

Film Script

Before diving into intertitles, it's important to establish the place and time where these were a staple in the movie going experience. Let's start with silent films. As their name suggests, these are films with no accompanying dialogue or sound. They were popular from 1890 until the late 1920s (Auerbach, 2007). The name "silent film" is somewhat deceptive. Though technological limitations at the time meant recording and playing back sound couldn't be synchronized, film showings in the early 1900s were not that quiet.

At theaters large and small, musicians or sometimes a full orchestra would signal the start of the film by playing (Lupack, 2020). Small neighborhood movie houses would have a single piano player provide musical accompaniment (Lupack, 2020). This live music element established the appropriate mood for the film. It was not unusual for musical scores to be entirely improvised by musicians.

Another central figure in film exhibition of the time was the lecturer. In her essay titled *'Those funny subtitles': Silent film intertitles in exhibition and discourse*, Katherine Nagels (2012) had this to say about this key figure: "He – it was almost always a he – mediated between the screen and the audience, introducing, commenting on, and so implicitly interpreting the film. Depending on the quality of the film, the lecturer could be indispensable to the audience's understanding of the scene or even the entire narrative (p.370)."

What are intertitles? Let's start with what they're not. It's not this. What you're seeing here is a film title. An opening sequence was important to distinguish between all the films being show and remains just an important to movies today for the same reason.

That was an intertitle. That moment of projected text on the screen.

There is much debate and conflicting accounts of when intertitles first appeared. This is largely because so many films from the era have been lost as nitrate reels are highly flammable and hard to preserve. Writers and film buffs agree that by 1903, intertitles or title cards as they were also referred to could be easily identified in movies (Smyth, 2006). Early silent films were very short. Once movies became longer than a minute or two, filmmakers began inserting intertitles in order to add more detail to their films. Text was framed and inserted between film sequences. There were two categories of intertitle: dialogue and exposition (Chisholm, 1987). As the name suggests, dialogue intertitles were used to convey verbal exchanges. Think of them as a precursor to subtitles before filmmakers had the ability to integrate text in a more fluid way without interrupting the action of the story.

Expository intertitles provided narration in case what was shown on film couldn't convey the full situation on its own (Chisholm, 1987). We can think of this kind of intertitle as a replacement for the narrator or lecturer we spoke of earlier. Though both played the same role in storytelling, a lecturer would interpret the film based on their own understanding and share this with the audience. Intertitles allowed the filmmaker to retain more control of what additional details the audience absorbs and to repeat the same exact details for each and every showing.

Intertitles were such a mainstay in movies during this period that their creators started experimenting. Intertitles began to visually morph away from their original art deco motifs into more stylised fonts and styles that suited the specific film (Walker, 2006). Though I don't speak German, here we see a fantastic example of intertitles seen in the 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. This film had an abstract visual

style and the green colouring and messy look of the intertitles mimicked the chaos at play in this horror film (Walker, 2006).

There was even an Oscar given in film for outstanding use of intertitles further proving their importance in the silent film era. The first ever Academy Awards presentation took place in 1929 had a total of 12 categories, one of which was "Best Writing for Title Cards". This award was given to Joseph Farnham, a very celebrated intertitle writer of the time. This was the one and only time such an award was to be given out, as right around the 1930s "talkies" or films with audio capabilities took over the industry (Pawlak, 2012).

One consequence of the widespread use of intertitles was the exclusion of what kind of populations would now enjoy going to the theatre. In the early 1900s, films were mostly attended by lower- and working-class audiences (Nagels, 2012). This was a form of entertainment that was cheap and enjoyed by the masses. Once intertitles were taken up as common practice, discrimination occurred between those who could read and those who couldn't. In this time period North America had a significant number of members of the working class who had immigrated from other countries and didn't read English at a high level (Nagels, 2012). It became accepted that part of the movie going experience was to read, thus excluding the illiterate who were almost always poor and/or immigrants.

Audio that could be recorded and synced up with a film allowed for dialogue in real-time as well as atmospheric sound and went a long way in giving the viewer a more complete understanding of the action in a film. Once this technology was adapted, the use of dialogue intertitles disappeared. As mentioned earlier, we can see the descendants of this type of intertitle today with subtitles, the use of which has allowed movies from all different genres and countries of origin to be enjoyed around the world. Without subtitles, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* would have

likely never achieved such acclaim and box office success as it did in North America and Europe. Though a well-known world leader parroted distaste over Parasite's recent Oscar win because the film had subtitles, the rest of us were glad to have had exposure to a Korean cinematic masterpiece.

Expository intertitles on the other hand have not disappeared (Gaudreault & Barnard, 2013). They are used today most often to indicate the passing of time before a new scene. Crime shows like Law & Order will use intertitles to show location and the exact date of an upcoming scene. One of the most iconic uses of intertitles in modern cinema is from the franchise we see here that has spanned 42 years and has become an instantly recognizable reference to pop culture even with the elimination of the accompanying soundtrack.

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