

“Here to Stay”: Sound Becomes Inevitable in 1928-1930

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During the years of transition to sound, no-one had any real idea as to what the lasting impact of the new talking picture would be. Amidst confusion and scepticism amongst film producers and exhibitors alike about the apparatuses, systems and rental terms surrounding sound films, opinion was split about the fate of the ever-reliable silent feature. The prospective landscape for silent cinemas was decidedly dire by the end of 1930, but even as recently as 1928, the looming demise of silent cinema was viewed as almost laughable. By September 1929, only 800 cinemas in the country had wired for sound, compared to 3,400 that had not, and despite the desire of many exhibitors to convert their halls for the talkies when the cost of doing so was more manageable, it remained accepted wisdom among many that so long as there remained a substantial number of silent halls in Britain, film producers and renters would continue to offer silent films to satisfy this demand. This paper will talk about the progress of the silent film shortage crisis as it was experienced by exhibitors and their trade organisation, the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, or C.E.A.

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At the beginning of 1928, Warner Brothers was the only major producer to announce a complete transition to sound, with a pledge to include at least Vitaphone sequences in their films from that moment on, buoyed by the success of talkies such as *The Jazz Singer*.¹ Other

¹ Scott Eyman, *The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution, 1926-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 165.

major studios were much more cautious, and it wasn't until June that another luminary voice sounded an impending end for silent film. At a luncheon for the Press at London's Ritz Hotel on June 3rd, Jesse Lasky – vice-president of Paramount – discussed his company's progress in fitting its studios for sound film production, telling those gathered that within six months all new Paramount films would have a synchronised score, although they wouldn't be suspending silent production completely.² In August, Fox announced that they would no longer be producing silent two-reel comedies, opting instead for a portfolio of Movietone subjects.³ By the end of 1928, only three major voices in American film production voiced any doubts of the complete takeover of sound film: Lasky and Adolph Zukor from Paramount, who suggested sound and silent would coexist; and Carl Laemmle of Universal, who considered sound as being a novelty unable to compete with the dominance of silent cinema.⁴

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Scepticism was more prominent in British film production. Alfred E. Bundy, chairman of British Instructional Films, Ltd., wrote at the close of 1928 of his belief that the talkies would not capture the imagination of the British audience as it had American cinemagoers. He wrote:

“But I consider – and I am not alone in my opinion – that the ‘talkie’ has caught on in the U.S.A. because it is a novelty in a land where novelties are always sure of a short success; that its success may be transient in the States and finally that it will

² ‘Speaking Films for U.S. and England Only. Lasky on the End of the Silent Screen’, *The Bioscope*, 6 June 1928.

³ ‘Fox to Drop Silent Two-Reelers’, *The Bioscope*, 15 August 1928.

⁴ Eyman, *The Speed of Sound*, 236–37. These notes of concern were voiced in the yearly American publication the *Film Year Book* (published by *The Film Daily*). Eyman notes that ‘more than forty other industry luminaries disagreed with the three loyalists and believed that that particular train had long since left the station.’

never in this country, where emotions are slower and novelties almost suspect, catch the public imagination to the same degree.”⁵

In October of 1928, the General Council of the C.E.A. concluded that “the development of sound films is entirely in the experimental stage,” and that, “It can safely be said that at least another two years will elapse before one can attempt to answer, with any degree of definiteness, the question whether talking or dialogue films will be a possibility of the future.”⁶ The C.E.A. issued strong advisement that exhibitors not install expensive sound apparatus at the present time, until this two-year grace period had lapsed. This would come back to bite them.

However, there were clear notes of change being sounded by other major industry figures. George Pearson, Director of Welsh-Pearson-Elder Films and Managing Director of British Screen Productions, wrote that the coming of sound to American film production could cause “a dearth of the silent drama in America which will give silent British films their opportunity to break in.”⁷ Victor Saville proclaimed the coming of sound to present seemingly limitless opportunities for British film, particularly because “our English speaking voices are more pleasant to the ear.”⁸ Joseph Phillips Jr., technical production adviser to British Phototone, was even more forceful, writing:

⁵ Alfred Edward Bundy, ‘Difficulties of British Film Production’, *The Bioscope British Film Number*, 12 December 1928.

⁶ “‘Sound Films May Form Stranglehold’; C.E.A. ‘Talkie’ Contracts Warning; ‘Exhibitors Should Not Tie Themselves’”, *The Bioscope*, 17 October 1928. As discussed from page 87 of this thesis, the Committee would not be allowed to forget the length of their cautionary waiting period, partially blamed for the subsequent failure of independent exhibitors to capably weather the uncertainty of the conversion to the talkies.

⁷ George W. Pearson, ‘Progress’, *The Bioscope British Film Number*, 12 December 1928.

⁸ Victor Saville, ‘Our Big Chance’, *The Bioscope British Film Number*, 12 December 1928.

“To hope to carry on and ignore [Talking Films] would be about as businesslike as an air-transport company sniffing at the Zeppelin and hoping to operate a trans-Atlantic service with hot air balloons. Because, there cannot be the slightest doubt at this stage of its development, the Talking Film, like the Zeppelin, has come to stay for the real big business of the immediate and indefinite future.”⁹

By the middle of 1929, opinion had shifted, and Sam Eckman, M.G.M.’s main man in Britain, was the only major voice from an American studio making distinct reassurances about the availability of silent films in the near future. At the M.G.M. conference held in London towards the end of May, Eckman stated that the fact that so many fewer cinemas were wired for sound than were not – 1,500 out of 20,000 in America at this time – meant that the silent film would live on for some time yet.¹⁰ In September, Eckman made further offerings to the cause of silent film exhibitors, relaying the decision from M.G.M.’s American headquarters that the company would be making silent versions of almost every film scheduled for production, apart from musicals.¹¹

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Eckman’s September announcement coincided with an increase in concerns expressed by C.E.A. members during meetings. The week before the announcement, North Western branch member F. W. Locke noted that, in his estimation, 75% of the discussion at recent meetings had focused on sound films – indeed, the present meeting had largely concerned them. He stated, “It is of vital interest to exhibitors whose theatres are not wired to know that

⁹ Jos. H. Phillips Jr., ‘The Talking Film To-Day’, *The Bioscope British Film Number*, 12 December 1928.

¹⁰ “Silent Film Not Dead” - Sam Eckman, Junr., *The Bioscope*, 29 May 1929.

¹¹ ‘Metro to Make More “Silents”’, *The Bioscope*, 11 September 1929.

they can be assured of an adequate supply of silent films.”¹² Other branch members discussed rumours that some renters had taken silent films from their shelves in order to return them to their respective production studios to be synchronised for sound and music, causing a further reduction in the number of silent features available. One suggested that renters were holding back their silent films purely to capitalise on the current boom in talkies, ostensibly exerting further pressure on exhibitors to convert.

An atmosphere of worry began to make itself felt amongst the C.E.A. branches in the last quarter of 1929. At an October meeting of the Scottish Branch, Mr. L. Dixon of the Bo’Ness Hippodrome reported on a recent meeting of the wider Scottish Branch, where it was agreed wisdom that there would be a silent film shortage in June or July of 1930.¹³ He went on to caution that British producers had seemingly also given in to the coming of sound, and reduced their forecasted output of silent films. At the Sussex Branch the following week, J. Van Koert – managing director of Brighton’s Arcadia cinema, and proprietor of the Heath Theatre in Haywards Heath – optimistically suggested:

“That producers should be compelled to produce a quota of silent productions, not merely conversions, to enable exhibitors to comply with the Quota Act.”¹⁴

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Scepticism was voiced by numerous exhibitors throughout the country about the prospect of screening silenced versions of films produced as talkies. Worries centred around both the potential for poor entertainment being the result of such alteration after the fact, as

¹² ‘Trounson Hints Exhibitors’ Production Plans’, *The Bioscope*, 11 September 1929.

¹³ ‘Edinburgh Fears Silent Shortage’, *The Bioscope*, 2 October 1929.

¹⁴ ‘Sussex Fears Shortage of “Silents”’, *The Bioscope*, 9 October 1929.

well as the possibility that renters would only show the sound version to the trade. By now, *The Bioscope* had become increasingly dismissive of those who would claim that the popularity of sound films was a temporary event, or one that sceptics need pay no mind:

“These people never seem to learn from experience, and seem constitutionally unable to meet a new situation with enthusiasm and freshness. If you are asked whether ‘talkies’ are failing or not, just bear in mind the statement of [Mortimer Dent, owner of the Danilo cinema chain], just back from the States. ‘Every busy studio is now busy on “talkies,”’ he said, ‘no silent films are scheduled for the future.’ Remember that for all practical film matters the bulb of our business is in America, and we can forecast our weather from there.”¹⁵

The magazine’s editors noted The Films Act of 1927, which mandated the trade screening of films in order for them to be registered under the Act and thus made legally rentable, did not make any distinction between sound and silent films.

This was certainly not good enough for the North-Western C.E.A. Branch at their November meeting. Exhibitor R. P. Rutherford, owner of two cinemas in Liverpool and Warrington, described the act of booking silent films based on their sound trade show as, “merely buying a ‘pig in a poke.’”¹⁶

The sense among silent exhibitors was that they were increasingly being treated as a second class of client by renters eager to reap the increased profits that sound films offered. Devon and Cornwall Branch members accused renters there of refusing to allow bookings for silent films already registered for Quota and shown to the trade, because they were going to be synchronised with sound.¹⁷ Walter J. A. Bayley, proprietor of the Public Hall cinema in

¹⁵ ‘Talk of the Trade: No Silents’, *The Bioscope*, 9 October 1929.

¹⁶ ‘North-Western Urges Training of Operators’, *The Bioscope*, 6 November 1929.

¹⁷ ‘Plymouth Alleges “Talkie” Coercion’, *The Bioscope*, 6 November 1929.

Exmouth, reported that exhibitors who had tried to report particular issues with renters had been intimidated by those renters, and now feared that their future business with these and other renters would suffer as a result of their whistleblowing. To this, branch chairman Major A. O. Ellis announced that “He was prepared to accept that challenge and take the risk,” naming *White Cargo* (1929) as a film that he was personally refused to book by its distributors Williams & Pritchard Films (W.P.), despite it having already been registered for quota.

The apparent availability of silent films for quota purposes largely depended on different interpretations of what constituted a silent film; numerous exhibitors noted that, when silent versions of talking films were taken into account, the number of silent films available seemed somewhat sufficient. Other exhibitors did not see things this way, including B. B. Blake of the Apollo Theatre in Southsea, who said to those gathered at a November 1929 meeting of the Portsmouth C.E.A. of silent versions of sound films: “Well, they’re freaks. They are like a dumb show on the stage.”¹⁸

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By December, the issue of silent film availability had come to the forefront of general industry discussion. *The Bioscope* ran a letter from an unnamed Merseyside exhibitor, who remarked that renters had taken to adopting a “take it or leave it attitude” with regards to silent versions of sound films, which were habitually not being trade shown alongside the sound versions.¹⁹ Exhibitors, such as he who wrote this open letter, were quick to point out

¹⁸ ‘Portsmouth Agitation against Long Programmes’, *The Bioscope*, 13 November 1929.

¹⁹ ‘Super Silent Films. Exhibitor’s Plea for Facilities to View’, *The Bioscope*, 4 December 1929.

that silent cinemas still greatly outnumbered those that had been wired for sound. W. Gavazzi King, former General Secretary of the C.E.A., stated both that the terms by which renters made sound films available meant that, for the great majority of sound exhibitors, no actual profit had been made; and that, “The silent film has steadily maintained its own, and in a way instances have actually proved to be more than unusually profitable.”²⁰ The primary threat to silent exhibitors was not the drawing power of talking pictures; it was the disregard that silent films were given both by producers and renters. This was despite the fact that reports of the non-profitability of sound cinemas were hampered by the refusal of large circuits to contribute their own returns to the C.E.A.’s data gathering efforts.

These overtures to the strength of silent exhibition may have intended to convince producers and renters not to abandon silent cinema, yet their only real function was to serve as something of a rallying cry for those exhibitors who still refused to wire for sound. This messaging was also inconsistent, insofar as it emanated from the General Council of the C.E.A., and accusations of hypocrisy began to be explicitly levelled against the leadership.

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Criticism of the C.E.A.’s response to the silent film shortage boiled over during a visit by the President and General Secretary (F. H. Cooper and W. R. Fuller respectively) of the Association to the Leicester Branch on December 18th 1929. Roland M. Wright, proprietor of the Leicester Picturedrome, presented a speech in which he characterised the C.E.A. as an

²⁰ ‘W. Gavazzi King Reports on C.E.A. Questionnaire’, *The Bioscope*, 4 December 1929.

organisation increasingly incapable of fulfilling its duties to, and representing the interests of, its membership. To this point, Wright said:

“There is a class of member in our organisation who never ought to be there – those who are largely linked up with Renting and Producing Interests. When you come to discussing trade matters, our main object should be as an Association to make the best terms possible for independent exhibitors. How can you do that adequately when your revenue, as an association, is largely made up from subscriptions derived from members, with a strong voting power in your organisation, whose interests in the Renting and Producing sections of the trade are so large, that any proposal made for the protection of the independent exhibitor has to be dropped because it would conflict with those members’ interests, whose subscriptions are considered so vital? [...] Independent exhibitors’ interests are sacrificed upon the altar of vested interests, because of how our finances might suffer as an association in consequence.”²¹

The General Council, meeting on January 8th 1930, finally presented the findings of its General Purposes Committee investigation into the availability of silent films for the near future, putting into stark terms what exhibitors had long feared already. Their enquiries to Hollywood producers regarding silent film production revealed that, to their knowledge, aside from Charlie Chaplin’s upcoming *City Lights* (1931), no major silent films were scheduled for release from 1931 onwards that weren’t conversions from sound films. The exhibition value of silent conversions of talkies had been seen to be greatly diminished, with the committee ultimately advising, “Unless, therefore, the situation changes, those members who are still unwired will have sooner or later to take steps to have their theatres equipped for talking pictures.”²²

²¹ ‘R. M. Wright’s Scathing Criticism of C.E.A. Policy’, *The Bioscope*, 25 December 1929.

²² ‘General Council Owns Up!’, *The Bioscope*, 15 January 1930.

With the General Purposes Committee's report, the idea that silent film might continue alongside the talkies for any considerable amount of time effectively died within the C.E.A. Discussion on the matter at branch meetings in the weeks and months following the report's release shifted away from the over-confident assertions that silent film production would continue – and even thrive – due to the proliferation of unwired theatres in the country; to accusations against the General Council for failing to defend the majority of cinemas in their charge from market forces. Criticism was levelled in three primary directions: against the General Council and the majority of individuals who sat on it, for failing to advise and advocate for independent exhibitors in a timely fashion; against the producer-renters for seemingly stampeding cinemas into installing apparatus that could not be afforded, or denying the rental of silent film product despite its availability, in order for it to be synchronised; and towards the C.E.A. membership in general, for its failure to present a loyal, united front against enemies both without and within.

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After the silent film crisis had come to an end, as cinemas made their peace and installed apparatus – now at some reduced cost – the efforts of the C.E.A. began to focus on the terms on which films were rented, as well as the perceived poor quality of British films made to satisfy quota. In both cases, members frequently stressed the need for cooperation and loyalty within the ranks, in order for collective action to be effective. Yet the experience of 1929, where cinemas with means had enjoyed distinct advantages both in their ability to wire for sound early and with the most renowned apparatus, and to enjoy the newest and most lavish productions from an industry rapidly abandoning silent filmmaking, had cast

significant doubts on the C.E.A.'s ability to present a united front. The Association's leadership had been accused both of incompetence and of acting at cross-purposes on behalf of large business combines; likewise, many in the membership considered the more powerful of their fellow members to exacerbate problems for smaller exhibitors, rather than lending their relative strength to their cause.

This sense of distrust and disloyalty continued into discussion of unfavourable trading terms under which sound films were rented to exhibitors. Speaking at a meeting of the Leicester Branch in April 1930, Roland Wright encapsulated this concern, and *The Bioscope* reported on what he expressed to members assembled:

“What they needed was greater loyalty. There were too many divisions in their ranks. They would never get a Trading Scheme in the C.E.A. whilst that atmosphere of hostility between the exhibitor on one side of the road and the other prevailed. Renters could combine to some purpose. They had agreed to put irksome conditions on ‘talkies,’ and their combination assisted to get them, but as exhibitors they could do nothing.”²³

He went on to complain that exhibitors had been known to agree amongst themselves on an approach to entering contracts with renters, only to immediately break those agreements and acquiesce to renters' demands. His words may have stirred some sense of shared purpose and unity amongst his fellow branch members, were it not for the regrettable fact that less than a third of the Leicester Branch members had chosen to attend that day's meeting.

²³ ‘Leicester Call for More Loyalty’, *The Bioscope*, 23 April 1930.