mamoulian that would be kept in the film *Porgy and Bess*, directed by Preminger 1959, from which Mamoulian was fired, making it the last film sequence he ever directed, constituting a symbolic—albeit uncredited—closure to his career given the importance of this musical idea to his work.

The use of sound effects in this musical way would be a recurring idea in the director’s films, more or less explicit or surrealistic in different cases, taken to an extreme with the use of farm animal noises as a choral counterpoint to one of the musical numbers performed by Irene Dunne in *High, Wide and Handsome*. Even in a manner that is not explicitly musical but clearly rhythmical according to the filmmaker’s particular idea of rhythm, the use of sound effects as a syncopated soundtrack is also used—as an obvious substitute for extra-diegetic music—in different moments of *City Streets*, with a progression of short sounds that interconnect with each other while also interconnecting the images (the sound of the wheels of a truck carrying beer, the bottle conveyor in a brewery, gunshots at the fair, the ambient noise of the crowd, the power looms that the female prisoners work at, and again the trucks).

Indeed, one of the constants of Mamoulian’s early films is the virtual absence of accompanying or extra-diegetic music, as in almost every case where the soundtrack contains music, it is

explained by or integrated into the action, because it is being sung or performed in the scene, or because a character is listening to the radio, for example. This idea of not dissociating the music from the story as a complementary element allows the filmmaker to use music with a direct narrative purpose, either to create continuity between scenes, or to create an indirect emotional effect.

Throughout the 1930s Mamoulian exploited this technique in many different ways, but always in a manner more complex than it may seem at first glance. In *Love Me Tonight*, for example, the Rodgers & Hart score contains a song, “Isn’t It Romantic?” (a popular number that would become an American standard), which is used as a narrative device to connect the two main characters (the tailor and the princess), who are initially in separate settings. Different scenes and sequences are linked together through different performers who pick up the catchy tune, which is overheard and repeated by many different characters. The song is sung first by Chevalier; then, a taxi driver will begin whistling it; after that, a traveller on a train; then, a battalion of marching soldiers; and then a wandering gypsy, until finally it reaches the ears of the downhearted princess to become a device that establishes a connection between the two main characters.

In a less artificial manner, but with the unusual function of a sonic temporal ellipsis, Mamoulian had already used a similar device in *City Streets*, in a scene where characters are listening to music on the car radio. Then there is a cut, and we see a silent group of gangsters, with dead silence on the soundtrack; the gradual return of the same music coming from an off-screen source (in continuity with the previous scene) will be what alerts the gangsters and the spectator to the arrival of the protagonists. The music or sound thus plays a narrative role in an allusion to the off-screen space, establishing continuity or units of meaning with the same force as (and with even great-

er originality than) the images. Mamoulian would continue to use this device in later years, although in a more clichéd and obvious way, such as in *High, Wide and Handsome* when the extra-diegetic music, reprising the favourite song of the female lead (Irene Dunne), reminds her of her husband (Randolph Scott), whom she has abandoned. However, even here the use of the device is not as simple as it seems if we consider that in this case, the (extra-diegetic) music is playing the same role as the voice-over of an inner monologue, i.e. representing the character's private thoughts.

Curiously, the idea of the inner monologue (visual, auditory or a combination thereof) as a character's train of thought expressed explicitly on the screen would become a way of marking a dramatic turning point in much of Mamoulian's work. The use of this sonic and visual collage for a key moment is a feature of many of the director's films, beginning with his first, *Applause*, and including *City Streets*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Song of Songs*, *We Live Again* and *High, Wide and Handsome*. Even in *Silk Stockings*, this idea of an inner transformation is represented in the film's title song, when the Marxist principles of the protagonist (Cyd Charisse) are brought tumbling down by capitalist Parisian materialism as symbolised in a pair of silk stockings.

TECHNOLOGY AND MISE-EN-SCENE AT THE SERVICE OF POETIC LANGUAGE

An analysis of the atypical relationship between sound and image in Mamoulian's films of the ear-



Images 13 to 14. *Silk Stockings* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1957)

ly 1930s, the narrative significance of the use of sound technology beyond the descriptive and synchronous, as a substantial element of the story or as an emotional or poetic metaphor, reveals the filmmaker's desire—his artistic intention—to explore cinematographic language beyond the conventions established by an industry often reluctant to admit changes or innovations.

This intention is made clear right from his first film, in which he categorically refuses to follow the mechanical design established for the first talkies, using static shots and theatrical compositions to film dialogues more comfortably. However, this exploration with sound is not an idea limited to this first picture, but is repeated, developed and expanded in his subsequent works (particularly in his Paramount period) to make up what is a near-complete corpus of narrative devices associated with sound: his intuitive idea of

diegetic and extra-diegetic sound music; the inner monologue or soliloquy brought to life through the introspective use of the voice-over; sound as a narrative temporal ellipsis or as a means of establishing continuity between sequences; and, in relation to musical rhythm, the possibility of the poetic use of sound effects or natural sounds and their variation in the creation of symphonies of city noises, which become something of an acoustic counterpoint to the avant-garde urban documentaries of the silent era like Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (Chelovek s kino-apparatom, 1929) or Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Metropolis* (Berlin, die Sinfonie der Grosstadt, 1927), a thought-provoking comparison previously pointed out by Vila (2001: 70).

But beyond the use or significance (narrative or aesthetic) of this sound technology and of the editing of that sound, Mamoulian's final aim, as he himself describes it, is the creation of a poetic and symbolic rhythm that produces a heterogeneous but balanced composition in the film itself, reinforcing the image through a creative logic in the use of sound: "I believe that film is primarily a graphic medium. Sound is secondary. You can have all the philosophy you like; if a film doesn't come across in graphic terms, it falls short" (Higham & Greenberg, 1969: 129). Curiously, one of the best examples of his skill in the use of sound is his construction of an atypical, quasi-silent scene in *Queen Christine*: the famous scene in which Greta Garbo caresses objects in the room where she has spent the night with her lover. Here, the sound is as important insofar as its absence reinforces the intensity of the images and the symbolic value of the objects that Garbo touches so that she will remember them in the future, to be able to treasure the images in her mind, in what practically constitutes a metaphor for Mamoulian's creative intention (in the creation of images). In other words, the devices, the filmmaker's actions and their use are placed exclusively at the service of this quest for convey-

ing meaning and emotion to the spectator. As the filmmaker himself puts it:

Film should be poetic, integrating all the components of art. And it should show the inner truth, not merely the "realistic" truth, in a stylized manner. It must also have rhythm. When I was a child, our teacher of elementary physics said: when a regiment of soldiers crosses a stone bridge, it is always ordered to break step, because if it walked in step, the power of the rhythmic vibration would destroy the bridge. It stuck in my mind that rhythm can have great power: if it can destroy, it can also build. And it can build a great tension and emotion in a film (Higham & Greenberg, 1969: 146).

This is the concept of rhythm sought by the filmmaker. The significance of Mamoulian's creative intention, with its victories and its failures within his brief filmography, is his constant exploration of cinematic devices to place them at the service of this poetic filmic action. His aesthetic and narrative discoveries integrated into the mise-en-scene, the editing, the soundtrack or the use of colour, in an unstable balance between realism and fantasy, result in a peculiar work somewhere between the avant-garde and the established Hollywood conventions, some of which began as innovative and atypical ideas of Mamoulian himself, used experimentally before being adopted as a narrative standard of classical Hollywood cinema.

NOTES

- 1 Mamoulian has been the subject of various monographs, especially in the United States. In Europe the traditional critical conclusions have been quite extreme, being argued, for example, with considerable zeal by the journal *Positif*, and particularly by Jean-Loup Bourget, and treated without much interest by *Cahiers du Cinéma*.
- 2 Among the academic studies dedicated to the filmmaker, it is worth highlighting a Spanish doctoral thesis by Santiago Vila from Universitat de València, which subsequently became the monograph *Rouben*

Mamoulian: el estilo como resistencia (Vila, 2001), a most interesting study, although it omits two films from its analysis—*Applause* (1929) and *High, Wide and Handsome* (1937)—no doubt because the author was unable to access the sources.

- 3 The official version of responsibility for the direction of *Laura* is disputed: some sources attribute much of the film to Mamoulian while others argue that Preminger began shooting from scratch (Vila, 2001: 239).
- 4 Shows with mature-aged stars, aimed at a vulgar audience.

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ROUBEN MAMOULIAN: EXPERIMENTATION, INNOVATION AND THE AVANT-GARDE IN HOLLYWOOD THROUGH THE NARRATIVE AND EXPRESSIVE USE OF SOUND

Abstract

This article analyses the work of the Russian-born American filmmaker Rouben Mamoulian, made during the golden era of classical Hollywood cinema, characterised by a unique balance between the aesthetic and narrative conventions of the Hollywood industry and the unique contributions and innovations (the use of sound, colour, editing and format) introduced by the filmmaker into his films. The article focuses particularly on the use of sound for narrative and expressive purposes, and on the poetic and symbolic meaning revealed by these experimentations, with special reference to the director's first four titles: *Applause* (1929), *City Streets* (1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), and *Love Me Tonight* (1932).

Key words

Rouben Mamoulian; Sound Film; Avant-Garde in Cinema; Sound in Cinema; Expressive Use of Sound.

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ROUBEN MAMOULIAN: EXPERIMENTACIÓN, INNOVACIÓN Y VANGUARDIA EN HOLLYWOOD A TRAVÉS DEL USO NARRATIVO Y EXPRESIVO DEL SONIDO

Resumen

El artículo analiza la obra del cineasta norteamericano de origen ruso Rouben Mamoulian, que se desarrolla durante el periodo de esplendor del cine clásico norteamericano y se caracteriza por un equilibrio singular entre el canon estético y narrativo de la industria de Hollywood y las singulares aportaciones e innovaciones (el uso del sonido, del color, del montaje o del formato) que introduce en sus películas. El artículo se centra, particularmente, en la utilización del sonido en clave narrativa y expresiva, y en el sentido poético y simbólico que alumbran dichas experimentaciones, teniendo como especial referencia los primeros cuatro títulos del director: *Aplauso* (*Applause*, 1929), *Las calles de la ciudad* (*City Streets*, 1931), *El hombre y el monstruo* (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1931) y *Ámame esta noche* (*Love Me Tonight*, 1932).

Palabras clave

Rouben Mamoulian; cine sonoro; vanguardia cinematográfica; sonido; uso expresivo del sonido.

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