



Silent Film Sound (Film and Culture Series)

By Rick Altman

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Silent Film Sound (Film and Culture Series) By Rick Altman

Because silent cinema is widely perceived as having been exactly that-silent-no one has fully examined how sound was used to accompany the films of this era. *Silent Film Sound* reconsiders all aspects of sound practices during the entire silent film period. Based on extensive original research and accompanied by gorgeous illustrations, the book challenges the assumptions of earlier histories of this period in film and reveals the complexity and swiftly changing nature of American silent cinema.

Contrary to received opinion, silent films were not always accompanied, nor were accompaniments uniform. Beginning with sound practices before cinema's first decade and continuing through to the more familiar sound practices of the 1920s, Rick Altman discusses the variety of sound strategies and the way early cinema exhibitors used these strategies to differentiate their products. During the nickelodeon period prior to 1910, this variety reached its zenith, with theaters often deploying half a dozen competing sound strategies-from carnival-like music in the street, automatic pianos at the rear of the theater, and small orchestras in the pit to lecturers, synchronized sound systems, and voices behind the screen. During this period, musical accompaniment had not yet begun to support the story and its emotions as it would in later years.

But in the 1910s, film sound acquiesced to the demands of the burgeoning cinema industry, who successfully argued that accompaniment should enhance film's narrative and emotional content rather than score points by burliesquing or "kidding" the film. The large theaters and blockbuster productions of the mid-1910s provided a perfect crucible for new instruments, new music publication projects, and the development of a new style of film music. From that moment on, film music would become an integral part of the film rather than its adversary, and a new style of cinema sound would favor accompaniment that worked in concert with cinema story-telling. For the first time, *Silent Film Sound* details the ways in which these diverse interests and industries came together to produce an extraordinarily successful audiovisual art.

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Editorial Review

Review

Weighty and ambitious....This thoroughly researched and copiously illustrated book is recommended for large libraries and all cinema collections.

(Roy Liebman *Library Journal*)

Silent Film Sound is a bible of reference information and vintage photos.

(*Bookwatch*)

Edison's pioneering work...is given a large amount of space in a fascinating new book.

(Steve Ramm *Groove Magazine*)

Rather than reinventing the wheel or allowing for too many examples in his analysis, Altman successfully dispels notions of a homogenous turn-of-the-century soundscape and interweaves salient but ignored aspects of early cinema and its coinciding entertainments...Highly recommended.

(*Choice*)

A magisterial effort of a type rarely seen in cinema today... Altman's history is precise, reflective, and human.

(*Cinemas Journal*)

Rick Altman's *Silent Film Sound* is revisionist film history at its best.

(Marshall Deutelbaum *New Review of Film and Television*)

Nothing short of a classic, definitive work.

(Jacob Smith *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*)

A major contribution to the history of early cinema.

(*American Studies*)

His groundbreaking, encyclopedic book represents a crucial contribution to the scholarly understanding not

only of early film sound, but also of the full range of film history.

(Kecia D. McBride *Film Criticism*)

Rick Altman has given us a magnum opus... a stunningly original work of film history.

(Tom Gunning *Film Quarterly*)

[A] majestic book... Readable as the most complete account of early American cinema.

(Dana Polan *Screening The Past*)

Silent Film Sound is a superb contribution to many scholarly fields in addition to film history, including musicology, media studies, sound studies and American history.

(Katherine Spring *Film International*)

Silent Film Sound is a top pick for any serious college-level film library.

(*California Bookwatch*)

Review

Altman radically rewrites the history of sound practices in silent cinema in the United States. He boldly challenges the basic assumptions of earlier work and carefully develops a series of cogent arguments about the complexity and swiftly changing nature of American silent cinema in which sound often had an importance equal to that of the moving image. The arguments are based on extensive, meticulous research in primary sources, many of them examined for the first time. This book is simply an extraordinary achievement.

(Richard Abel, University of Michigan)

New historians usually assert that history is always already an act of "interpretation" and that it thus always has to be re-done, over and over again, to fit new generations, new modes of thought. With this masterful work by Rick Altman, other historians can take a break from their efforts! Altman's interpretations are so solid that they will remain operative for much longer than usual.

(André Gaudreault, University of Montreal)

About the Author

Rick Altman is professor of cinema and comparative literature at the University of Iowa. He is the author of *The American Film Musical* and *Film/Genre*; the editor of *Sound Theory Sound Practice*; and the coeditor of *The Sounds of Early Cinema*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gina Hill:

In this 21st millennium, people become competitive in most way. By being competitive at this point, people have do something to make them survives, being in the middle of the actual crowded place and notice by surrounding. One thing that oftentimes many people have underestimated this for a while is reading. Yeah, by reading a publication your ability to survive raise then having chance to stand up than other is high. For you who want to start reading some sort of book, we give you this Silent Film Sound (Film and Culture Series) book as basic and daily reading publication. Why, because this book is greater than just a book.

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Irene Gamino:

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