

## CLOSE UP

and condemned the purposeful gentleness of the interrogator, the ghoulishness of producer and audience exploiting the poor frightened man, the "science" of criminology enjoying its new toy, the circumstances that made a harmless individual a murderer, the tabloid scandal tone of the theatre's announcement of the film—and created a pity, where pity could be created, for the man who said "youse" and could not remember what led to the firing. It was an exposé of humanity that was more concerned with the capture of the "criminal" who did not want to escape save by suicide, than with saving the wounded girl. A very dramatic film that should free the actor, but a film which should not be repeated or broadcast.

HARRY A. POTAMKIN.

## TWENTY-THREE TALKIES

From Al Jolson to *Atlantic*. And even beginning before, with the De Forrest shorts at the Capitol, and the first Movietones at the New Gallery. I went to *The Singing Fool* twice . . . . because I wanted to see the end of it; but I never did. Otherwise I saw every talkie that came over, up to *The Canary Murder Case*. Then I got ill for a few months, but that didn't hurt any. Talkies and I just went

on in our own way. I lay in bed, thinking, and talkies, as for as I could see, went on, not thinking, but being made. I saw *Broadway Melody*, which was a great shock, and I went away for a month. *Blackmail*, when I came back was a surprise. Now I have seen most of them again, and want to explain why.

Sure . . . . you get out of here before I cop you on the jaw . . . Oh, yeah? . . . . You've said it . . . . you're yellow . . . sure . . . come on out of this, sweetie . . . . you leave this to me . . . sure : . . . and if that pink-eyed bum comes near me again . . . Oh, yeah? Mr. Callaghan, you wouldn't do that to a porr goil . . . what wants her name in lights . . . bo, you're a pal . . . that's all right, bo . . . regular guy. . . . wouldn't let my mother know . . . . sure, she's white . . . . she's yaller . . . I'm feeling blue . . . sure, sure, sure, I couldn't git sore with you . . . . is that so? . . . sez you. Well, all that does need explaining. Especially when none of the esses come out. But out of all that, rising out of that perpetual chatter, there have been one or two little whispers, twenty-three, in all, hints of spring if the rash winds of production don't blow them down before they have had time to show what they were like.

The first was *Melody of Love*, where one or two things happened for the first time, including an attempt to use sound expressionistically. There was a string of play-films, *Hometowners*, *Interference*, *The Doctor's Secret*, which quite successfully put the movies inside a proscenium, in the usual attempt of the magnates to show how much more than mere cinema the movies really were. As good as a play. Then it occurred to someone that they were as good as life, and we

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had the Movietone short of King Alfonso, which was easy and bright and natural, and we had *White Shadows*, which did a lot to me then, but won't do so much to people who have seen a lot of the later ones before it is generally released in February. But there we got away a bit from dialogue, and had sound going on, not representing the images, but going along complementary to them; we had the mike outdoors, too. I know we also had a close-up of Monte Blue, and the sound that came from his laughing was very small and distant, but that is so obvious a flaw it is hardly worth discovering. The mike went further outdoors with *In Old Arizona*, the first talkie "Western". Here there were noises, life-noises, hooves and clatter and dishes . . . you remember, one of the high-lights of the picture was that you saw AND heard a bacon being boiled with its egg. I know this was absurd, I know we all screamed that we didn't want to hear what we saw, but something else, and that *Interference* marked something or other because we watched a person phoning, and heard the other person at the other end. But it is true that the people had to show us this was possible for us, the wise ones, to be good enough to point out just when it was good to hear the frying bacon (I am sorry, I said boiled just now). There are obviously moments when it might be. When food is being cooked, something boils over . . . it is then the sound that attracts the attention of people who may be engaged in drama in another room. The sound is all that is needed, a little picture of an over-boiling saucepan is not really needed, and isn't specially cinematic. A film is much smoother if sound lets you keep on with the visually main theme, instead of swooping about. We have

got used to swooping about, until we think that is cinema, but it was really a pis aller. Refer to the Russians' statement, which no one has read enough.

But in *In Old Arizona* there was more. The hero was a 'Cisco Kid who was "wanted" in the town. A gay, swaggering, clinking fellow. It amused him to visit the sheriff, who was the barber, and have a bath. He had it, while the sheriff outside talked of his plans for capturing the 'Cisco Kid. We saw the Kid feeling the water, and pouring oils in, cutting to the sheriff in the old-cinema way. But while the sheriff talked, we didn't cut back. We should have, in silent days, it was the only way to get the suspense, the parallel action. Here is a man who is wanted, and here, in the next room, is the man who wants him. But with sound, we could hear the bath water pouring in, while we saw the man, the sheriff, talking. This was much better. It gave us one visual thing, and added to it by sound. The main thing was the sheriff talking, and it was built up and added to by hearing the water running in. There in the next room was the 'Cisco Kid himself, and we knew it. We could hear him. We could hear him because the walls were thin. That added to the suspense. Not only were we in possession of the fact that hunter and hunted were in adjoining rooms, and that we could hear the hunted through the walls, but we knew, by this, that the walls were thin, that there was almost nothing between the two, that the 'Cisco Kid was very daring to be there.

I think I may record that this was one of the first films in which there were several languages, Spanish and Chinese, and they got their effect as dramatic noise, not as dialogue,

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which is a point. Although, also, we heard a cart rumbling into the distance, and heard horses galloping round a bend, we had to cut pretty quickly; the mike in those days didn't move . . . . I think I am right in saying.

These two outdoor films came pretty soon after each other. Then there were crook films, William Powell films, play films, and then the first musical, *Broadway Melody*. Shall I ever forget it? Ever forget Anita Page, and Bessie Love's sob out of a blank screen? Let's try, and hurry on to *Movietone Follies*, which I dealt with all by itself some months back, and need not do again, save point out that sound and visual imagery were blended for the first time and that the camera was allowed to move around and make its own patterns while the sound, in this case of a song being sung, was quite straight. This came first, you see; it did not occur to people to do anything with sound but use it straight. Until *Blackmail*. I do hope I am right in these suppositions. But *Blackmail* used sound with bits of imagination. The famous instances are now famous enough, but let me record how well the sound began, after a man had been caught by the Flying Squad, the detectives breaking into speech for the first time as they left the job. They didn't talk about that, they didn't at once proceed to unfold the drama as dictated by a script. They talked about their tailors as they washed their hands. And how well silence was used, too, that was an advance. It also got us a little away from the dreariness of everything having to be realistic. Smaller directors would not have risked silence in parts of a talkie, because they would have worried about the fact that traffic noises don't suddenly stop, that people don't

suddenly cease making a noise. This would have pre-occupied them at the expense of what the mind felt. And, a last instance, what an excellent laugh the girl had in the beginning, as she was leaving with her detective-sweetheart. Such a stupid, spoilt laugh. We are prepared at once for her type. Mr. Hitchcock risked making his heroine unsympathetic by that laugh . . . or maybe he didn't, maybe he was just giving us an ordinary London girl. Well, that was quite an innovation. He let us think what we liked of that laugh and most directors in talkies don't let us think. They present us with the point of view of someone manifestly unable to think, themselves. People always hold up against talkies that they prevent you thinking, that they "leave nothing to the imagination". That is, save in the terms, true, as at present used. But what should be seen is that if this is true it means that the talkies are impossible to get away from. As an instrument of expression, they are strong, powerful; there is no getting away from them. If a good talkie was made by a good man, therefore, there *would* be no getting away from it. So that talkie must be made. Late in the summer came *The Idle Rich*. If you didn't think talkies had done anything but say Oh, yeah, here you were. This answered the criticism that the microphone took the movie indoors by keeping it there, in one room, the whole time. Did it deliberately, on purpose. Maybe couldn't see the new kind of talkie that had to be evolved, but did see at least that if you were play-filming, don't try and make it a film by insert action and scenes, as in *Madame X*. There was no action in *The Idle Rich*. It was just talk. The talk woke up the class-consciousness of the middle-classes

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when one of them married a millionaire. They were as good as he was, they had their pride, they were, O, indeed they were and how, the middle-classes. And it was all talk. Talk in a little cramped room, washing the dishes, avoiding the furniture, trying to get a few minutes alone with a member of the family and being interrupted because the table had to be laid, or the door answered. This was something different from the plain canned-play of *The Hometowners*, where they just grouped in front of the microphone and wished they were on the stage and what was the camera for, anyhow? *The Idle Rich* as it was given us, couldn't have been given by the stage or by the old film. It said, the microphone gives us talk, and it rules out action and much change of scene, so it talked and talked in one room, and built up plausible characters by talk, by talkie. This wasn't a good film, isn't new film, but it was a kind of progress because it was a logical carrying to a conclusion.

But talkies could be fluid, could get movement into them. There were good sequences in *The Perfect Alibi*. There was a lot of bunk, which would have been there anyway, but there were good sequences. And if you writhe at the inanity of dialogue, remember that that is only another way of acknowledging the expressiveness of talkies. That inanity in the dialogue would have been implied in the silent film; if you didn't notice it then, the silent film was not so sharp. Dialogue has simply got to be better, it isn't wrong in itself, except that hundred per cent. literal dialogue isn't wanted, has nix to do with cinema. *Fashions in Love* did things, very useful things with sound. An amusing drawing-room comedy, with an interesting pattern of sound, ruined only by

the playing of a badly-recorded piano. Drawing-room comedies are not what we want on the screen, but we had them before, so don't complain when they are better done. The main fear is that they will be so well-done that people will like them too much. The answer to that is that if they can be done as well as that, the right kind of film can be done better. The answer is, as to most things, keep your head.

Musical films. How we have suffered. How jazz has suffered, too. What rotten tunes in, *The Hollywood Revue*, *Sunnyside Up*, *Gold Diggers*, for instance. And the terrible plots used to introduce the singers that have been roped in. But the talkies had to do this, they did after all have to show that the camera gave dancing and the mike gave singing, and they did have to mix them as quickly as possible. Now they have proved this, and fed up the public with it, let them stop. *Big Time* was worth making, because, as in *The Idle Rich*, real people emerged. And the fact that on the screen you can see the faces (which you never can on the stage) was used. Screen and mike treatment were blended, if you looked, so that the characters grew up out of more than the dialogue. It wasn't what was said, nor the tones, but what was done or just not done before and after the lines, the thinking going on behind the talking. It was acted by Lee Tracy, Mae Clark, and Stepin Fetchit.

Signalons aussi, as the French papers say, *The Trespasser*, *Madame X*, *To What Red Hell*, *The Sacred Flame*, *Great Gabbo*, and others. Mention them, because they are one and all incroyable! *Trespasser* and *To What Red Hell* especially, though why pick names. But they all illustrate the most dangerous flaw, the most disturbing thing about

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talkies, the thing that makes Eisenstein say that colour is far less upsetting . . . the continuity. It is AWFUL to switch from one bit of dialogue to another bit, only related dramatically. It happens all the time. We have one bit, then different voices, different theme, flung at us sharply, shatteringly. This can't go on. In cinema, scene after scene is linked which has no literal connection. The principle is montage. You know what I mean. But no one attempts to mount dialogue. It begins and leaves off. We are used in cinema to quite different scenes which fit rightly because of their weight, of their rhythm, of the light vibration on black and white. We cut from a person waving a hand to a signal going down and steam from the engine being blown, and all that is design, montage and composition. But a person saying " Good-bye, give my love to Ethel ", a whistle blowing and someone in the train saying " Excuse me, my seat I think " have little in common, and that is a mild instance. We usually cut from Ethel being given love to two men in the train saying " When they arrive, sock 'em on the boko, I'll see to this, we'll meet at Redmane Guy's ", and then Redmane Guy's is shown with raucous laughter that only begins the minute the picture comes on the screen though the movement in the picture has clearly been continuous. Notice this in *The Virginian*, and *Condemned*. The sound must be all patterned itself; just dramatic fitness won't do. And the patterning takes three things into account, besides subject. There is the actual noise, the change in the voices, which change in timbre far more sharply than the images do in weight and light; this must be recognised, it can then be an advantage as well as an obstacle to surmount. There is the

changing from one voice to many, although people present in picture may roughly be the same, and there is this last fact that speech always begins and ends so neatly, in other words says what it has to say, comes on when the picture does and ends when the picture cuts, whilst the movement in each piece of film is continuous: goes on after it is off the screen, and has been going on before. Whoever sees a scene in which the characters just begin to move, a scene which opens on a gesture which has not been led up to, if not positively interrupted? Sound and dialogue must have that done to them, and they can't if they continue to be used literally. Dialogue, no less than sound, must be split up into images, and sound need not be lifelike, if that is going to make it impossible to mount a door banging, a car starting and a woman crying. Sound **MUST** be mounted. Sidney Howard tried a little in *Condemned*; that is to say that his scenes were written for the screen, were short; but they had this flaw of giving the impression that now the characters are ready to speak, and that they stop the minute you don't see them. Hitchcock was far better in *Juno and the Paycock*, with people moving away while they were still talking, and sounds coming up before you saw their causes. Hitchcock didn't digest the play into a real talkie, but in playing round with certain aspects of sound, he got to several minor off-roots of the problem. It was interesting to see in one scene in *Condemned* how the director tried to be daring. The convicts were just landed, they were talking. Talking of home. He wanted to get over the longing for home. The word "Paris" kept on emerging. That was what you heard most. Rumble, rumble, PARIS, blurrh, blurrh,

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blurrh, PARIS . . . . PARIS. It didn't work, because you began to look out for the word, and in a literal talkie you soon found that the rest of what they were saying didn't count.

I thought the life-noises in *Condemned* were going to be fun, but they brought about a disaster. They showed up the studioness of the sets. This is going to be fatal. The real noises among cardboard walls and canvas deserts won't do. The better the sounds, the more false are the sets going to be shown up as, and then you start seeing which of them the characters in the film match, the comparatively real or the patently false. Whoever saw a Russia like that of *The Cock-eyed World*? The bright ray to be found here is that studio sets will be abandoned.

In *The Trespasser*, Gloria was sent for by a dying man. She caught up a wrap, you know, and flung out. There followed a quite unnecessary sequence showing a car bonnet going along a street full of obliging noises. Then we saw the marquise arrived at the house of the dying man and rushing upstairs. The car bonnet had effectively prevented there being any connection between these three bits. If the film had been silent, we'd have seen Gloria flying down her own stairs and cut to her rushing up the other ones, there would have been sight-continuity at least. Here there was neither sight nor sound continuity. It was just what happened. It was LITERAL.

In *Juno and the Paycock*, there are several moments when it is important to some character that there is a noise in the street or on the stairs. The men in trench coats come to take away the informer, or Juno is heard returning by her

husband. Hitchcock gives the noises, of course, but he guides the eye at the same time. And not always to match the character's reaction. As far as I remember, the son hears a ring at the door. We are shot to the window, getting the street idea. But the son looks at the door, where the men will enter from the street. The noise of the funeral rising out of the gramophone was well-done in this film, too, but it was a queer film with little bits well done, and no one able to disguise the fact that it was stage players we were watching, in a play that had been filmed as a play, and not re-visualised into a talkie; and above all nothing could disguise the oddity of filming at this date a young girl who advances into the middle of the room when she is going to have a baby, and declaims that there cannot be a God, he wouldn't let this happen. Nor did I find it easy to sympathise with a father who was so horrified at this thing which was described as "worse than consumption", a father who turned the girl out, and a mother who said, clasping the errant daughter to her chest, "never mind, your baby may have no father but it will have what is much better . . . . two mothers". Question mark, and echoes of "IS that so?" I mean really, does this sort of thing go on among tenement dwellers, or is it just a dramatist's fancy? It may be remarked that for sheer courage this talkie has not been beaten. For consider, the crying need of British films is a world market, and so they make a long film completely in the Irish brogue, which is not only very tiring but difficult even for Englishmen to understand completely, so different are the inflections and many of the words. It is not I that would decry experiment, but I do think that for wild

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courage, Elstree must be given the palm of a really big hand.

So here we are at the next and latest Elstree production, *Atlantic*, a film as abysmal as the deepest ocean. False in sentiment, conventional in language. These are some of the noblest lines from the English version. "He's a brute!" "He's not that, Betty, not that!" "HE IS" . . . . . "This is no time for mincing matters" . . . . "Padre, find my father for me. Tell him he is making my mother ill" (because he is flirting with another woman) . . . "Steady, see it through, old man" . . . . and finally, "Don't forget those words of Henley's", to which cue Monty Banks in the copy at the trade-show sang "Captain of My Soul". It was a very noble film; everyone was very noble; Ellaline Terriss knelt in the water for hours, just to help British pictures, and none of the men took off their evening shirts so as to be able to swim better. It was so noble, and so unconvincing. You felt none of these people had lived or enjoyed themselves and had hell at all. It all belonged to the stage, the talking before the mike, the grouping, the exits and entrances.

That is where we come. I know there have been a lot of terrible things due to the talkies, hardly any of them atoned for. We have heard "You've said it . . . and "oh, YEAH?" been dragged into dressing-rooms and out before the footlights. We have seen actresses lose their facial play and act, like Ruth Chatterton, with their voice only. We have heard those same voices twisted by once good screen actresses into all kinds of shapes and refinements (except in *Gold Diggers*, which was honestly rough and rowdy) and we

have seen gestures become unspontaneous because people were bothering about their voices, whilst at the same time we have seen a lot of unnecessary gesturing because someone had an idea you can't stand still and talk for more than two seconds. We have lost a great deal. But here and there in these twenty-three talkies, I think there may be found hints of something done that won't excuse all the rest that has been done, but does at least point the way to some kind of gain for the future, if that is recognised to have very little in method to do with the present.

And a year after all, a year and some months, isn't very long in which to have come from *The Jazz Singer* and *The Terror* and *Hometowners* to *Gold Diggers*, and Arlen talking with ten times more life, and Tashman, superb in colour and speech, and *The Virginian* and *On with the Show*.

What has got to be scrapped is the same as before; the theatre idea. Dialogue isn't just plain conversation, any more than film-making is plain filming of a story. Film-making is blending and mounting and lighting. Sound must be "lit", too; it must be brought together in sound waves, as the images are in light waves. And it must be cut up, seen and felt in bits, as film is seen and felt in pieces. If that is done, it can't be theatrical any more. And it CAN be something it never has been before, and that's what it must be. Meisel tried in a small way to mount a score in a film manner, with his saxophone close-ups and so on, in *The Crimson Circle*, but that film didn't give the score a chance, and it was a musical score anyway, not a score of sound proper. In *Mickey* we can all see how sound is used, and can see that that is how sound must be used. The sound

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there is all of a pattern. Whether it is the noise of a milkcan falling over or a piano being played (and there are too many pianos played now in Mickey films, scarcely one without one) it builds onto the next noise, linking it to the one before, in sound-pictures or wave-images. The noise made by Mickey's foot isn't literally the noise of a foot, not always, any more than the sound of his train is that of any actual express locomotive. But foot and train meet in sound as a kind of loco-pedestrianism, each having one of the other, as it were, each being different from itself, as everything is, more than itself only, and also like something else, perhaps more like than the actual thing. Mickey's foot is more vocal than his tongue. Take again the cat seen for a few seconds in *When the Cat's Away*. It drinks from a bottle. There is the throat-noise, bottle-noise, and also the comment, "Little Brown Jug How I Love Thee", which switches over into "Over the Hills and Far Away" for the next scene. Mickey's sound is made up of many pieces of noise, no one definite noise joined on to another definite noise without any thought being taken for their conjunction and combustion. That is left to talkies. But if cinema is to gain from talk, and there have been these little small gains since, using my publicity sheet like a certain well-known critic, since Warner Brothers, Pioneers of the Motion Picture Industry, opened their never-to-be-forgotten Vitaphone season at the Piccadilly Theatre in London, to fill up an article, if the cinema is to make any use of these gains, it must in the future discard literalness for reality, and work like Mickey. Lifelike noises are not essential. The noise of the footsteps in *Juno and the Paycock* was awful, and the whole thing seemed too strident

at its trade show. But what we want is not absolute faithfulness to life, but creative relation to each other, in our sounds. We want them to be part of each other as the opening pieces of *New Babylon* are part of each other. As it is now, films are ripped asunder, should they be even tolerably mounted (which *Taming of the Shrew* was not) by a current of noise, consisting of a million unrelated noises, flowing straight on. Sound must relate to sound, not to the drama alone.

But of course, none of this may mean much, because I see that Miss Betty Balfour has not yet announced her plans for 1930. She will do so shortly, and that, of course, will make a lot of difference. O, yeah? SURE!

ROBERT HERRING.

## A GERMAN SCHOOL FILM

There is much experiment and progression at work all over the world in the educational field, but it is none of it co-ordinated, and half of the experimenters are ignorant of what their neighbours are doing. This was particularly the case when after seeing *Kampf der Tertia*, I tried to discover exactly how much of it was commercial and how much schoolboy, for it is a very obvious mixture of falseness and reality. But I could not find out very much: half the people