

Writing Without Words: Visual Storytelling in Film

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Abstract—Dialogue is one of the most familiar ways of telling a story in cinema, but some of the most memorable film moments communicate very little through spoken words. Characters can express emotions, relationships, conflict, and personality through movement, facial expressions, gestures, sound, silence, timing, and visual actions. This research will explore how filmmakers use these elements to tell stories when dialogue is limited or absent, with a focus on both animation and live-action cinema. The study will look at how non-verbal storytelling has developed across different periods of filmmaking, beginning with the physical performances of silent-film actors such as Charlie Chaplin and moving towards animation, where visual action and timing have often been central to storytelling. Examples such as Tom and Jerry, WALL-E, and Flow can be examined alongside selected live-action films to understand how different filmmakers approach storytelling without relying heavily on dialogue. The research will consider how the absence of spoken dialogue affects character development, humour, emotion, pacing, and the audience's understanding of a story. By comparing these different forms and periods of cinema, this research aims to examine whether storytelling without words changes with the medium, technology, and expectations of audiences. It will also explore the idea that visual storytelling is not simply a substitute for dialogue, but can be a deliberate creative writing choice that gives audiences space to interpret characters and events for themselves.

I. INTRODUCTION

Film is usually seen as a visual medium, but dialogue is still one of the easiest ways for a film to explain a character or move a story forward. A character can tell us what they feel, what they want, or what has happened simply by speaking. At the same time, cinema has never depended completely on dialogue. From silent films to modern animation, filmmakers have shown that stories can also be understood through what characters do, how they react, and what the audience sees and hears.

This is especially important when thinking about creative writing for film. A screenplay is not only a collection of lines for actors to say. It also describes actions, situations, reactions, and visual moments that later become images and sounds. Because of this, screenwriting involves thinking about how an audience will understand a character through both words and behaviour. Visual storytelling is therefore part of the writing process itself, not something added only after the script is finished.

This can be seen in films from very different periods. Charlie Chaplin created a strong physical style through gestures, movement, facial expressions, and comic timing. Animation opened up even more possibilities because movement could be created and controlled frame by frame. In Tom and Jerry, the characters often make their intentions clear through action and reaction instead of long conversations. WALL-E shows that a full-length animated film can build a character, a world, and emotional relationships with very little spoken dialogue. More recently, Flow takes this idea even further by using almost no conventional spoken dialogue and relying on animal behaviour, sound, camera movement, and the environment.

This paper asks a simple question: how do filmmakers communicate character, emotion, humour, and narrative when dialogue is limited or absent? It also looks at whether these techniques work differently in live-action and animation, and how they have developed over time.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1)To examine how visual and non-verbal elements communicate narrative information in film.
- 2)To analyse how limited or absent dialogue affects character development and emotional expression.
- 3)To compare non-verbal storytelling techniques in live-action and animation.

- 4) To understand visual storytelling as a deliberate creative writing and screenwriting choice.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Film scholars generally view meaning in cinema as something created by several elements working together, not by dialogue alone. Giannetti's *Understanding Movies* discusses movement, editing, sound, acting, story, screenwriting, and mise-en-scène as parts of film language [1]. Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith also explain film form through the interaction of narrative, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, and animation [2]. These ideas are useful for understanding films where spoken language is not doing most of the storytelling. Brine's work on cinematic storytelling is useful for this study because it treats visual storytelling as something that must be planned. Shots, cuts, transitions, blocking, and storyboards all help decide how a story will appear on screen [3]. This is especially important in animation, where movement does not happen naturally in front of a camera and has to be carefully designed.

Studies of silent cinema also show how much meaning can come from physical performance. Calhoun describes Chaplin's pantomime as a kind of visual language built from gestures and the body [4]. Wang's study of *The Kid* points to framing, editing, mise-en-scène, physical comedy, repeated actions, and visual motifs as important parts of Chaplin's storytelling [5]. Research on animation places similar importance on movement and timing. Hooks describes animated characters as performers whose acting depends heavily on timing and movement [6]. Alexander's work on MGM cartoons also discusses how comic timing and musical synchronization help shape the humour of *Tom and Jerry* [7].

WALL-E and *Flow* offer more recent examples of the same idea. Pixar's production material describes a wordless sequence in *WALL-E* that uses visuals to communicate the history of Earth [8]. Research on the film's soundtrack also shows how music helps carry the story even when there is very little dialogue [9]. In discussions of *Flow*, director Gints Zilbalodis has explained that removing dialogue meant relying more strongly on movement, sound, camera work, and the environment [10].

IV. RESEARCH GAP

A lot of writing about visual storytelling focuses on one period, one medium, or one technique at a time. Silent cinema is often studied separately from animation, while animation studies may focus mainly on movement, timing, or sound. This paper brings these ideas together on a small scale.

Instead of treating silent film and dialogue-free animation as completely different practices, it looks at the common idea behind them: telling the audience something through visible action and audiovisual storytelling.

The study is intentionally small. It does not try to represent every kind of animation or every live-action film. Instead, it uses a few examples from different periods to show how non-verbal storytelling has continued to be useful and how its techniques can change with the medium.

V. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative comparative approach. The selected films are examined closely to see how they use gesture, facial expression, movement, framing, editing, sound effects, music, pacing, and the environment. The purpose is not to measure audience reactions statistically, but to understand how these creative choices work within the films.

The case studies represent different periods and forms: Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921), selected *Tom and Jerry* shorts, Pixar's *WALL-E* (2008), and Gints Zilbalodis's *Flow* (2024). These examples were chosen because each one relies less heavily on spoken dialogue and therefore gives the audience more information through action, sound, timing, or visuals. The comparison is supported by film studies research on silent performance, visual storytelling, animation acting, and cinematic form.

In this paper, dialogue is treated as only one part of cinematic communication. A film can have no spoken dialogue and still have plenty of sound. Music, sound effects, animal noises, movement, editing, and camera choices can all communicate information.

Flow is a clear example because it has no conventional spoken dialogue but uses sound and environmental detail throughout the film.

VI. VISUAL STORYTELLING AND SCREENWRITING

Visual storytelling is more than simply making a script look interesting on screen. It means creating actions and images that help the audience understand something without having it explained in words. Film uses several systems at the same time, including mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, sound, acting, and narrative structure [1], [2].

For a screenwriter, this creates a useful difference between telling and showing. A script could simply say that a character is lonely. A more visual approach might show the character returning to an empty room, eating alone, or reacting to the absence of someone they care about. In the second approach, the writer has to create behaviour that can actually be performed and seen on screen.

This works because audiences often understand actions quickly. A character who looks away, pauses before touching something, or moves closer to another person can reveal a relationship without explaining it directly. The meaning still depends on context, performance, timing, and editing. Good visual storytelling therefore has to be clear enough for the audience to follow while leaving some room for interpretation.

Storyboarding is another place where writing and visual storytelling meet. Storyboards turn story ideas into planned sequences and help filmmakers work out actions, camera movement, transitions, and screen geography before production [3]. In animation, this planning is especially important because movement has to be created deliberately.

VII. CHARLIE CHAPLIN AND THE LANGUAGE OF PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE

Silent cinema is a natural starting point for studying storytelling without dialogue. Charlie Chaplin's films show how much a performer can communicate through the body. His Tramp character became recognizable not only because of his costume, but also through his walk, posture, gestures, facial reactions, and rhythm.

In *The Kid*, Chaplin mixes physical comedy with emotional situations. The relationship between the Tramp and the child becomes clear through their behaviour toward each other. The audience can

understand affection, dependence, conflict, and vulnerability without needing long explanations. Their actions become part of the story itself [5].

Chaplin is useful for a study of creative writing because his work shows that a scene can be built around an action rather than a conversation. Instead of first asking, 'What should this character say?', a writer can ask, 'What does this character do?' and then build the emotion around that action. This connects closely with Calhoun's discussion of Chaplin's use of gesture and physical performance [4].

VIII. TOM AND JERRY AND ANIMATION AS PHYSICAL STORYTELLING

Animation creates a different kind of non-verbal performance because there is no actor physically standing in front of the camera in the same way. Movement, poses, facial expressions, rhythm, and reactions are designed deliberately. Because of this, timing becomes a major part of animated storytelling [6].

Tom and Jerry are a clear example. Much of the comedy comes from physical action, and the audience rarely needs a long conversation to understand the relationship between the characters. We quickly understand that Tom is chasing Jerry and that Jerry is usually trying to escape or outsmart him. Their feelings are also shown through movement and reactions. Many jokes depend on anticipation, timing, surprise, and exaggeration rather than spoken explanation.

Alexander's research on MGM cartoons highlights the importance of comic timing and musical pacing in Tom and Jerry [7]. The timing of an action can tell the audience when to expect a joke, when to react, and how to understand what a character is doing. In that sense, timing can perform some of the work that dialogue normally does.

Animation also allows physical behaviour to be exaggerated beyond what would normally be possible in live action. A reaction can be stretched, repeated, delayed, or made much faster. Once the audience understands the rules of the animated world, these exaggerated movements become part of the characters and the humour. Timing is therefore not just a technical detail; it becomes a storytelling choice.

IX. WALL-E: EMOTION WITHOUT CONVERSATION

Pixar's WALL-E is a strong modern example of visual storytelling in feature animation. In the opening part of the film, the audience sees an abandoned Earth, follows WALL-E's routine, and begins to understand his personality with very little spoken dialogue. Pixar describes 'The Walk Home' as a wordless sequence that reveals the planet's history through visuals [8].

WALL-E's personality is built through repetition and behaviour. He collects objects, keeps his home organized, watches old recordings, and reacts with curiosity to things he finds. These simple actions tell us that he is lonely, curious, and capable of attachment without someone having to explain those qualities. When EVE arrives, changes in his behaviour show his excitement and growing feelings.

Sound still plays a major role. WALL-E is not a silent film in the strict sense. Mechanical sounds, environmental noise, music, and electronic vocalizations take over some of the work that dialogue would normally do. Castro's study of the soundtrack also examines how music helps the story move forward despite the limited dialogue [9].

For screenwriting, WALL-E shows that dialogue can be reduced when a character's motivation is made visible through behaviour. The audience does not have to be told that WALL-E is lonely. His routine, actions, and surroundings make that feeling clear.

X. FLOW: CONTEMPORARY DIALOGUE-FREE STORYTELLING

Flow takes the idea of dialogue-free storytelling even further. Directed by Gints Zilbalodis and written with Matiss Kaza, the film follows a cat and several other animals trying to survive after a massive flood. There is no conventional spoken dialogue, but the characters still develop distinct personalities and relationships.

Zilbalodis has explained that removing dialogue meant the filmmakers had to express ideas through movement, sound, the environment, camera work, and editing [10]. He has also described the writing process as challenging because ideas that could normally be explained in dialogue had to be turned into visible actions [11].

Because of this, the cat's behaviour becomes central to the story. Fear, curiosity, distrust, cooperation, and

attachment are shown through movement and reactions instead of spoken statements. Even the environment helps communicate meaning. Water can feel dangerous, uncertain, peaceful, or overwhelming depending on how the scene presents it.

Flow is especially interesting because it shows that dialogue-free storytelling is not just something from the early days of cinema. It can still be a deliberate choice in a modern animated feature. Zilbalodis has discussed the use of longer takes, active camera movement, and environmental detail to make the audience feel as if it is discovering the world with the characters [10]. The film suggests that removing conventional dialogue does not automatically make a story difficult to understand.

XI. COMPARISON BETWEEN LIVE-ACTION AND ANIMATION

The selected examples show both similarities and differences between live-action and animation. In live action, non-verbal storytelling depends strongly on the physical performance of an actor. Chaplin could use his actual face, body, posture, and timing, while the camera recorded that performance in a real environment.

Animation creates performance differently. An animator decides how a character moves, reacts, pauses, and changes expression. This means movement can be exaggerated or controlled very precisely in ways that are not always possible in live action. Timing becomes part of the character's performance as well as part of the story [6], [7].

Even with these differences, the basic creative idea is similar. The audience needs to understand what a character wants, feels, or fears through behaviour that can be seen or heard. Whether the character is played by an actor, drawn in 2D, or created digitally in 3D, the writer still has to create situations in which emotion can be expressed through action.

Sound is another important similarity. Silence does not always mean that there is no sound. WALL-E and Flow use sound effects and music extensively, while silent cinema was also commonly presented with musical accompaniment. So 'writing without words' should not be understood as 'writing without sound.' It means reducing spoken language and allowing other audiovisual elements to carry more of the story.

XII. DISCUSSION

The case studies suggest that visual storytelling works best when the reduction of dialogue is intentional. Chaplin's physical performance, Tom and Jerry's comic timing, WALL-E's behaviour, and Flow's use of the environment all show that audiences can understand characters and events without conventional conversations.

This also changes what the screenwriter has to think about. When dialogue is removed, the writer has to build the scene around actions, reactions, situations, and visual consequences. The challenge is not simply to delete lines of dialogue. It is to replace unnecessary explanation with meaningful dramatic action.

At the same time, dialogue and visual storytelling do not have to compete with each other. Modern films can use both. The more useful question for a writer is whether a particular idea is better communicated through words or through an image, action, sound, or pause.

This is especially relevant to animation. Animation gives filmmakers enormous visual freedom, but that does not mean every moment needs to be visually crowded. WALL-E and Flow show that a simple movement, a pause, or a character's reaction can become more powerful when the audience is not receiving constant verbal explanation.

XIII. CONCLUSION

Visual storytelling has been part of cinema from its earliest years, but the ways filmmakers use it continue to change. Chaplin's physical performance, the exaggerated movement of Tom and Jerry, WALL-E's expressive animation, and Flow's dialogue-free world all show that stories can be carried by much more than spoken words.

The comparison also shows that live action and animation approach non-verbal storytelling in different ways. Live action records a human performance, while animation constructs performance through deliberate choices of movement and timing. Even so, both forms can use action, expression, sound, pacing, and visual composition to communicate character and emotion.

For creative writing and screenwriting, the main lesson is simple: dialogue does not always need to be the first solution. Sometimes an action can reveal more

than a line of dialogue. A pause can create tension without explanation, and a small visual detail can communicate something that would sound forced if a character said it aloud. Visual storytelling is therefore not just a replacement for dialogue; it is one of the main creative languages available to film writers.

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