**IB Film Class Notes for Sound**

The talkie revolution.

The Jazz Singer was the first commercially released talkie – a movie with pre-recorded sound.

Prior to this movie, nearly all movies had live musicians playing along with the movie. Some movies in some theaters had full orchestras.

Most early sound movies were visually dull. Actors were stuck in one position because they could not move far from the microphone and the camera could not move at all because it was too noisy. Editing was to stitch scenes together.

Cameras had sound bafflers called blimps – sound proof boxes. Soon, several microphones, each on a separate channel, were on the set. Microphones at the end of long sticks were called booms, or boom mikes.

Many felt that synchronous sound detracted from pure cinema.

Talkies ended the careers of many silent film stars, such as John Gilbert, because their voices did not sound good. Silent film acting was exaggerated by modern standards, because the exaggeration helped convey meaning without words.

Orson Welles, coming from the world of radio drama, was in important innovator of movie sound. He used sound montage, in which the dialogue of one character overlaps with that of another, or several others.

Sound effects.

In movies, the sound you hear is constructed from many different layers and are synthesized (or “mixed”) in a sound studio. Foley artists gather sounds from many different sources to use in movies. For example, coconut shells were often used to create the sound of horses galloping. The basic theory of sound design is “See a dog, hear a dog”. The mixer decides how loud the various sounds are in relation to each other.

Most movie theaters have five speakers: cener, left-front, right-front, left-back and right-back. Dolby sound systems may have six or seven speakers.

Sounds that the characters can hear is called diegetic. If the characters are listening to music on a radio, and the audience can hear the music too, then the music is diegetic. Sounds the audience can hear, but the characters cannot (theme music for example) are nondiegetic.

High pitched sounds generally produce tension. Low pitched sounds are relaxing, like Gregorian chants.

Sound can be offscreen, and thereby increase the scope of the experience.

In the 1960’s the documentary style cinema verite became prevalent. The style was characterized by using live sound and minimal special effects.

Music

There are various theories. Eisenstein insisted that music must not be mere accompaniment. It ought to have its own integrity. Others claim that music must not dominate the image. Some use descriptive music, or “mickeymousing” – from Disney’s early experimentation with this musical style. If a character is creeping into a room in a comic fashion, each step has a musical note.

A great example of music adding to the impact of a movie is The Graduate, using the songs of Simon and Garfunkel.

Musicals. They exist. I’ve personally been able to sit through two: The Wizard of Oz and Camelot.

Spoken Dialogue. Actors interpret dialogue for us, where readers of a book interpret dialogue in their minds.

Some critics hate voice overs because the movie should be showing us rather than telling us. Some movies use them effectively, such as Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, or The Usual Suspects. Voice overs can either be omniscient and God-like, which is more or less out of style, or by a character, which means that the narrator may be unreliable.

Sound can permit directors more visual freedom. Voice can convey much about a character so that the director does not need to convey the same information visually.

Questions to ask about a movie’s use of sound: how is sound orchestrated in each scene? Is the sound distorted, and if so, why? Is the sound simplified or dense? How are silences used? What type of musical score is used? Is music used to underline speech or for action scenes? Does everyone use the same dialect and accent? What do these differences tell us about the characters? What is the subtext between character intent and their spoken words?