

When the Talkies Came to Hollywood

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HOLLYWOOD RESISTED SOUND for a number of good reasons besides general inertia. Most of its actors and many of its stars were pantomimists with untrained voices and questionable ability to convey emotion through words. Hollywood stages weren't sound-proofed. The theaters as well as the studios had to buy a great deal of expensive equipment. The companies had a large backlog of silent films. And there was the foreign market where few houses were ready for sound.

It was doubly fortunate for the Hollywood studios that they had largely taken to sound before the depression began in the fall of 1929. The Wall Street boom and the quick success of the talkies enabled exhibitors to borrow and to pay off the money needed for new sound equipment; the cost per theater ran from \$8,500 to \$20,000. If the producers had waited till October 26, 1929—as they might well have done except for Warner Brothers and Fox—sound would have been impossible for ten more years; and receiverships would have come to Hollywood quite a time before 1932.

The reverberating boom of sound may be measured by a few of the gaudy operations of the expanding film companies. In 1928, Fox built a wholly new studio, five miles west of its old one, investing \$4,000,000 in buildings alone; and within a year, it bought for over \$40,000,000 temporary control of Loew's, Inc., owners of MGM. The Rockefellers thought so well of picture

making and exhibiting that they built the Radio City Music Hall and had their Radio Corporation of America—which made sound-on-film equipment—buy FBO, a film producing company, and the Keith-Albee-Orpheum vaudeville theater corporation, and set up RKO; even in 1931, the film business had withstood the depression so well that RCA added the Pathé studio to its interests. Warner Brothers was prosperous enough to bid against Fox for Loew's, and then to buy the Stanley chain of theaters, along with First National, a producing company that had been set up by a large group of exhibitors. Warner Brothers now controlled about 500 theaters, and other companies bought up other chains and houses. Guesses at the weekly attendance are unreliable, but when one writer says that 57,000,000 went to movie theaters in 1927 and 110,000,000 in 1930, the proportion of increase is probably correct. The fact that the depression didn't hit the film business until about 1932 is proved by the increase of sound-equipped theaters from under 9,000 at the end of 1929 to 13,000 two years later. When Warner Brothers gave up the use of discs in 1930, exhibitors were able to meet the expense of scrapping Vitaphone equipment and putting in sound-on-film projectors.

New Players for Old

Sound—that reluctant revolution—upset the personnel as well as the techniques of Hollywood. Almost anyone could be made reasonably effective as an actor in silent pantomime. Acting with the voice was another matter. Then, too, the recording mechanism was crude to start with. It couldn't handle the screaming voice of Andy Devine. Sibilants were so exaggerated and distorted that I remember how in *The Lights of New York* "success" sounded something like "shuckshesh." Sound cut off the careers of some good actors as well as many incompetents. The imperfect vocal cords of that excellent silent comedian Ray Griffith produced something like a husky whisper. John Gilbert's voice was too high.

Silent actors with stage experience had nothing to fear—men and women like Ronald Colman, Claudette Colbert, William Powell, Marlene Dietrich, John and Lionel Barrymore, George Bancroft, Marie Dressler, Clive Brook, and Joan Crawford. Millions of playgoers, however, held their breaths when they read in the advertisements of *Anna Christie* (1930) “Garbo talks.” The studios hired, with varying success, Broadway stars such as George Arliss, Helen Hayes, Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Fredric March, Leslie Howard, Clark Gable, Frank Morgan, Sylvia Sidney, Fred Astaire, Paul Muni, Spencer Tracy, and Katharine Hepburn. The screen came to depend on character actors who had learned to speak in the theater—Boris Karloff, Jean Hersholt, May Robson, Nigel Bruce, James Gleason, Charles Laughton, and others. Voice specialists and teachers of acting flocked to Hollywood. With or without the aid of coaches, a number of silent stars who had had little or no experience behind the footlights kept their hold on the public—Janet Gaynor, for instance, and Warner Baxter, Norma Shearer, Charles Farrell, Gary Cooper.

Playwrights and Directors from Broadway

The greatest sufferers when sound came in were the screen writers. A very few, like John Emerson, had had practice in the theater, and they could handle dialogue. Some makers of silent plots learned to do so. But, for a few years after 1929, Hollywood hired playwright after playwright from Broadway. It didn't much matter whether their plays had been successes or flops. They knew how to write lines.

There was some turnover among the directors, though not so much. Most of them had to have what were called “dialogue directors” in Hollywood and “directors of elocution” in London. Some of these dialogue directors—George Cukor, for instance—were soon placed in complete charge of a shooting company. Hollywood hired experienced stage directors like Richard Boleslavsky and Rouben Mamoulian, and started them at the top. Many of

the silent directors adapted themselves quickly and effectively to sound. I will name a few of those who made contributions to the talkie: King Vidor, John Ford, Frank Lloyd, Lewis Milestone, Joseph von Sternberg, Henry King, Clarence Brown, William Van Dyke, Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock.

The Frozen Camera

During the first three years of the talkies—from 1928 through 1930—Hollywood all but took the motion out of motion pictures. This was partly due to the studios' turning to plays because they had ready-made dialogue but mostly because of a problem in recording sound. The camera made a noise. To keep this noise off the sound track or the disc, the technicians put the camera in a soundproof room with glass walls. This "icebox," as it was soon called, might be a cube as much as eight feet wide; and, loaded with cameras and cameramen, it weighed thousands of pounds. The icebox froze the camera since much time and effort were involved in moving it about. By putting two cameras, with different lenses, in one box, and a third camera in another, a director could shoot three angles at the same time; but the lighting was often unsatisfactory in one shot, and the cameras couldn't pan or follow the actors far. In general, the first talkies weren't so very different from the static films of the Film d'Art in Paris.

Problems of Sound Recording

Also, there was trouble with the microphones. As yet, Hollywood had no "boom," or pole, to hold the mike over the heads of the players. Sound receivers had to be hidden in different parts of the set where an actor might stand. Andy Devine was wide enough to hide a mike strapped to his chest or back, and thus he began to work once more, though in silent bits. The editing of sound developed very slowly. So did the mixing of speech and natural sounds or music—technically called rerecording and dubbing. Songs were recorded directly on the set through their whole length; after a time, they were recorded without a camera

and played back to the singer, altogether or bit by bit, while he mouthed the words.

The films slowly escaped from the strait jacket of the immovable camera and mike. Somebody put the camera into a padded cloth "blimp," and it could ride on the wheels of a "dolly." It was still awkward to handle; but soon, smaller, box-like blimps came in; and some years later, these gave way to cameras with noiseless gears. While the mike acquired a "boom" that could be lengthened or shortened and moved about just out of the picture, the camera got another type of boom, or crane—a wheeled vehicle with the camera set on a long, counterbalanced arm that could carry the machine and its operators up and down and around at pleasure.

Disc recording of dialogue made it difficult to shoot exterior scenes. With sound-on-film it was much easier. Fox's production of *In Old Arizona* during 1928 and its release early in 1929 brought the Western back to the screen—a kind of film that had been peculiarly fitted to the swift and wide-ranging mobility of the silent camera.

Another development is worth mentioning. Silent film had run through camera and projector at sixteen frames, or one foot, a second, which meant 60 feet a minute. A reel of 1,000 feet lasted for about sixteen minutes on the screen. To improve the quality of sound recording and projection, the film was speeded up to twenty-four frames a second, or 90 feet a minute; thus, a reel ran for only about eleven minutes. A five-reel feature of the 1920's occupied an hour and twenty minutes of playing time, whereas a five-reel sound film finished in only fifty-five minutes. Take this into consideration in judging the length of modern pictures in reels as against the silent features.

Putting Movement Back on the Screen

In 1929, two directors began to show their fellow workers and the public that the talkie could have much of the freedom of movement of the silent film and that sound could add greatly to

the effectiveness of a story. One of the directors had worked some time in Hollywood; the other came from opera and the stage.

In the silent days, King Vidor had created the exciting superficialities of *The Big Parade* (1925). He had shown fine skill with camera and editing in his middle-class tragedy *The Crown* (1928), his last silent film. The next year, when he turned to sound in *Hallelujah* with an all-Negro cast, he used dialogue as little as possible and introduced imaginatively the sounds of the wind and water, birds and insects, and the off-screen sound of running feet as well as Negro spirituals.

Rouben Mamoulian had directed productions of the American Opera Company and brilliantly staged a number of Broadway productions, including the all-Negro play *Porgy*. In his first Hollywood film, *Applause*—in which the singer Helen Morgan played an aging queen of burlesque—he blended music and camera movement deftly, developed lyrical love scenes in contrast to the tragedy of the woman played by Miss Morgan, and came close to the skills of the present-day talkie.

In 1930, the silent directors Lewis Milestone and Joseph von Sternberg used both camera and sound freely and imaginatively. From Milestone's silent and swiftly moving gangster film *The Racket* (1928), he turned to *All Quiet on the Western Front*—Eric Remarque's tragic and mordant story of World War I, told from the point of view of young German soldiers—and he gave it great pictorial power. He intercut most skillfully the sweep and din of battle with intimate scenes of dialogue. Audiences long remembered the scene in the shell hole between the dying French soldier—played beautifully in silence by Raymond Griffith—and Lew Ayres's young German who was soon to die. Von Sternberg—brought to Berlin by Eric Pommer to direct Emil Jannings and Marlene Dietrich in English and German versions of *The Blue Angel*—used all his skill with camera and background action, as well as a new sense of the possibilities of dialogue and music, to make a highly effective film. In the newcomer Marlene Dietrich he found a *femme fatale*. Back in Hollywood, he ex-

ploited her rare personality in *Morocco* (1930) along with Gary Cooper and Adolph Menjou, and then led Miss Dietrich through a descending scale of pictorially glamorous films that had only one high spot, the melodrama *Shanghai Express* (1932).

These directors brought back camera movement and blended it skillfully with varying amounts of dialogue. In *The Front Page* (1931), Milestone showed how a play that depended very greatly on speech could be filmed with swift effectiveness. By the next year, the skills of sound editing had reached the point where the thoughts of the characters in Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*—which had been spoken soliloquies on the stage—could be heard from the screen while the lips of the actors were still.

The Opponents of Sound

On the whole, motion picture directors readily accepted sound. So did the big public. Only the intelligentsia, including many film critics and a few actors, resisted. It was natural that men and women who saw the silent screen reaching a new perfection with the Russians, the Germans, and their American imitators should sorrow over its untimely extinction. (They now look aghast at most of the silent movies that they had so admired.) In 1929, Gilbert Seldes wrote in his book *An Hour with the Movies and the Talkies*, "it is the great popular art and the aesthetes are weeping over its demise." More than one writer recalled that "silence is golden." A playwright said that the talkies would end in the "smellies." Sure enough the producers of a short called *California, Here I Come* required the exhibitor to fill his theater with the scent of orange blossoms, while Italians patented an odoriferous way of presenting a film of theirs called *This Is My Dream*. And Aldous Huxley in his utopia of *Brave New World* envisioned the perfection of screen art in the "feelies"—stereoscopic, of course.

One film critic spoke contemptuously of "Mr. de Forest and his deadly little audion." Mary Pickford said of sound: "It's like lip rouge on the Venus de Milo," completely forgetting, by the way,

that the Greeks painted the bodies as well as the lips of their statues.

Some of the opponents of the talkies went in for arguments of a fuzzily scientific nature. The eye was quicker than the ear. Man could understand pictures better than sounds. And hearing interfered with visual comprehension. The two faculties were at war with one another.

The German Rudolph Arnheim in *Film*—written as the talkies were just taking shape—said that “light gives a more complete and therefore more accurate picture of the universe than sound. Light gives us the ‘being’ of things, while sound generally gives us incidental ‘doing.’” Writing in 1929, the English film maker and critic Paul Rotha said in the first edition of his book *The Film Till Now*:

No power of speech is comparable with the descriptive value of photographs. The attempted combination of speech and pictures is the direct opposition of two separate mediums, which appeal in two utterly different ways . . . a silent visual film is capable of achieving a more dramatic, lasting, and powerful effect on an audience by its singleness of appeal than a dialogue film . . . Immediately a voice begins to speak in a cinema, the sound apparatus takes precedence over the camera, thereby doing violence to natural instincts.

When Rotha revised *The Film Till Now* for re-publication in 1949, he gracefully admitted that “prophecies about the dialogue film” had been “largely disproved.”

Belief in the silent film died hard. In 1928, Jesse Lasky saw that the talkie had “its definite place in the film scheme.” “But,” he continued, “this does not mean that the silent picture is doomed. On the contrary, it will remain the backbone of the industry’s commercial security.” The next year, Seldes, too, asserted that silent films would continue to be made; but he recognized that picture and sound might be merged in “an entirely new form—cinephonics, perhaps,—in which the principle of the movie will not be abandoned.” Seldes was wrong about the future of the silent film. He was right, in all but name, about

“cinephonics.” Within a very few years, directors and writers had learned how to tell stories in filmic terms while taking advantage of the special contributions of sound. These included greater realism and a marked deepening of characterization and content.

Sound Eliminates Subtitles

Few defenders of the silent film recognized the very obvious fact that sound eliminated a major blemish on all but a few of the films made before 1930. This was the use of subtitles to convey information. Obviously they were at odds with the flowing nature of the silent film, and yet it was extremely difficult to do without them. Arnheim saw that “a simple phrase like ‘She lived absolutely alone in her cottage’ is extraordinarily hard to express on the [silent] screen.” Directors tried to reduce these “literary” interruptions to a minimum, and some got as low as a dozen an hour.

One way of escape from the lettered subtitle was the insert. Inserts—letters, clocks, or newspaper items—were, after all, visual objects. They were less offensive than “Came the dawn” or “All the tears of the ages gushed over his heart” or “I’m going back to the country I like and where I belong. Will you come with me?” Yet present-day directors and screen writers strive to eliminate inserts. They try to supply information through dialogue or in other ways; for example, if it has to be conveyed in a letter, they may have the over-screen “thought voice” of the one who wrote the note repeat the words as the recipient reads it.

Spoken dialogue speeded up action. If you study almost any silent film that is not overloaded with subtitles, you will note how long it took characters to convey by action and pantomime what could be told through dialogue in a much shorter time.

Dialogue Makes the Film More Significant

Much more important, of course, was the power of dialogue to characterize people. For centuries, good plays had demonstrated this. In silent films, a man or a woman tended to be a stereotype—

unless a subtitle provided an essay on his character. Working only with the camera, a director had to fall back on visual clichés. A man who stroked a cat was a good man; a man who kicked a dog was a bad man. Through spoken dialogue, on the other hand, a film could present well-rounded characters. Its men and women could have the breadth and depth of true humanity.

Out of this and out of much of the talk in a film, the screen at its best could give us content ranging from emotion to ideas. The moving picture was able at last to take on the high values that lie in the dialogue of a good play.

At first, the problem of the talkie was to retain as much as possible of the unique pictorial meaning of moving pictures while adding the values of the spoken word. This was a most difficult problem and, even today, only the exceptional director succeeds in solving it. But when he does succeed, he demonstrates the vital superiority of the talking picture to the silent movie. As Roger Manvell has put it:

The most delicate of all instruments, the human voice, and the most highly patterned and artificial of all sounds, musical composition, add their powers to the flow of mobile pictures. The beauties of the silent film seem elementary and over-simplified in comparison with the multi-dimensional experience the interplay of sound and pictures is able to create.

Sounds That Silent Films Needed

Of course, there are other uses of sounds besides dialogue. These are not so important in terms of character and story content, but they may add greatly to the excitement of a scene, and they may help to make the emotions of a character clearer and more compelling. These sounds include the noise of machines, animals, and nature, and off-screen speech.

The early writers on the talkies were bothered a good deal over sound that was not dialogue. They pointed out some of the methods that silent producers had used to visualize sounds, and they debated whether such sounds should now be heard while we

looked at their source. There were deep doubts that an audience should see and hear a clock at the same time; this would mean a double and wasteful emphasis. It was obvious that a clock couldn't go on ticking all through a scene, and it couldn't start ticking at a particular moment unless the camera brought us so close to it that we had to hear it. One writer said that *seeing* a dog bark was sufficient; to *hear* him, too, "adds nothing to the expressive qualities of the image," except "a gain in realism." (I don't think anyone explained that, if we saw a watchdog asleep and then a man nervously attempting to enter a house, it would be much more effective to hear an off-screen bark than to cut to a silent shot of a dog barking.) In von Sternberg's silent film *The Docks of New York*, a man fired a gun, and the director cut to a rising flock of startled birds. Arnheim claimed that this was not merely "a contrivance on the part of a director to deal with the veil of silence"; it was, "on the contrary, a positive artistic effect."

In silent comedies like Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* (1925), a sound would often have been far more effective than a visualization of its source. For instance, during football practice, Lloyd looked distressed over something, and his legs seemed to be giving him trouble. A cut to a man splitting wood told us that the comedian thought he heard his bones cracking. If we had seen Lloyd's anguish and heard the noise, we would have thought, as he did, that it came from his bones; then, a cut to the real source of the noise would have made the gag more amusing than it was on the silent screen.

Obviously, off-screen sound could do many things more effectively than visual images. Take the subjective reactions of characters under some tension like fear. Griffith used the material of Poe's *The Telltale Heart* in the best of his early films, *The Avenging Conscience*. In the short story, the mind of the terror-stricken murderer, who had buried his victim beneath the floor, magnifies the imagined ticking of the murdered man's watch into the fearsome beating of a human heart. If Griffith had been able to use sound, he could have swelled the ticking of the watch into

throbbing and reverberant heartbeats. Instead, he introduced a subtitle approximating “Like the beating of a dead man’s heart,” and cut to the pendulum of a clock.

Alfred Hitchcock’s first talkie, *Blackmail* (1929), showed us the power of off-screen speech to dramatize subjective fear. In a silent film, if a woman committed murder and the director wanted to emphasize her fear of discovery without resorting to a subtitle, he would double-print over her close-up some newspaper headlines, accusing faces, great lips that seemed to shout her guilt. Through sound, Hitchcock got a more exciting effect. His heroine had stabbed a man who attempted to seduce her. At breakfast, her father asked for the bread knife, and the words “knife, knife, knife” echoed on the sound track over her tortured face.

Contrapuntal Sound That Is Realistic

Some early theorists on sound *vs.* silence often thought the off-screen speeches were “contrapuntal” when they were largely realistic. In Fritz Lang’s first talkie, *M* (1931), the unseen mother of a missing child—whom the audience knew had been murdered—called the child’s name again and again over the empty stairs, her empty attic room, her uneaten food on the table, her ball in the grass, and the balloon that the murderer had given her, now entangled in some telephone wires. Then, there was the menace of the tune from Grieg that the killer whistled off-screen; heard by a blind beggar, it led at last to the murderer’s doom. Lang used with equal skill and enormous effectiveness other off-screen but natural sounds.

Pudovkin thought he was using contrapuntal sound in *Deserter* (1933) during a scene in the fog:

For the symphony of siren calls with which *Deserter* opens I had six steamers playing in a space of a mile and a half in the Port of Leningrad. They sounded their calls to a prescribed plan and we worked at night in order that we should have quiet.

In 1954, without such a complicated operation, Elia Kazan mixed sound tracks of harbor noises in *On the Waterfront* and

used them with far greater imagination. They drowned out the attempt of a young tough, played by Marlon Brando, to justify himself to the heroine. (Incidentally, Kazan used something like the subjective and drunken camera of *The Last Laugh* as Brando, badly beaten up, staggered towards the entrance to a dock.)

Eisenstein's "Monolog" Becomes Narration

Another use of the sound track was foreshadowed—and with rather absurd emphasis—by Eisenstein when he stated in 1933: “the true material for the sound film is, of course, the monolog.” Now, there are monologues and monologues. When the chief of police in *M* told a higher official what his detectives were doing, Lang cut to their activities while the chief went on talking. Film makers began to find in the off-screen voice of a character a useful way of conveying information and saving production costs. Thus, in *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939), Stanley’s voice told the story of his search for Livingstone, while we watched silent shots made in Africa with “doubles.” Next, the monologue became an envelope for the story and a subjective guide through its action; it has been used effectively in *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Brief Encounter* (1945), and on through many more pictures. What Eisenstein called a “monolog,” we now find in the narration of all but a very few of the nonfiction films that we call documentaries. *Night Mail* (1936) from John Grierson and Basil Wright and Pare Lorentz’ *The River* (1937) were early and notable examples.

Making the Talkies Filmic

While critics worried over the problems that sound created, workaday directors went on experimenting in its use. They recognized that the public wanted this novelty and wanted it badly. Arnheim had said that, in a silent film, “if people were walking across the screen no one missed the sound of their feet”; but I remember with what excitement an audience recognized the

crunch of the gravel as George Bernard Shaw strode down the garden path to make his first speech on film. Arnheim said that "one of the chief tasks of sound film is to avoid sound." There was something in that. Talkies should not be merely stage plays photographed and recorded. But, on the other hand, it was foolish to avoid the use of dialogue to draw out character and increase excitement and pleasure. Directors like Lang and Pabst in Germany; René Clair, Feyder, Renoir, and Duvivier in France; Hitchcock, Alexander Korda, and Carol Reed in England; Vidor, Milestone, Lubitsch, Ford, Mamoulian, Frank Lloyd, Frank Capra, and many others sought more and more successfully to make a motion picture that would be filmic as well as audible. The Americans found an easy and an old form in the Western and a new and lively one in the gangster film. And directors of many nations learned how to make both drama and comedy rich in content as well as kinetic in movement. The talkie became the movie at its best, and went beyond it.