

The Art of Sound

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London, May 1929. Today there is no individual, no company, no financial coalition capable of stopping the triumphant march of the talking film. The industrialists of the American cinema maintain that the public has clearly manifested its liking for talkies, and that they have done no more than meet the public's wishes.

But if the public suddenly got tired of its new toy, the same docile industrialists would certainly refuse to pander further to its whims. For meanwhile the talkies have become one of the biggest business undertakings of our age, to which, banks and public utility companies with interests on an imperial scale have linked their fate. So many thousand million dollars have been invested in this enterprise that from now on any and every means will be used to ensure its success. The talking film exists, and those skeptics who prophesy a short reign for it will die themselves long before it's over. It is too late for those who love the art of moving pictures to deplore the effects of this barbaric invasion. All they can do is try to cut their losses.

The talking film is not everything. There is also the sound film-on which the last hopes of the advocates of the silent film are pinned. They count on the sound film to ward off the danger represented by the advent of talkies, in an effort to convince themselves that the sounds and noises accompanying the moving picture may prove sufficiently entertaining for the audience to prevent it from demanding dialogue, and may create an illusion of "reality" less harmful for the art than the talking film.

However, we have grounds to fear that this solution will only half-satisfy the public. If there is almost universal agreement about the advantages of a mechanical musical accompaniment over the improvisations of a cinema orchestra, opinions vary as far as noises accompanying the action are concerned. The usefulness of such noises is often questionable. If at first hearing they are surprising and amusing, very soon they become tiresome. After we have heard a certain number of sound films, and the first element of surprise has worn off, we are led to the unexpected discovery that the world of noises seems far more limited than we had thought.

Although the talkies are still in their first, experimental stage, they have already, surprisingly enough, produced stereotyped patterns. We have barely "heard" about two dozen of these films, and yet we already feel that the sound effects are hackneyed and that it is high time to find new ones. Jazz, stirring songs, the ticking of a clock, a cuckoo singing the hours, dance-hall applause, a motorcar engine, or breaking crockery-all these are no doubt very nice, but become somewhat tiresome after we have heard them a dozen times in a dozen different films.

We must draw a distinction here between those sound effects which are amusing only by virtue of their novelty (which soon wears off), and those that help one to understand the action, and which excite emotions which could not have been roused by the sight of the pictures alone. The visual world at the birth of the cinema seemed to hold immeasurably richer promise. . . . However, if imitation of real noises seems limited and disappointing, it is possible that an interpretation of noises may have more of a future in it. Sound cartoons, using "real" noises, seem to point to interesting possibilities. Unless new sound effects are soon discovered and judiciously employed, it is to be feared that the champions of the sound film may be heading for a disappointment. We shall find ourselves left with the "hundred per cent talkie," as they say here, and that is not a very exhilarating prospect.

Of all the films now showing in London, *Broadway Melody* is having the greatest success. This new American film represents the sum total of all the progress achieved in sound films since the appearance of *The Jazz Singer* two years ago. For anyone who has some knowledge of the complicated technique of sound recording, this film is a marvel. Harry Beaumont, the director, and his collaborators (of whom there are about fifteen, mentioned by name in the credit titles, quite apart from the actors) seem to delight in playing with all the difficulties of visual and sound recording. The actors move, walk, run, talk, shout, and whisper, and their movements and voices are reproduced with a flexibility which would seem miraculous if we did not know that science and meticulous organization have many other miracles in store for us. In this film, nothing is left to chance. Its makers have worked with the precision of engineers, and their achievement is a lesson to those who still imagine that the creation of a film can take place under conditions of chaos known as inspiration.

In *Broadway Melody*, the talking film has for the first time found, an appropriate form: it is neither theater nor cinema, but something altogether new. The immobility of planes, that curse of talking films, has gone.

The camera is as mobile, the angles are as varied as in a good silent film. The acting is first-rate, and Bessie Love talking manages to surpass the silent Bessie Love whom we so loved in the past. The sound effects are used with great intelligence, and if some of them still seem superfluous, others deserve to be cited as examples.

For instance, we hear the noise of a door being slammed and a car driving off while we are shown Bessie Love's anguished face watching from a window the departure which we do not see. This short scene in which the whole effect is concentrated on the actress's face, and which the silent cinema would have had to break up in several visual fragments, owes its excellence to the "unity of place" achieved through sound. In another scene we see Bessie Love long thoughtful and sad; we feel that she is on the verge of tears; but her face disappears in the shadow of a fade-out, and from the screen, now black, emerges a single sob.

In these two instances the sound, at an opportune moment, has replaced the shot. It is by this economy of means that the sound film will most probably secure original effects.

We do not need to hear the sound of clapping if we can see the clapping hands. When the time of these obvious and unnecessary effects will have passed, the more gifted filmmakers will probably apply to sound films the lesson Chaplin taught in the silent films, when, for example, he suggested the arrival of a train by the shadows of carriages passing across a face. (But will the public, and, above all, the filmmakers, be satisfied with such a discreet use of sound? Will they not prefer an imitation of all the noises to an intelligent selection of a few useful ones?)

Already in the films we are shown at present, we often feel that in a conversation it is more interesting to watch the listener's rather than the speaker's face. In all likelihood American directors are aware of this, for many of them have used the device quite often and not unskillfully. This is important, for it shows that the sound film has outgrown its first stage, during which directors were intent on demonstrating, with childish persistence, that the actor's lips opened at exactly the same moment as the sound was heard—in short, that their mechanical toy worked beautifully.

It is the alternate, not the simultaneous, use of the visual subject and of the sound produced by it that creates the best effects. It may well be that this first lesson taught us by the birth pangs of a new technique will tomorrow become this same technique's law.

Whenever the most faithful devotees of the silent cinema undertake an impartial study of talking films, they inevitably lose some of their assurance right at the start, for, at its best, the talkie is no longer photographed theater. It is itself. Indeed, by its variety of sounds, its orchestra of human voices, it does give an impression of greater richness than the silent cinema. But are such riches not in fact quite ruinous to it? Through such "progressive" means the screen has lost more than it has gained. It has conquered the world of voices, but it has lost the world of dreams. I have observed people leaving the cinema after seeing a talking film. They might have been leaving a music hall, for they showed no sign of the delightful numbness which used to overcome us after a passage through the silent land of pure images. They talked and laughed, and hummed the tunes they had just heard. They had not lost their sense of reality.