

The Evaluation of Audio in Britain in Early Sound Cinema

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The coming of sound was a swift and decisive moment in cinema history. In the space of half a decade, the paradigms for film production and distribution underwent a sea change unparalleled anywhere else in the medium's history. In Britain, this change was primarily concentrated in the years between 1929 and 1931, when cinemas around the country rapidly transitioned to the new standard. With this new technology serving almost to effectively create a new medium, there grew a need to define it and to understand the effects and meanings of sound in both popular and industrial discourse. How sound and synchronised music could be used to greatest effect was a primary concern of film producers both within the country and around the world. Yet sound also presented problems in the other spheres of the film industry, and particularly in exhibition, where cinema owners and managers contended with the new medium's possibilities and potential dangers. This paper will discuss how sound in film was mediated in public and trade discourse, looking particularly at early responses to mechanical reproductions of sound effects, music and vocal performance of dialogue.

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The transition to sound film in British cinema kicked off in September 1928, with the screening of *The Jazz Singer* at the Piccadilly Theatre in London. Sound and its uses for the exhibitor had long been a point of discussion by this stage, however. Earlier in the year, Panatrope – manufacturers of gramophone equipment which has seen wide use in cinemas –

had demonstrated the use of their apparatus and so-called “effects records” to synchronise sound effects to silent cinema. The machine was designed to replace the myriad effects equipment and personnel required to produce high-quality sound effects within exhibition spaces, and thus affording the smaller and more budget-conscious exhibitor the opportunity to add such sound effects to their screenings. A journalist wrote of the demonstration, given for a screening of F. W. Murnau’s popular film *Sunrise* at London’s Marble Arch Pavilion, “The Panatrope is introduced during the film as a jazz band, an organ, during the storm, and in the fairground scenes. Few people in the hall would believe that such a variety of sounds could be reproduced from a gramophone record. The storm is most realistic, the howling of the wind and the lashing of waves are almost terrifying in their realism.”¹ Demonstrations were also held that year in the English provinces, including Nottingham in the Midlands and Hull in the North. The *Nottingham Evening Post* was complimentary of the device, noting, “The demonstration was thoroughly successful, the tone being good and the synchronisation admirable.”² The *Hull Daily Mail* was similarly appreciative of the Panatrope’s performance where, when compared with what it refers to as a “normal gramophone player,” it noted, “The difference in quality and volume was startling.”³

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¹ ‘Something Attempted, Something Done: Panatrope “Effects” Records’, *The Bioscope*, 2 February 1928.

² ‘Cinema Innovation. Mechanised Music With Pictures’, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 8 February 1928.

³ ‘Panatrope Recital. Storm on a Stage at Hull City Hall’, *Hull Daily Mail*, 3 May 1928.

All demonstrations featured prominent use of the sound of storms and inclement weather, and the effect is regarded by the journalists present at each occasion as being one of great fidelity, and thus of high quality. The value of the sounds reproduced by the Panatrope is expressed almost wholly by their verisimilitude, and the technical qualities of the apparatus are seen as being instrumental in this. This is in some contrast to wider contemporary practice regarding sound effects, which had for some time been utilised in the cinema by a number of exhibitors, who relied upon the talents of skilled sound effects practitioners to create sounds live, along with the musicians in the cinema's orchestra. *The Bioscope*, a weekly film trade journal aimed primarily at exhibitors, ran a column entitled "Sound Effects and How to Get Them," amongst its pages in early-to-mid 1928 and written by effects practitioner and technical writer Alfred Whitman. The first edition of his column includes a warning to exhibitors that, "The secret of success is to remember that one is not attempting to introduce realism. [...] Effects are intended to impart an *atmosphere* of reality; to suggest, rather than to portray."⁴ Whitman's column primarily consists of practical advice for exhibitors for how to create sound effects suitable for a variety of scenes and onscreen actions. For the sound of a train starting to move from a station, he suggests, "[giving] a sweep on [some] sandpaper, followed by a beat on the drum;" for a burning fire, he recommends, "Two bunches, each of half a dozen canes, held in either hand and rubbed against each other [to] produce a crackle that can be varied at will."

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⁴ Alfred Whitman, 'Sound Effects and How to Get Them', *The Bioscope*, 15 March 1928.

He also makes note of the specific requirements of comedy, where special effects artfully placed within the screening can be used to elevate and emphasize comedic moments. He writes, “If someone is struck on the head with a mallet, a comic crash on a cymbal or something equally far-fetched is quite worth while. A fall through the air can be accompanied by a siren whistle; a tearing garment by a rather twist; and so on.”⁵

Whitman and other cinema sound effects practitioners were borrowing from theatrical and vaudevillian practice to introduce extratextual elements to the spectator experience that add and inflect meaning, rather than strictly representing the sounds that are ostensibly missing from the silent film. This is important to recognize when discussing the early uses and reception of audio material in sound cinema; as can be seen in the examples of early responses to the Panatrope, attention was primarily paid to the fidelity and verisimilitude of the sound heard, rather than the more critical and artistic concern given by Whitman towards practical effects.

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The distinction between the pursuit of quality reproduction and of artistic distinction was more explicitly stated for cinema music, where various voices sounded notes of scepticism about the appeal of mechanical reproduced music, with one columnist writing that, “With a large cine-going public the ascetic qualities of music individually expressed will continue to find preference to that of the canned variety.”⁶ Cinema music journalist Edwin Evans witnessed a demonstration of Vitaphone subjects in late 1928, and wrote of his

⁵ Alfred Whitman, ‘Sound Effects and How to Get Them’, *The Bioscope*, 19 April 1928.

⁶ ‘To The Exhibitors Who Dream of an Empty Orchestral Pit’, *The Bioscope*, 26 September 1928.

impressions of the apparatus's reproduction of music. He especially complimented the reproduction of the banjo, but noted that this was in part because "[the instrument's] characteristic quality is, in the strictest sense, not musical. It has no roundness, no resonance, but consists mostly of impact."⁷ He goes on to write that whilst the banjo's interest lay in the dexterity of the performer, the greatest pleasures of orchestral performance stem from the physical sound of the ensemble, and, "For that reason, what was technically the best reproduction was by no means the most enjoyable." James Lastra, writing on Theodor Adorno's 1941 essay "The Radio Symphony" which attempted to "make a study of what radio transmission does musically to a musical structure", wrote that for Adorno, "Music is objectively definable by the specificity of its part/whole relationships, and their dynamic processes of structuration. Any acoustic transformation that affects the *perception* of that structure is, axiomatically, detrimental since it interferes with the mode of listening deemed appropriate to symphonies."⁸ So too was mechanical reproduction seen, much earlier than Adorno's 1941 essay, by some to be distinctly detrimental to music whose pleasures were considered to be inexorably linked to the environment and circumstances of their performance.

In these instances, before the complete domination of sound cinema was seen as an inevitability by most observers, a rudimentary distinction can be seen to have emerged, between the artistic critical frame by which live performance of music and effects was judged,

⁷ Edwin Evans, 'A Musician Looks on "Vitaphone"'. Musical Merits and Failings of "Talkie", *The Bioscope*, 10 October 1928.

⁸ James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 129.

and the technical frame used to discuss mechanically reproduced sound. Evans notes that during a demonstration of the reproduction of a solo performance, where one would expect an audience to maintain silence in the presence of a live musician, those present continued to converse as before. He writes, “Psychologically, this is rather interesting. It suggests that even when a mixed audience does hold its many tongues for the duration its motive is not necessarily musical.” This goes some way to suggest the nature of the distinction drawn here, between audiences paying attention to the musical content of a performer, and the sound quality of a reproduction of a performance.

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Early reviews of sound films by the trade press were similarly concerned with technical aspects above and beyond their artistic or subjective merits. A review for *Lonesome*, a Hollywood comedy from the film company European, wrote of its sound that “Only part of the dialogue is heard, but that very effectively, and the varied sound of the Fun Fair blend very well with the musical accompaniment.”⁹ A review in the same issue for *The Melody of Love* writes, “The main purpose of the film, however, is as a medium for sound effects, and in this respect it achieves a considerable measure of success. Some voices come out better than others, and the dialogue accentuates the fact that the tempo of the stage and screen is widely difference, but these are technical details that will be speedily overcome.” Sound is seen primarily as an effect, one whose value is visceral and technical, and judged primarily both on its ability to replicate real sounds, and on the mechanical skill with which it these sounds are

⁹ ‘Reviews: Lonesome, The Melody of Love’, *The Bioscope*, 21 November 1928.

produced. This remained the case through 1929. An October review of the United Artists comedy *Three Live Ghosts* had the following remarks on its sound content: “Dialogue is very distinct and can easily be followed. Bands in Armistice celebrations, songs in Army record offices, cheers and demonstrations in street, coughs, yawns and snores plainly recorded. Dialogue is maintained consistently through the film.”¹⁰

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A review in the *Nottingham Evening Post* of the British and Dominions film *Black Waters*, which played at Nottingham’s Hippodrome cinema in August 1929, gives an early glimpse of a critical eye cast towards sound in cinema. After praising the reproduction of the Western Electric apparatus, and granting a caveat for the “inrooted objections which one possessed towards the Americanisms of the conversationalists”, the reviewer notes that the atmosphere created by the production’s sounds induced an atmosphere that was “gruesomely real,” complimenting the film’s story of murder aboard a steam ship. The reviewer goes on to write: “Much of the impressive effect of the film was due to the tense acting of James Kirkwood and Lloyd Hamilton, who have not failed to take advantage of the opportunities which the talking picture offers in the way of undisplayed emotion. For the first time in Nottingham, talkies have showed themselves to be something more than a novelty.”¹¹ A language can be seen to be in its infancy for describing and evaluation audio, with this critic focusing on sounds ability to exploit what he terms “undisplayed emotion”, that which is

¹⁰ ‘Review: Three Live Ghosts’, *The Bioscope*, 2 October 1929.

¹¹ ‘Theatre and Cinema. Reviews of This Week’s Shows’, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 13 August 1929.

expressed verbally rather than through the pantomime of silent cinema. Rather than merely relegating sound to a role of enhancing or heightening the visual drama, sound is here credited with adding novel, original contributions, echoing for drama in some ways the intent of Alfred Whitman the effects man, who championed sound's ability to add new inflection for comedic films.

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The aforementioned caveat regarding so-called Americanisms is an exemplar of a primary example of a critical discourse present throughout film criticism in Britain during the transition period – concerns regarding the perceived unattractiveness of American voices. As I have previously argued in a paper entitled “Legitimate Language and the Coming of Sound”, these criticisms position American speech outside of the British experience of the English language.¹² They also relay fears of the youth's assimilation of Americanisms into their own speech, and the resultant impacts on their education. An article in Nottingham's *Evening Post* of August 25th, 1928 headlined “Yankee ‘Talkies’. New Language Peril Threatened. Safeguarding English Ears” explicitly ties language to both education and national identity, writing: “The alarm [is] felt by all educationists – and indeed all who love England and the English language.”

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¹² Nyasha Sibanda, ‘Invasion: Legitimate Language and the Coming of Sound in the Nottingham Evening Post, 1928-1930’ (British Silent Film Festival Symposium, King's College London, 2015).

The success of British films abroad was met with contrasting fanfare. On the 22nd of January 1930, the *Nottingham Evening Post* ran a small segment claiming “British films are much more popular in the United States than ever British silent films were.”¹³ The reason given by American actress Jacqueline Logan was that American audiences are “tickled to death by the pure English that is spoken. America is, in fact, beginning to learn real English. Your talking films have, therefore, a definite educational value.” The cultural exchange effected by the sound cinema is here framed as being a zero-sum game. One English-speaking culture must conquer the other. On the 4th of February that year, Parliament discussed the matter of limiting the importation of American talkies to Britain. The Post printed several remarks by notable figures within the British film industry. Statements by Benita Hume and Jameson Thomas considered the best response to be a countervailing influence on America by exporting more high-quality British films. Kathleen O’Regan predicted “America will become Anglicised as much as we will become Americanised.”¹⁴ Concerns for the integrity of the language were entwined with concerns for the health of the British film industry. Economic measures were frequently cited as the surest way to offset the American invasion. This is either from a protectionist film importation protocol or through direct stimulus to the production industry.

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Accents were a matter of debate for cinemagoers as well, with opinions varying between accounts. An exhibitor speaking at a meeting of the Devon and Cornwall

¹³ *NEP*, 22nd January 1930.

¹⁴ *NEP*, 4th February 1930.

Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association in January 1930 wrote that a great number of patrons had stopped attending his cinema because, "[They are] absolutely fed up with the 'talkies,' the Yankee nasal twang has got on my nerves."¹⁵ The *Nottingham Evening Post's* film critic was similarly disparaging in his August 1930 review of the American romantic comedy *Holiday*, where he wrote that, "[The] banal Americanisms [...] spoil the realism of an intensely real story."¹⁶ In contrast, a London-based journalist writing for the *Nottingham Evening Post* in April 1931 wrote of an appreciation some Londoners were developing for the voices of American talkies, writing, "This craze chiefly affects the humbler suburbs, where you will constantly hear all manner of queer Americanisms used quite normally and unconsciously, as well as a decided Yankee twang in the accent."¹⁷

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During the transition period, sound cinema in Britain was primarily evaluated through a technical framework. The quality and variety of recorded sounds, and the quality of their reproduction, was considered above all else by the majority of critics, particularly those writing for the trade and the general public. Whilst intellectual debate primarily criticised talking pictures for ostensibly depriving cinema of its medium specificity, bringing it instead to the realm of stage theatre, critical discourse in the general press was largely focused on the visceral pleasures of recorded sound effects and voices. The coming of sound brought numerous linguistic challenges to international film production and distribution, yet the

¹⁵ 'Devon Exhibitor Finds Patrons Hate Americanese', *The Bioscope*, 29 January 1930.

¹⁶ 'This English! New Talking Picture Marred By Americanisms. "Holiday" Trade Show in Nottingham', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 8 August 1930.

¹⁷ 'Echoes from Town. Mutual Admiration.', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 4 April 1931.

primary challenge for the British cinema was the introduction and rapid saturation of American accents. This issue was also debated as a matter of visceral pleasure, with the sounds of American voices and vernacular being judged on their attractiveness. It is telling that the aforementioned Nottingham critic admonishes *Holiday* for spoiling the film's realism through the use of American accents, rather than English ones. The verisimilitude of the film's voices is compared to the lived experience of the critic, as opposed to an imagined experience of American life, particularly as it relates to the upper-classes and their use of colloquial language. The critic writes, "Those who attended [the film] today must have found it difficult to believe in society ladies – Americans though they may be – who have a 'grand' hunch concerning the actions of a variety of 'guys.'"¹⁸ Sound is seen as serving primarily to convince an audience of its realness, and to represent faithfully what would be expected from the environmental components of the scene shown, the vocal performance of its players, and the musical content of its score. This paper has attempted to show some early examples of sound evaluation in British cinema discourse, where sound was still very much considered secondarily to cinema.

¹⁸ "This English! New Talking Picture Marred By Americanisms. "Holiday" Trade Show in Nottingham'.