

CLOSE UP

Vol. V No. 4

October 1929

AS IS

BY THE EDITOR

Those who have mentioned *Blackmail* in *Close Up* have left much to say about it. We are not burning to make a written orderliness of its implications, but we are interested to do so, because it is a film of essentially an examinable nature, and of a nature that, once examined, is far and away the most significant determinant to unification of sound-sight deliberately and sustainedly that we have yet had. *Blackmail*, I want to establish, is the first sign of a comprehension of the relationship of techniques. I have seen most of the talking films. Without exception any power they may have had to hold us was fragmentary, accidental—purely and wholly accidental. Bouldery jumble without inter-relation or any specific plan, without architecture and without mortar, the object of which must be considered to be served if it can get its story told.

Long before the word montage was ever heard, a film had served its purpose if it adequately illustrated its sub-titles.

In those days it might have been likened to magazine illustrations. "Overcome" said the subtitle "with remorse, Felicitas determines to be revenged upon her betrayer, and that night . . ." In those days Felicitas would then have been shown on the usual tinted stock creeping exhibitionistically to the assassination. Mr. Hitchcock, supposing that such a title were possible in these days, with a more modern technique would show a curtain billowing, fingers running mediumistically down the handle of a knife, then cut to Big Ben, and help his montage with a scream.

There now, wait here.

Montage. Mr. Hitchcock is quite the first to have realised and profited by the fact that the talkies we all go to see are using a crassly naïve and retrospective manner which differs from the cinema's genesis only in that spoken dialogue now illustrates the picture-text instead of pictures illustrating written text. I think Mr. Hitchcock began to see, and is probably working it out in his mind now, and will use it well in his next film, that sound is not an accessory to lollop clumsily beside a film leashed in a twin harness, but a direct spur and aid to simplification, to economy. Accoustical montage, in short. Take this instance from *Blackmail*, it is a good one. I said Mr. Hitchcock would help his montage with a scream, which, in fact he did do. You remember Anny Ondra after the murder pacing the streets. You remember her obsession with the flung back, trailing hand of the murdered artist. At the end of her trudging, when she must have been, incidentally, very exhausted, the sight of a sleeping beggar with outflung, trailing hand, brings forth a scream. There is an immediate cut to the screaming face

CLOSE UP

of the old woman who finds the artist's murdered body. This is neat and dramatic. It is important, because it is the exact use of sound in its right relation. Part of the building. It is suave and polished, but more important than any of these, it is intensely significant. I say it is part of building, and until sound and film are built in one, grafted, and growing together, not much is going to be done. The scream that was both the girl's scream and the concierge's scream banished a lot that we can well do without. Picture this silent. You could not very well leave Anny Ondra screaming there. The beggar would or would not wake. She would hurry on. This would probably have to be shown. At the point of her hurrying on there could be a cut to the bed curtain being pulled back and then the old woman's face screaming. That is to say, that at least there would have had to be three additional un-dramatic shots needful to continuity, but causing a sagging of dramatic moment. Three at least. When you think of films you see, it is possible the script would have called for the old lady knocking, entering, pulling up the blind, going over to the bed, and so forth. Two shots and one sound did all this a hundred times better. There were the three shocks in sheer dramatic unity (in its Potamkin sense) piled in one. The effect could not but have been, as it was, ideal.

The far more obvious, though quaintly touching, bird song accompanying, in the best Pudovkin manner, contrapuntally the dazed, and in the circumstances, excusably meagre toilet of the heroine, should have its mention, as should, for just the same reason, the artist's words, " I live right up there at the top " (or words to that effect) at which

we look, as we would, not at his lips, but where he is directing our attention, namely up the stairs toward the top.

Here, by the way, although I did not like the *Seventh Heaven* mounting of the stairs, Hitchcock built very deftly his atmosphere of chilly squalor. The intentions of each and their knowledge of the implications had a power that reminded me of Pabst at his best but in slower tempo. The way in which slight contacts gave out under pressure of everything that makes contacts give out when you go to a new place for the first time, the augmenting distrust, were dwelt on carefully, with conscious, sustained slowness. The murder I did not like, but this is not relevant to the point I am making, that *Blackmail* appears to me to deserve our most serious attention, not as a story, not necessarily for its recording, which, by the way, a British Phototone product, was excellent, and very free from the bangs, roars and reverberations that sooner or later we shall have to accustom ourselves to if we can. *Blackmail* deserves our attention, as I have already said, because it has a conscious effort to bring technical thoughtfulness to bear on its own construction. The instance I have used of the scream I do suggest should be thought over as a clue. We just do not want sound as an accompaniment, and, if I may say so, neither do we want it solely as a counterpoint. We want it as part of the film, spliced on to it and inseparable. Not to slow the film, but to speed it. Let me proffer another hint from the Knife, knife, knife scene. "Aren't you feeling yourself?" Anny Ondra's father asks her. A small screaming clang begins, which gets louder and louder, and bursts like a shell. Meanwhile you are watching Anny Ondra's face, very drawn,

CLOSE UP

half stupefied. Her father says "another customer". The clang-scream was the shop bell. Phobia has translated it thus to her, meaning psycho-analytically that through that door may come the police. The door bell has become unconsciously a thing of terror. This again is worth thinking of. You might call it cinematic sound. It is not sound only, it gives you a picture of a mental state, as well as having its rightful place in the narrative.

Both these instances are given as indicative of the way we must begin to think of sound if we are to do anything with it. I was touched and amazed to find it thus in a British film, far and away the best talkie we have seen. I had meant this to be an article of sound with *Blackmail* as something to evolve something else out of. Since I have considered it more objectively than that, let me add a word of praise for Joan Barry's ghosting for Miss Ondra's voice. The overlayer of "refinement" on Cockney was superb. Donald Calthrop's more traditionally elocutional manner became good if you decided soon enough that there was a down-and-out actor, though no indication was given of the fact. The story condensed to a study in fear was excellent. If you preferred its more obvious, objective presentation it was a weak story, full of old clichés. After all, the heightened conduct and heightened impasse conventionally demanded of drama are not limitless, and to-day's innovation becomes to-morrow's cliché, and the day after to-morrow's joke. The story, however, (and it's after all the crux of every argument on story value) was not beneath psychology. Everything was accountable, and it dealt largely with minds. The established statement that it's not the story but the way you

handle it that matters can be accountable only after you have established several other conditions. The psychology possibility is one of the most important of them.

People have not yet begun to speak, far less to think, of sound in the same way as they think now and write in *Close Up* and elsewhere of vision. They must. The theory of sound and sound-vision is just as complicated, and in many ways similar. Sound must never be thought of alone. It must now be inseparably and forever sound-sight. The construction of sound-sight aesthetic must be taken in hand. An illusory amplification of reality is not achieved by adding odd effects haphazardly whether they be a third dimension, clairvoyance or every sound that the world contains. The silent film at its best has already shown that unquestioning credence can be tapped. In other words, any medium that can take you where it wants to and make you credulous is complete. If you are taken there is no further demand that can possibly be made of you. The film silent or forever sounding can be complete or not in the exact degree in which it is able to render you a participant, non-existent, obliterated and believing. If sound jangles you into self-consciousness, into any awareness, it is sound wrongly used, and the film would be better without it. Consider, after all, sound. Very few of the million noises surrounding us every second of our lives are received in the portentous, acutely self-aware manner in which they are thrust upon us in the cinemas. Sound of motor cars, for example, react differently on different nervous systems. Here Hitchcock's method of the bell clang-scream is significant. Sound is more like this. And sound is not one isolated, reedy noise filling a whole

CLOSE UP

auditorium. It can only be rendered symbolically always. The million sounds you hear have a special timbre, rhythm, sound-sight significance. What a complicated, vast, never-ending science the investigation and psychology of sound is going to present to us, and some of us already are beginning to say that talkies are an art. When you think, nobody has translated sound, except into music. It has remained an unclassified, unqualified, imminent and unresolvable substance over and around us, without symbolic form; without, let us say, the fierce lines of sculptured metal that somebody might submit as a shape for it—without any art form. And before we can use it as trimming or sewing thread even, we must set it an area, find terms for it and text books, know what sound is and what it does and what we do with it. And that will need a science more than medical, therapeutical, psycho-analytical, mechanical or philosophic. Till then, gee, honey, ah'm jes *crazy* 'bout yu, and I don't mind telling the world I miss the sound now in a silent film, and *you'll* be with me.

KENNETH MACPHERSON.