The long-anticipated arrival of the "talking picture" in 1927 was greeted with wild enthusiasm . . . and tentative welcome . . . and outright dismissal. In this article, published soon after the premiere of the first "all-talking" picture, *Lights of New York*, Hollywood producer Monta Bell summarized the industry's response with insight and humor. "Everybody predicted something," he wrote, "and nearly everybody predicted something different. Never in the history of the industry was there, or is there, such divergence of opinion, or such feverish activity."

MOVIES AND TALKIES

__Monta Bell, *The North American Review*, October 1928__

Now that the screen has found its voice, what will it have to say? A noted director, pioneering for Paramount in the production of sound pictures, sifts out the common sense of the current film sensation.

COLONEL Charles Lindbergh's take-off for Paris was flashed on the screen of the Roxy Theater in New York on the night of June 25, 1927. From the showing of that newsreel there dates as astonishing an upheaval in the motion picture industry as was caused in American aviation by the event which it pictured.

A sudden whirring sound had swept through the Roxy auditorium that June evening, and then, to one of the most frenzied acclamations in theater history, the actual sounds of the flight's start were reproduced.[1]

The roaring of the airplane motor, the shouts of goodbye, and the gasping of the crowd when the plane seemed destined to crash before leaving the ground—the final cheer of relief when the young birdman began to rise—all were reproduced with startling reality.

The roar of Lindbergh's engine still echoes in Hollywood today—more loudly than ever. Millions are being spent for new equipment; producers, writers, actors, directors, are in a ferment of uncertainty; and from coast to coast the question is being debated whether a medium of entertainment that draws daily audiences of fourteen million persons is to be thrown into a veritable hurlyburly of inartistic experiment with noise and speech—at the very time when the silent cinema art is reaching notable heights of beauty and power as pantomime only.

All this because six thousand theatre patrons went wild when they heard the incidental clamor of Lindbergh's take-off!

[1] See silent footage at Critical Past (www.criticalpast.com/).

OF COURSE, subsequent events rapidly conspired to accelerate the current stampede to talking movies. Barely a year ago as this is published, Warner Brothers released for the first time a picture called *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson in the leading role. It was announced that Jolson would sing several of his best known numbers, and that his voice actually would be heard speaking lines from the screen. The picture was instantly a success. A "wow," they called it, rightly, for few pictures in the history of the industry have been the box office sensations that *The Jazz Singer* was, and still is.

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With a gasp, producers everywhere sat up and took notice. "What's going on here?" they asked themselves in alarm? Whatever it was, they decided, the time had come to get on board the bandwagon and to ride with the crowd. As one, they joined in the race for sound. Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*, and Colonel Lindbergh in the Movietone news reel, had done more for the popular development of talking pictures than had been accomplished in fifteen previous years of painstaking experiment.

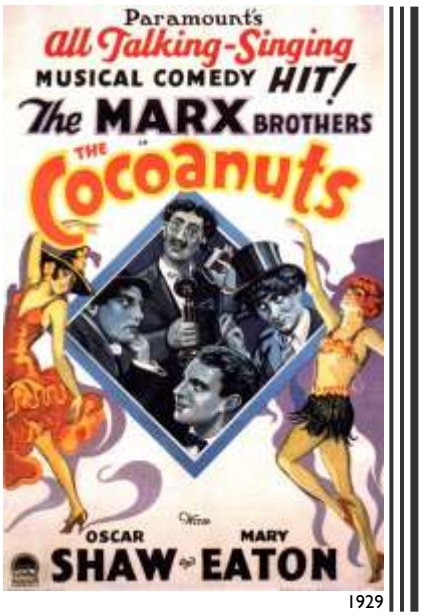
SINCE that time, the industry has rushed head over heels into the sound picture. New devices began almost instantly to appear on the market. Intensified selling campaigns were launched in the exhibitor fields in order that there might be a market for the synchronized product.[2] Studios equipped themselves with special stages for producing sound. Synchronizing companies worked day and night to meet the demand for sound effects. Legitimate stage began to think of the patronizing, and slightly caustic, remarks they would make to the youthful stars of Hollywood who, of course, would be needed no longer now that speech was required of them.[3] Dreams of new wealth drifted up before the disappointed old timers, who had looked enviously and with disapproval at the movie sheiks and queens with their Rolls Royces, and who now, for the first time, saw visions of themselves enjoying the same opulence.

Hollywood palpitated with excitement. Proud stars, it was said, who took orders from no one, were meekly submitting to voice tests. Eighteen thousand extras began filing information with the Central Casting Office as to their experience in speaking lines. And the first complete talking picture with dialogue came along amid press agent didoes [antics]. One company after another announced that it had acquired rights to sound devices. Even the comedies were to be produced with sound, that we might hear, as well as see, a pie spatter a comic's face. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences began an intensive study of the situation. Difficulties arose and cast weird shadows before the producers' eyes. Broadway heard that every legitimate actor was being flooded with contracts and that Hollywood was going to move to Manhattan. It was sound, sound, sound.

Differences of opinion arose at once as to the future of "talkies," as the dialogue films came instantly to be known in picture circles. One producer sailing for Europe on Monday would give out a statement that in five years there would be no more silent screen. The next day another producer, sailing for Europe, would warn the industry that the picture was still the important piece of entertainment and that sound would have to be subordinate. A third producer, sailing for Europe on Wednesday, would predict a complete new order in motion picture production—new scenario writing, new acting, new direction, new effects which would double the attendance. The results of thirty-two years' endeavor were to crash before this new startling device. Everybody predicted something, and nearly everybody predicted something different. Never in the history of the industry was there, or is there, such divergence of opinion, or such feverish activity.

[2] Synchronized sound and film, i.e., the "talkie."
[3] I.e., producers of live theater imagined sardonic comments to direct at silent film stars who, without an effective voice, would no longer be hired. (The terms "legitimate stage" and "legitimate actor" referring to non-film stage acting derive from eighteenth-century British law regulating theaters.)

Production costs would be lowered, one producer declared. Production costs would be doubled, said another. The foreign market would be killed off, a third predicted; the foreign market would not be affected, protested a fourth. We were told that talking pictures would soon deal a death blow to legitimate drama, which had long since suffered so disastrously simply from movie competition. We were told, on the other hand, that the speaking shadows of the screen would revive public interest and take people back to the flesh and blood drama of the stage. We were even told that Broadway productions would be photographed and synchronized and sent out to compete with the products of Hollywood—a fantastic scheme ignoring essential differences in technique between film entertainment and the speaking stage.



1929

INDEED, everybody began to think in diverse terms of talking pictures, and not only to think but to act. Every important producing company today is seriously engaged in making talking pictures. The latest survey shows that in the 1928-29 product there will be 225 feature pictures with synchronization, and 1,012 short subjects with sound. Seven hundred and ninety-nine theatres are already equipped for sound and the number is being added to daily—hourly. Undoubtedly, talking films will rejuvenate the public interest and add vitality to the industry. The furor over sound is, for the time being at least, certain to bring new patrons to the motion picture theatres. But what of the future? What place has sound in our scheme of silent things? What are the problems to be faced? Where are we going? How soon will sound find its true level?

AS I see it, the picture itself—silent action in a silent medium—is still the foundation of screen entertainment. Sound is simply an accessory. I do not look and hope for continuous dialogue in pictures, but simply for added dramatic effectiveness through sound effects. The soughing [rustling] of the winds, the ceaseless murmur of waves, the barking of dogs, the crashing of thunder, the roaring of cannons, the sound of an elevated railway outside a window, are important and highly desirable. Add to these, effective dialogue in dramatic moments, and the usefulness of sound reaches its peak. The picture remains. Action continues to be paramount in importance. Quality in the picture itself continues to be the dominant object of the producer. Sound becomes important but remains subordinate.

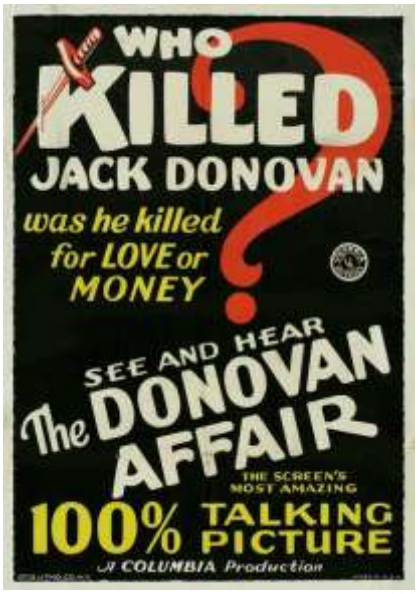
There is no getting away from the fact that that which the eye sees is the chief attraction of the screen. After about fifty feet of a "picturized" overture I begin to get restless. My eyes get tired of the same figures scraping the same violin bows. No matter how good the music is, the pictures of an orchestral work become monotonous.

Good directors will avoid this monotony by making the screen continuously interesting. If Beethoven Symphony is being played, the picture may be telling Beethoven's story or revealing what he had in mind when he composed the music. Then the eye is entertained while the ear is being satisfied, and the combination highly pleasing.

Realization of this fact will lead to the use of many new and interesting camera angles. While a ballet is being played, for instance, the camera can be dodging about, catching a glimpse of dancers, of bounding legs, of billowing skirts. There will be scenes from behind, from above, from various angles—the idea being always to keep the eye pleased while the ear is being delighted.

To be specific, let us suppose that Miss Gertrude Lawrence is singing a song. Just to see Miss Lawrence singing becomes, after a while, wearisome to the eye if not to the ear. Not that Miss Lawrence is not attractive or that her singing is wearisome. But we have been so trained for action that involuntarily we weary of one set figure. If, instead of showing her standing in front of a camera singing for ten minutes, the camera should steal away, give us a glimpse of the chorus behind her, flit here and there,

while her voice is coming from the screen, only to conclude with Miss Lawrence in some of her captivating expressions, then you would have something to hold the attention.



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JUST now we hear loud percussions on Broadway to the effect that the legitimate actor is going to overthrow the movie stars of today. Frank Gillmore, secretary and treasurer of the Actors' Equity,[4] who does not question the success of talking films, and who thinks audiences will never again be satisfied with silent drama, argues that the industry must turn to the stage for material. "Since dialogue means acting, not the mere memorizing of words," he says, "the best actors will be sought after. Actors whose training and natural aptitude make it possible for them to step into parts and act them without being given detailed description."

WHILE unquestionably there will be, for a time, a certain stimulated demand for actors with ability to speak dramatic lines, I do not believe that the public is going to throw over Clara Bow, Mary Pickford, Buddy Rodgers, Jack Gilbert, and Charlie Farrell, nor any other of the motion picture stars who have arresting personalities. Nor do I think that the public is going to throw over Emil Jannings, and Pola Negri, and Greta Garbo, and Ramon Novarro, because they have accents. These people have something the public demands; and whether they can speak or not, makes very little difference after all. The thought that all the stars who have not had stage experience are going to be discarded and forgotten is in my opinion ridiculous.

The public has always been drawn to motion pictures by the personalities of the stars, and there is no reason, I believe, to think that this will ever cease to be the case. The first and greatest test of motion picture work is personality, and that is going to remain the first and greatest test. Besides, in making talking pictures we are not simply going to put stage plays on the screen. If we do that, we are committing folly, for stage plays do not lend themselves directly to screening.

Nor is our scenario writer to be discarded. He will still write scenarios, and where there is a need of titles, the titles can be spoken.[5] Just as the best pictures are those which have the fewest titles, the best talking pictures will be those with the least talk. It is always preferable to advance an idea by what we call "a piece of business"[6] than by words whether spoken or written.

AS A MATTER of fact, how many players on the stage today are known for their voices? Do we demand perfect diction of our actors? Even in England there is no such high regard for diction as ordinarily we suppose. Rather, is it not true that we care more for types? In motion pictures especially, types are utilized and desirable for the very reason that the screen is now, and always has been, more realistic than the stage and is more concerned with natural human relations. The stage does not even approach the screen in reality. And besides, why should anyone think that the motion picture actors and actresses, simply because they got started in a different dramatic medium, cannot speak for the screen? They have average voices. And that is what we need. There is no necessity for shouting in front of a sound recording device. The slightest whisper can be recorded and amplified to reach every corner of a theatre.

Many stage voices, it seems to me, are undesirable for the screen. Put an actor on a stage and he at once begins declaiming. Tradition has it that this line should be spoken thus and so. Hamlet's musings on suicide must be read this way because someone else once declaimed them this way. Any other

[4] American labor union representing live theatrical performers (not film or television performers); formed in 1913.
[5] Titles: dialogue or explanatory text appearing on back-panels in silent films.
[6] "A piece of business": a scene device, character action or gesture, brief episode, etc., for quickly conveying a point or moving along the plot.

interpretation is shocking, almost blasphemous. Because the screen has tried to be natural, it has escaped much of the artificiality of the stage, and it is hoped it will continue to do so.

What is more, a substantial majority of the best known motion picture actors today have had some stage experience. One of the biggest studios in Hollywood, with probably the largest stock company, reports that at least sixty-five percent of its actors had legitimate dramatic experience previous to entering the motion picture. A recent survey revealed that of 143 featured players in six studios in Hollywood, eighty-five—or sixty percent—have had stage experience.

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I think it is a slight exaggeration, therefore, to say that every legitimate actor on Broadway is being importuned [encouraged] to appear in pictures and that the favorites of the screen are doomed. Many of the legitimate actors will tell you of the number of offers they have had, but many of the offers are imaginary. The industry is not going to engage a great number of persons without having definite need of them. When we have a picture which requires certain types and certain actors, we will go out and get those actors just as the stage producer does when he has a play calling for a definite number of performers. Most of the actors and actresses who would succeed in pictures are already in pictures. The others have been tried and discarded.

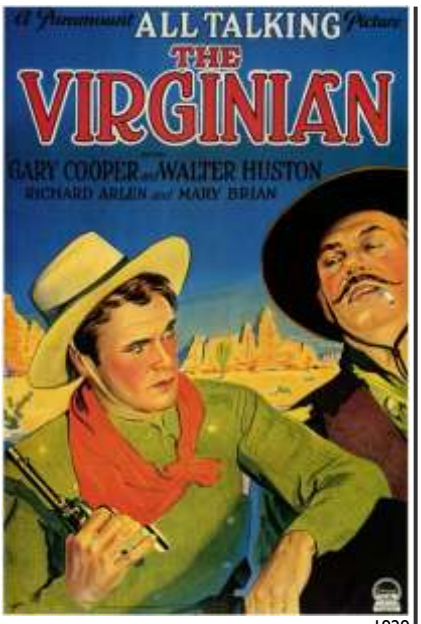
ONE of the drawbacks to the continuous dialogue film is that, to be successful, the dialogue must be spoken in a "close-up." If two figures on opposite sides of a room are talking, the voice of each comes apparently from the center of the screen. This may have an advantage in foreign prints, for it might be possible to have lines spoken in a foreign language where the movement of lips is not closely shown; but for home consumption the effect is not so reassuring. Otherwise the talking film will have no demand abroad.

Sound effects, on the other hand, can be understood anywhere, just as music can be understood anywhere. The future, therefore, of sound effects and of synchronized music is assured.

To the director, the most interesting possibility of the talking, or synchronized, picture is that of presenting a complex situation, such as that of hearing the voice of one actor and of seeing the face of another. The reaction of the person addressed is frequently of more importance than the person speaking.

Take this one very simple illustration. A man goes to the telephone and picks up the receiver. A voice on the other end says, "I'm sorry, but your wife and child have just been killed." We hear the voice without seeing the speaker. What we do see is the husband to whom this tragic news has been brought. That, to the director, would be something worthwhile. It has real dramatic interest. You can feel the grip of it, and out of this simple little illustration may come a thousand variations.

ONE thing that the industry will find out for itself is that talking pictures will raise the cost of production. Some of the best informed technicians estimate that introduction of sound will raise the production costs of feature pictures by as much as half a million dollars. On the face of it, this statement would appear misleading. Certainly many scenes now taken by the director in an effort at the "right one" will be eliminated, true enough, but where we gain in footage of film, we lose in rehearsals. In the past we have engaged stars, paid them well, and used them for a few days, after which we were through with them. Now we shall have to spend days and weeks rehearsing, just as the Broadway legitimate producer rehearses his cast, and we shall have to pay for those rehearsals. With dialogue and sound made to fit, there will be no such thing as cutting a picture after a film is completed.



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THERE are now in operation two totally different methods of reproducing sound — the disc method, and the sound-on-the-film method. The Vitaphone, simpler and first of the methods, is based on synchronized recording of film and sound. For this purpose a single motor is used for the camera and the turntable on which is the phonograph disc. The speed of both instruments is synchronized, the sound being relayed through a microphone as the film is taken. In showing the picture, the process is simply reversed, the projection machine and the turntable being synchronized so that, as the film unreels, the phonograph disc keeps time on the revolving turntable. An amplifier measures the volume of sound.

The Movietone process is more complicated. Sound vibrations, synchronized with the camera's photography, are transformed through a microphone into electric vibrations. The electric vibrations agitate a light contained in a tube and directed at the edge of the raw, or unexposed, film. These subtle flickers produced in the tube light imprint themselves down the edge of the film in the "sound track." By reversing the process, and making use of an amplifier instead of a microphone, and a projection machine instead of a camera, the electrical vibrations are turned back into sound.

IT IS too early to say which is the better method. Both will have a trial, and performance will raise the hand of the victor. Improvements, of course, will be made, for technical experts are at work on every mechanical problem connected with the instruments.

In directing pictures, I have never leaned toward rehearsals. I always take the actors into my confidence, discuss with them the action which we are to "shoot," give them my interpretation of its meaning, and try to explain what I think is the spirit of the story. If there are any suggestions, I am glad to have them. I have always felt that actors, whom I choose for roles in my pictures, are sufficiently equipped to play their parts without too much direction. In other words, if there are seven actors on a set, I want them to be seven individuals and not seven Monta Bells.

I am not yet sure what effect directing "sound" pictures will have on this theory. The studio for the talking picture is totally unlike the motion picture studio. There can be no sunshine, no open air. The studio, rather, is like a padded cell on a large scale, enclosed and sealed to keep out all other sound. Even the electric lights are especially built to do away with reflections of sound. There must be no noise, no sound other than that of the human voice speaking the lines accorded to the scene.

Before calling for the camera and sound, the director may rehearse the scene as often as he wishes, but when all is arranged, he may only wave his hand and the action begins. A wave of the hand stops the scene. There have been no hurried calls, no spoken directions.

TALKING and synchronized pictures are where motion pictures were fifteen years ago. So far they have had a tendency to drag the motion picture backward. The inevitable result of the present excitement in motion picture circles will be that producers will, in all probability, rush out and make a number of bad sound pictures during the next two years. There will be too many titles, and the result will be discordant entertainment. Then the reaction will come. Sound will find its level. Good taste and economy will again triumph. The talking picture will take its normal place and serve its useful purpose.

That purpose will be a mighty one and will include gorgeous climax effects, lifting the pictures out of the ordinary and giving them new life, new meaning. Inevitably out of the present friction in the industry there will spring a rejuvenated art of the screen.