

Evoking Empathy Through Audiovisual Design: A Semiotic and Cognitive Poetic Analysis of 'Do You Hear the People Sing' in Les Misérables (2012)

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Abstract. "Les Misérables"(2012) is renowned for its high-quality adaptation and sophisticated filmmaking techniques that convey profound emotional resonance. The clip "Do you hear the people sing?" serves as compelling evidence, as it elicits strong emotional engagement from audiences. While existing studies have examined the effect of simple elements, a research gap remains regarding how these elements interact to enhance emotional resonance. This study seeks to explore how the clip "Do you hear the people sing" from Les Misérables (2012) elicits audience empathy. This study integrates film semiotics and cognitive poetics to examine the specific manifestations of signs and symbols in the clip. The study will employ a detailed textual analysis of the clip, analysing through five dimensions: frame, music, lyrics, characters, and audience interaction. By examining how these elements interact in harmony or contrast, their combined impact on emotional engagement and empathy will be evaluated. The clip reinforces emotional expression and continuously invites audience engagement, fostering viewers' sense of identification that elicits empathy.

Keywords: Les Misérables(2012), Do you hear the people sing, Humanities text analysis, Evoke Empathy, Interaction

1. Introduction

"Les Misérables"(2012), as a classic film, is renowned for its high-fidelity adaptation of the original work and the musical, as well as its sophisticated filmmaking techniques that elicit profound emotional responses. The clip "Do you hear the people sing?" is a paradigmatic example of how the film transmits fervor and idealism. In academic research on this film, most studies focus on the expressive effects of specific themes and their messages, rather than investigating the underlying mechanisms or methodologies [1]. Additionally, most research adopts a holistic approach to the film, with scant research dedicated to analyzing the individual clip "Do you hear the people sing" [2-4]. While existing studies have explored single elements in isolation, little research examines how music, visuals, and narrative synchronize to construct empathy. According to Decety and Jackson's empathy model, cinematic empathy encompasses two dimensions: cognitive empathy

(understanding a character's situation) and emotional empathy (experiencing a character's emotions) [5].

This study is based on the framework integrating film semiotics and cognitive poetics [6]. Film semiotics examines the creation, application, interpretation, and communication of signs to convey messages to audiences, while cognitive poetics explores how textual elements shape audience cognition, thinking, and emotional responses [7,8]. This study analyses the multimodal symbolic interactions within this sequence to reveal how it elicits audience empathy, thereby providing an interdisciplinary reference for film music analysis and arts education.

2. Historical contextual analysis

The 1832 June Rebellion erupted in Paris during the post-revolutionary period [9]. Despite the 1830 July Revolution ousting the Bourbon dynasty, the July Monarchy ignored social grievances, prioritizing bourgeois interests. The 1832 cholera epidemic worsened working-class conditions, fueling public outrage. As a working-class uprising, it championed democracy, republicanism, and equality—ideals rooted in early socialist thought. Though dismissed as a failure by the government, its legacy endured through media and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which transformed the event into an enduring symbol of resistance.

3. Musical film genre and evoking empathy

The musical film, as a very new kind of genre, began developing in the 1950s. Compared to traditional films, the use of music can amplify emotional resonance. Study indicates that music elicits empathy in audiences by mimicking the acoustic features of human vocal emotional expression [10,11]. For example, harmonious chords convey positive emotions, while dissonant or unresolved chords convey negative or complex emotions. Music in musical films aligns with characters' expressions, inherently embodying human emotional expression. Specifically, this clip's revolutionary fervor is conveyed through a unified, robust melody and evocative lyrics, effectively eliciting viewers' empathetic engagement.

In contrast to traditional stage musicals, musical films exhibit realism, which enhances viewer immersion [12]. The film ultimately adopted live-recorded audio to achieve maximal realism and emotional impact. This realism dispels the "utopian" quality of the original stage play, facilitating viewer identification and emotional resonance with the film.

4. Specific interactions

4.1. Song & frame

The director strategically constructs the interaction between framing and the lyrics, effectively eliciting the audience's emotions.

From 1:47 to 1:50, for 3 seconds, the director employs a shaky handheld camera to capture the entire funeral cart. The use of a handheld camera in the film can be analyzed within the framework of montage theory. Eisenstein's intellectual montage theory emphasizes evoking emotion through visual contrasts between images [13]. Compared to the preceding and subsequent scenes, shot at eye level, the frame's overall composition forms a triangle weighted toward the right during these seconds. The road is tilted rather than horizontal, and the camera shakes distinctly. The lyric here, "Singing the song of angry men", aligns with the image. Anger, a passionately restless emotion, is

amplified by the shaky, disorienting framing. The shaky, disorienting visuals and tilted, unsettling composition amplify the anger referenced in the lyric, fostering audience empathy.

Another place of using a handheld camera is from 2:01 to 2:04, for 3 seconds. The clip follows behind the government soldiers' running. The perspective is low, almost around the waist of the soldiers, with serious shaking, and even some environmental images are blurry. The low angle shot strengthens the nerve and tension for this scene. There is a contrast between the subject "government soldiers" and the lyric "There is a life about to start", the old system and the "new life". Therefore, despite the tension, the intention of the blurry shaky frame also infers the troubles of the old system under the challenge of the revolutions. The director used the interaction of the contrast to form a gap between senses, encouraging the audience to think deeply.

In contrast, fixed and smoothly moving cameras are used at the beginning of this clip, from 0:01 to 0:08, for 8 seconds. This is the prelude of the song and the sequence's preparatory phase. The funeral procession and soldiers proceed in an orderly formation, accompanied by measured, solemn drumbeats, creating a solemn and imposing scene. The contrast between the fixed framing and the moving soldiers directs audience attention to the march, evoking a sense of unease. Additionally, the contrast between fixed and handheld cinematography reinforces the conflict between the revolutionaries and the old system.

Compared to the musical theatre version (taking the 25th anniversary tour production as an example), the film adaptation excels at presenting close-up shots from varied perspectives [14]. The stage production, however, prioritises wide shots, with performers predominantly marching across a flat stage, thereby lacking a certain authenticity and grandeur.

The director manipulates frame composition and cinematographic techniques to either align with or contrast with the song. Handheld cameras are associated with the emotion of fury, amplifying the revolutionaries' spirit of resistance. The ambiguous visuals reflect the old system's instability amid revolutions. Fixed framing, meanwhile, captures the opening's solemnity, maintaining audience focus and contrasting with handheld shots to highlight the antithesis between the old system and the "new world." Both emphasis and contrast arouse audience emotions and elicit empathy.

4.2. Song & character

The connection between the song and the character is clearly structured. The director elicited the audience's empathy through a specific order of characters appearing and the correlation between lyrics and characters. Here, based on Propp's theory of functional roles, this study will analyze the functional categories of characters and the effects of showing them in the clip [15].

The first lyric accompanies the appearance and singing of Enjolras. Within the whole narrative, he acts as both a sender and an assistant to Jean Valjean, indirectly guiding Jean Valjean to the barricade and advancing the plot. In the revolutionary storyline, Enjolras is the undisputed protagonist and hero. Starting with him highlights his significance within ABCs and also underscores his role as the leader of the revolution. The camera then shifts to the other ABC members in sequential order. As Enjolras' assistants, they share the same revolutionary ideals. A brief shot of a minor female character appears between ABC members' scenes. At first, she appears confused and shocked; in her second appearance, she joins the chorus. While women of the era were unlikely to stand at the forefront of such a significant funeral, this character bridges three identities: "woman", "normal people", and the "audience." Her transition from confusion to participation mirrors the audience's shift from passive observers to active emotional participants. By including this representative figure, the clip enhances audience engagement with the revolution and its emotions.

Important characters are related to pivotal lyrics. For example, from 1:28 to 1:30, Gavroche waves the banners with two other children. The lyric is “Will you give all you can give so that our banner may advance?”. Children, symbolizing hope, are depicted engaging in the revolution. This creates emotional tension: passion for the revolution’s potential progress, contrasted with sorrow at the knowledge that war may claim their lives. Such conflict heightens resonance.

Another example is Javert, appearing in three segments (0:32–0:34, 1:26–1:28, 1:36–1:38), corresponding to the lyrics “When the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drums,” “Will you provide all you can provide so that our banner may advance,” and “Some will fall and some will live; will you stand up and take your chance?” As a defender of the old system, Javert is a source of dissonance in the scene. He is an antagonist but not a one-dimensional figure. His hesitation and transformation make him a round character, enhancing authenticity. Each lyric challenges Javert’s inner convictions, prompting the audience to question both him and themselves. The director strategically aligns main characters in “Les Misérables” with lyrics and also includes supporting characters as audience surrogates, strengthening immersion. The method effectively evoked the audience’s empathy.

4.3. Song & plot structure

Compared to the musical, the film alters the sequence of “One Day More” and “Do you hear the people sing”. In the musical, the song “Do you hear the people sing” appears after the ABC Society’s first full appearance—before the funeral—while “One Day More” serves as the final song of Act I, just prior to the funeral. The film reorders these two songs, placing “Do You Hear the People Sing” after “One Day More” and setting it during the funeral. The differences in plot sequencing stem from the distinct narrative functions of music in musical theatre and film [8]. In musical films, music not only conveys characters’ emotions but also functions as a critical tool for advancing the plot and intensifying atmosphere. The placement of music alone conveyed substantial narrative information. Specifically, in this situation, the preceding song “One Day More” articulates conflicting perspectives of characters with differing allegiances, amassing all anticipations and tensions within the number. These emotions are then unleashed in the subsequent song, creating an emotional release that heightens the scene’s nervousness and tension. The funeral marks a turning point in the revolution and “Do you hear the people sing” is one of the most famous and significant songs in this show. By combining them, the director emphasizes the significance of this scene, creating a mutually reinforcing relationship between the song and the event.

4.4. Audience & video

In this clip, the director integrates visual and auditory cues to engage the audience both directly and indirectly throughout the sequence.

From 0:55 to 1:00, the chorus’s vocal lines suddenly grow distinct, allowing the audience to hear clearly as Enjolras leads. The line, “then join in the fight that will give you the right to be free”, is a direct invitation from the revolution leader, with his action of rushing into the funeral march, waving red flags and initiating the uprising. Following this, from 1:07 to 1:10, the lyric, “It is the music of the people who will not be slaves again”, accompanies a crowd-rear perspective, positioned specifically behind Enjolras, which allows the audience to observe Enjolras’s action once more, and as the camera advances, it creates a sense of the audience joining Enjolras’s call. This aligns with the lyric’s reference to “the people,” framing the audience as part of this collective.

From 1:34 to 1:36, the lyric, “Will you stand up and take a chance”, coincides with Enjolras standing atop the funeral cart, holding a red flag and pointing toward the camera. The low-angle, upward shot centers the frame on his pointing finger, forging direct interaction between Enjolras and the audience. The song’s structure—filled with rhetorical questions like “Will you...?” and “Do you...?”—enhances its persuasiveness, and with the combination of the visual interaction, it enhances the cohesion of the lyrics and intensifies the revolutionary atmosphere.

Through repeated invitations to audience participation and interaction, the clip enhances viewers’ immersion and identification, effectively evoking empathy.

5. Expectation of interaction

In the first 16 seconds of the clip, it uses heavy drumbeats instead of the original melody in the musical. The whole scene is grand and silent. There’s only the sound of grave drums and the footsteps of the marching soldiers. Therefore, tension was created and maintained, enhancing the audience's emotional investment and raising the audience’s expectation of significant events coming further, prompting them to be solemn and ready to engage emotionally [16]. Overall, the clip conveys minimal narrative information. Based on the preceding context, the audience is aware that the ABCs plot an uprising at Lamarck’s funeral. These two minutes simply present this information and show that the government soldier comes to suppress. Minimal critical narrative details are revealed, which creates reflective space for the audience to contemplate and feel. Viewers can fully immerse themselves in their emotions without the risk of missing key information, fostering profound emotional engagement and stimulating empathy.

6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of the clip “Do you hear the people sing”, this study reveals how the clip evokes the audience’s empathy by amplifying revolutionary fervor and facilitating audience interaction. This study mainly explored the synergistic effects of music, lyrics, and visual elements and their role in fostering audience engagement. However, the study's depth in exploring individual elements lacks sufficient depth, suggesting a need for future research to delve deeper into the effects of specific elements. This study focuses on individual film segments, with potential future expansion to full-length films or multi-version comparisons, to deepen our understanding of the emotional mechanisms at work in musical cinema.

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