**When Britannia Ruled the Sound Waves**

Britain’s Transition to Sound in its European Context

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**Abstract**

This essay investigates the British film industry’s conversion to sound in 1929 in the context of the related conversions in Germany and France. Encouraged by the English language’s global spread, and bolstered by predominantly American sound technology, Britain’s industry took the lead, launching continuous production of talking features in the spring of 1929 with the talkie version of Hitchcock’s *Blackmail*. By the beginning of June, work had begun on *Atlantic,* the world’s first talking feature to be shot in two languages, English and German. Germany itself, its progress delayed by patent disputes, swung into action in the autumn with multi-lingual films made at Ufa’s newly converted Neubabelsberg studios. Held back by lack of industrial, financial and technological muscle, France was the slowest to convert.

The essay also investigates the creative limits of Britain’s advance, and the relative caution of its exploitation of sound compared to the bolder, more rigorously designed sound features emerging from Germany and, eventually, France – countries with less domineering theatrical traditions and stronger traditions in cinematic experimentation. Britannia’s dominance over the sound waves turned out to be brief, and incomplete.

*Key words*: Britain, Germany, France, Hitchcock, sound conversion

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Consider the logo used at the end of the 1920s by British International Pictures, the film company that forged ahead more quickly and confidently than any other in Britain and Europe during 1929, the turbulent year when the world beyond America began to face up to the challenge of following the American industry’s lead, making feature-length films with synchronised sound and dialogue. Usually glimpsed at a film’s conclusion, emblazoned with the words ‘THE END’, the logo proudly features Britannia, the female personification of the British Isles depicted on coins from Roman times onwards. In her right hand she clutches a shield – it also looks like a lopsided film can – engraved with the company initials, BIP. In her left she clasps a trident, the spear regularly carried by Neptune and other mythological figures deemed to wield power over oceans. In its mobile form on the screen, the logo’s globe quickly revolves, revealing in turn stylised representations of the Americas and Australia – English-speaking land masses that, by implication, BIP’s product hoped to conquer.

**[fig. 1.** The logo of British International Pictures, as seen at the end of *A Romance of Seville* (1929).]

For a film business encouraged by the protectionist measures of the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, the figure of Britannia must have seemed an appropriate vessel for channelling the industry’s revived aspirational and patriotic spirit; a spirit also suggested in the names of other film companies formed in this period, including British National Pictures (absorbed into BIP in 1927), British and Dominions Film Corporation, British National Tone-Film Productions, and the riskily titled British Masterpiece Films. For the industry in 1929, however, the waves that Britannia needed to rule with her trident were sound waves, not ocean waves. And it is Britain’s initial advances into the production of synchronised sound features, alongside the more measured advances in Germany and France, Britain’s closest European competitors in their total number of cinemas (converted or not), that this paper seeks to document, analyse, and explain.

**Britain’s steps towards synchronised sound**

As with many other countries, the United States included, the British film industry’s exploitation of synchronised sound before the late 1920s had mostly remained at the novelty level. In the 1900s gramophone records, newly created or taken from existing commercial supplies, had sounded out from behind early cinema screens, hopefully matching the filmed scenes of muted music and song; this was the technique of Cecil Hepworth’s ‘Vivaphone’ films, on show around the country by 1910, with effects ‘strangely life-like’ (Anon., 1910; Hepworth, 1951). As late as 1927, Manchester producer John E. Blakeley’s *Cameo Operas* endeavoured to foster synchronicity with the screen through live cinema accompaniments by musicians and soloists (Anon., 1927). But it took the development of optical sound, inscribed on an outer edge of the projected celluloid, for continuous production of plausible British synchronised sound films to begin. A scientific paper by C. F. Elwell with film illustrations, delivered at the Royal Society of Arts in London on 26 November 1924, laid out the optical technology used by his employers, the British offshoot of DeForest Phonofilms (Elwell, 1924). The company subsequently began issuing their own showcase shorts – dramatic sketches, variety acts, even a poetry reading by Edith Sitwell, made at the small Phonofilm studio in Clapham, South London. The need for special projection equipment restricted the scope for public exhibitions, centred in London at the Capitol Theatre, Haymarket, though by 1929, after management changes, a move to Wembley, and reconfiguration as British Talking Pictures, Phonofilm output increased in ambition. The three-reel comedy *Mr. Smith Wakes Up!*, trade shown in February 1929, filled 25 minutes with synchronised talk – for a brief period, a British record (Hill, 1929).

Phonofilms’ expansion came in the wake of the major catalyst for Britain’s talkie revolution, Warner Bros.’ extended London display of recent Vitaphone features and shorts, launched at the recently constructed Piccadilly Theatre, wired for the purpose, on 27 September 1928. The Western Electric technology used – with synchronised soundtracks captured on 18-inch discs, laborious to ship, store and operate – created a stir and a debate in the industry. But technical matters paled beside the public impact of the screenings, particularly of *The Singing Fool*, Al Jolson’s emotionally florid successor to *The Jazz Singer*, which drew large crowds happy to queue across all hours after it opened on 29 November at the Regal, Marble Arch*.* Boosted by parallel public enthusiasm in America, British exhibitors and producers finally became convinced that Britain’s own sound films had to be produced, for all the technical and financial upheaval involved on the heels of the expansion initiated by the Films Act. Even before the Warner showcase opened, Herbert Wilcox, of British and Dominions, and a determined showman, had planned an American trip to study sound production and mount his own talkie production in Hollywood as a precursor to securing his own sound facilities in England (partially achieved in September 1929) (Anon., 1928a). The eventual outcome of his US trip was an enjoyably melodramatic mystery thriller, *Black Waters*, directed by the American Marshall Neilan, shot in Los Angeles in December and early January using Western Electric sound equipment, and characterised by one American reviewer as ‘the talkingest-talkie yet projected on the screen’ (Anon., 1929a). It was registered by the British Board of Trade as a foreign film.

By the time the ‘foreign’ *Black Waters* received its London trade show in May 1929, Alfred Hitchcock was busy at Elstree in a temporary BIP sound studio directing the sound sequences necessary to turn his thriller *Blackmail*, shot silent, into a product fit for the new marketplace. BIP eventually advertised the result as a ‘100 per cent talkie’ and ‘the first full length all talkie film made in Britain’.[[1]](#endnote-1) It marked the culmination of a technical transition process that had been underway at John Maxwell’s company at different speeds for over six months. In November 1928 the company, strengthened financially by its ownership of the theatre chain Associated British Cinemas, had announced the addition of two sound stages to a studio site already established as the biggest in Britain (Anon., 1928b). In December, trade papers improbably reported that the new studios were ‘rapidly nearing completion’ (they opened in the summer of 1929), though their assumption of the choice of sound apparatus – Western Electric’s American rival RCA Photophone – proved correct (Anon., 1928c). Serious building work began only after contracts with Western Electric were signed in January (Tilley, 1929a). By April, an extensive sound production team, dominated by six former employees of the BBC, had been formed, with Dennis Scanlan serving as chief technician, but slow progress on the studios meant that *Blackmail* had to be fitted with its talkie voice in an imperfectly sound-proofed temporary space, a former storage room for scenery, about 40ft by 65ft (Anon., 1929b). Shooting started on 8 April. Later press commentary (Lejeune, 1940) suggested that the only RCA equipment to hand for the taskwas a second-hand set previously shipped from America as a collegiate gesture to technicians at Cambridge University. If true, the equipment would have formed a startlingly slim technical foundation for the bold sound programme announced by Maxwell just before Hitchcock started work: 15-20 sound features during the year, with 20-25 following in 1930 (Anon., 1929c).

BIP’s production of the talkie *Blackmail*, a substantial success when it opened to the public on 28 July, ran in parallel with two foreign excursions: the shooting in New York of sound sequences for transplant into another BIP silent, Victor Saville’s version of Warwick Deeping’s sentimental novel *Kitty* (Mannock, 1929a); and a frothy German comedy, *Wer wird denn weinen, wenn man auseinander geht/ Why Cry at Parting?*, BIP’s latest German co-production with the director Richard Eichberg, fitted with synchronised music and dialogue at the Lignose-Hörfim studio in Berlin (Gandert, 1997, pp.715-718). Throughout the summer, BIP remained technically hard-pressed at Elstree, with frequent equipment breakdowns partly caused by sound apparatus being shunted overnight between different stages to maintain Maxwell’s ambitious schedule.[[2]](#endnote-2) But the company’s standing within the trade remained strong, reflected in BIP’s own advertised estimate of itself as a company ‘ever in the vanguard of progress’, one that used ‘enterprise, talent and brains [to] produce “talkies” without compeer’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Gaumont’s futuristic *High Treason*, the W. P. Film Company’s *White Cargo* and Strand’s *To What Red Hell* (all talkie versions of provocative plays), and the cultured melodrama *Dark Red Roses*,produced by British Talking Pictures’ offshoot British Sound Film Productions, remained the only major talkie competitors among London’s other studios, many of which were still completing their conversions.

**Germany, Britain, and the ‘language difficulty’**

Maxwell’s production push worked. By the end of the year, bolstered by extra equipment and the completion of the two permanent sound studios, Maxwell had achieved his 20 talkie features, ranging from variously re-upholstered silents like *Blackmail*, *Kitty* (premiered 8 June), and *The Informer* (trade shown 17 October) to films always conceived with microphones in mind, such as *Atlantic* (trade shown 15 November) and *Juno and the Paycock* (30 December)*.* Shot between June and September, *Atlantic*, inspired by the sinking of the *Titanic*,proved particularly significant as the world’s first dual-language talkie. In April Eichberg had voiced plans to synchronise *Why Cry at Parting?* in German and English, with an ‘unclear’ version theoretically capable of later transformation into other languages (Anon., 1929d). By June, Germany’s major film company Ufa was publicising its own plans for multi-lingual versions, to be shepherded by the producer Erich Pommer (Anon., 1929e). But it was BIP’s management and their star import director E. A. Dupont who took the major practical step by arranging to simultaneously shoot *Atlantic* in English and German with two different casts in an effort to combat the loss of silent films’ universal ‘language’, establishing a production template further developed by Pommer at Ufa. BIP continued with its own multi-lingual versions until 1932, making two more with Dupont, *Two Worlds* and *Cape Forlorn,* and three with Richard Eichberg.[[4]](#endnote-4)

*Atlantik*, the German version of *Atlantic*, was premiered first (28 October) in Berlin. Reviewing for *Variety*, C. Hooper Trask labelled it ‘the first 100 per cent German talker, but made in England’ (Trask, 1929). Numerous intermediate examples had appeared before, like Walter Ruttmann’s experimental sound documentary *Melodie der Welt* (‘Melody of the World’, premiered 12 March), or the part-talking UK co-production *Das Land ohne Frauen/ Bride No.68* (30 September). Yet the arrival of *Atlantik* still delighted audiences, if not all critics, at a time when the German industry’s big studio conversion at Ufa’s Neubabelsberg site had only recently been presented to the press. Rudolf Arnheim in *Die Weltbühne* carped about actors reduced to ‘unaesthetic barking’ or speaking like ‘funeral directors’ (Arnheim, 1997, p.38). British trade reporters ignored the film’s faults and basked in the international limelight. The *Cinema News and Property Gazette* headline read: ‘British Production Triumph: “Atlantic”Premiere a Sensation’ (Anon., 1929f). Britannia must have been very pleased.

The Berlin premiere of *Atlantik* presented a stark contrast with the situation noted one year before during a European tour by the producer and director Sinclair Hill, then managing director of Stoll Film Productions. He claimed to have detected almost no interest in sound at Neubabelsberg, and only ‘lukewarm interest’ in Paris. Berlin, he wrote in the *Kinematograph Weekly*, considered sound a ‘passing novelty’ – a museum exhibit like the Tri-Ergon process, an optical recording method that had briefly interested Ufa in 1925: ‘None of the leaders in the industry in ­­­­­Germany would dream at the moment of converting their studios for the making of talking pictures, which are regarded as inimical to their particular path of development in motion pictures’ (Hill, 1928).

Hill could not have looked very deeply. By the time of his tour, deals were already being pursued linking British film and recording companies with German partners (Brown, 2013, pp.189-190). Even before he came back, British Phototone had started producing a series of sound-on-disc shorts at the Lignose studio in Berlin (Anon., 1928d). An executive delegation from Ufa itself visited America late in 1928 to study the sound phenomenon, with London tucked into the return trip. Once home, Ufa’s management took the critical decision to embrace sound; and by February 1929 the conversion process at Neubabelsberg began, culminating in a rigorously sound-proofed building known as the *Tonkreuz* for its cross formation, and far more thoroughly planned for the task than the new stages built at BIP (Kreimeir, 1996, pp.180-181). Under political pressure to push Germany and German technology onto the world stage, Pommer set about forming a technical team, with Fritz Thiery, previously an electro-acoustic researcher at Siemens (a major force in the Klangfilm group) in charge of sound (Hardt, 1996, p.129; Kreimeir, 1996, p.190).

Almost six months after the trade show of *Blackmail*, Pommer’s first ‘super’ sound film for Ufa, *Melodie des Herzens* (‘Melody of the Heart’), launched in May with silent location shooting, made its Berlin public debut on 16 December after sonic refinements at the *Tonkreuz*. It was issued in four languages. By that time, Pommer was well into production on the dual-language musical *Liebeswalzer*, set in motion by September when the British juvenile lead John Batten was signed to play in its English version, *The Love Waltz,* for a weekly salary rumoured to be in three figures (Mooring, 1929).

Assessing the Neubabelsberg development in November 1929, the technical team at the *Cinema News and Property Gazette* whetted its readers’ interest and envy with the usual bevy of statistics and technical details: 42 ensuite dressing-rooms; signalling devices hoisted on tripods on the studio floors; walls covered in Celotex insulation panels (Anon., 1929g). More usefully for us, the coverage also pondered the reasons why sound came to Germany ‘fairly late’, lagging behind American and England. The main reason picked was the ‘language difficulty’ caused by the talkies, which curtailed the amount of exportable product and theoretically left any German talkies, once made, with a market shrunk to German-speaking audiences alone.

Whether or not linguistics played that much of a part, it is clear that as the single Anglophone country in Western Europe Britain occupied a unique position. The country shared its language (more or less) with America. It was stocked with stage-trained performers who could speak with the clear elocution deemed necessary for a ‘microphone voice’ – a concept initially developed in the wake of the BBC’s radio broadcasts, but quickly transferred by journalists to the new field of talking pictures (Anon., 1929h). Had British talkies not talked in English, executives such as Maxwell or Wilcox would not have felt so powerful an urge to rush into talkies to meet the American challenge. Nor would the industry have harboured hopes that British talkies, with technical improvement, might actually supplant Hollywood product, an accomplished some felt achieved by *Blackmail*. ‘Beating the American talkie to a frazzle’: that was the expression of Arthur Dent from the distributors Wardour Films, speaking at a sales conference dinner in June (Anon., 1929i). Equally, journalists carried on winds of hyperboles would scarcely have advanced what now seems the preposterous hope that London could topple Hollywood as the global centre of film production – a visionary prospect also manifested in the scheme floated in 1929 by the American film executive J. D. Williams. He envisaged a ‘World Studio Centre’: a 20-stage factory at Elstree for stamping out films in multiple language versions. It was never successfully financed, and never built (Anon., 1929j).

Britain’s initial position at the head of Europe’s conversion to sound was further strengthened by London’s status during 1928 and the first half of 1929 as the European city with the biggest number of wired cinemas for showing America’s talkie imports, from *The Singing Fool* and Warners’ other Vitaphone features to MGM’s *The Broadway Melody*. As editor of the new French magazine *Pour Vous,* Alexandre Arnoux came in October 1928 to cover Warners’ *The Terror,* the first full-length talkie screened in Europe. His review ended: ‘A second birth or a death? That is the question facing the cinema’ (Clair, 1972, p.129). London reports, equally sceptical, followed from René Clair in the spring. Other Europeans visited Elstree and Wembley studios, where dramatic sound productions, short or long, could be seen in action. Interviewed after his trip to British Talking Pictures at Wembley, the director of *Pandora’s Box*, G. W. Pabst, pronounced himself very impressed with the visual and aural strengths in the rushes of Sinclair Hill’s extended short *The Unwritten Law*,now seemingly lost (Blakeston, 1929). It is hard to think of a previous time when the British film industry’s studio activities had ever been a source of foreign interest.

**The wider international context, ‘Film Europe’, and the ‘Chart of the Sound Picture Industry of the World’**

Pabst also saw *The Singing Fool* in London: a bad film, he thought, though he admitted he had cried at the end. At the time, the film’s German release was being held up by a developing battle between Western Electric and the new German conglomerate Tobis-Klangfilm over claimed patents infringements concerning Western Electric’s equipment (Thompson, 1985, p.154). This battle, fought through legal injunctions and trade boycotts, chimes with the second reason identified by *Cinema News* as a factor in Germany’s delayed response to the talkies: the legal complications generated by the multiple patents and licenses underpinning the exploitation of sound apparatus across the world. By the end of the 1920s, fifteen different sound systems, based on 3000 different patents, fought each other for prominence across Europe (Kreimeir, 1996, p.179). The merger of the Tobis and Klangfilm groups in March 1929 lessened those numbers, and created enough industrial muscle to allow Europe to feel more confident challenging America’s electrical combines. A partial rapprochement between the sides followed the conclusion of the Paris conference on patent rights in June 1930, when degrees of control over equipment licensing were laid out for Europe, America, and the wider world, with Tobis-Klangfilm dominant in Germany (Irby, 1930, p.747; O’Brien, 2005, pp.19-20). But the previous uncertainties had already given German companies sufficient pause to slow the wiring process in cinemas: in August 1929, Pommer informed the British journalist Cedric Belfrage that the total of wired cinemas was only about 20 (Belfrage, 1929). One month later, Britain’s total, with some 1000 fewer cinemas than Germany, was already around 630 (Tilley, 1929b, p.47): the direct result of a far simpler licensing situation and much less industrial uncertainty, with American equipment quickly dominant in cinemas (Western Electric took the lead), and eventually dominant, with RCA Photophone, in the studios as well (Low, 1985, pp.74-76).

The complexities of patents and industrial relationships only grew during the transition to sound. In September 1930 this global maze was powerfully crystallised in diagrammatic form in an imposing ‘Chart of the Sound Picture Industry of the World’, first published in the American magazine *Electronics* (Lewis, 1933, p.79)**[fig 2**. ‘“Electronics” Chart of the Sound Picture Industry of the World’, published in *Electronics* magazine, September 1930.] On the left of the chart stands the United States, where the industrial sound revolution began, powered by the ambitions and technologies of Western Electric (offshoot of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company) and the Radio Corporation of America, part owned by the conglomerate General Electric. Europe occupies the chart’s right, showing the territory’s technologies and patents firmly controlled by three main company blocks, Tobis and Klangfilm in Germany, and the Amsterdam-based Küchenmeister conglomerate, a major holder of Tobis capital.

Britain’s film concerns, harder to spot, sit roughly in the chart’s middle, far from the top where the real industrial power lies, yet strengthened by lines of association reaching leftwards to RCA Photophone or upwards through British Talking Pictures’ relationships with Klangfilm and Tobis (Brown, 2013). France’s industry, lurking at the bottom right, maintains a weaker presence, with fewer connections to the chief drivers of cinema’s sound technology. The chart’s visual summary accurately reflects the French industry’s status at the time – smaller, more insular, more artisanal compared to either Britain’s or Germany’s, poorly financed, with a stock of ageing studios and no home-grown electrical conglomerate or powerful sound patents to call its own (Abel, 1984; Crisp, 1993).

A similarly imposing diagram would be needed to chart another global tangle of corporate links governing film production and distribution – links that steadily developed within Europe during the 1920s, accelerated by the stabilisation of the German economy and a mounting desire to bind together the European market in the face of American imports (Higson and Maltby, 1999). British companies formed numerous deals, especially with Germany. Gainsborough started collaborating with Ufa and Emelka in 1924 with *The Bla, ckguard*, shot in Berlin;Gaumont-British, by now Gainsborough’s parent company, struck its own wide-ranging Ufa deal in 1928, when British Instructional Films signed contracts with Länder-Film and Svensk Bioscop, resulting in Anthony Asquith’s *The Runaway Princess* and *A Cottage on Dartmoor*. This was the age of ‘Film Europe’ – the German trade’s term for the goal of collaborative production and product exchange in a pan-European industry (Higson and Maltby, 1999, pp.1-2).

With the co-production deals involving Germany, always the negotiations’ prime mover, British trade commentators were under no illusion about where the power lay. Foreshadowing the glories itemised in later coverage of the *Tonkreuz*, the actor-director Miles Mander, fresh from appearing in Hitchcock’s *The Pleasure Garden*,shot at Emelka’s Munich studios, wrote in the *Kinematograph Weekly* of facilities far beyond Britain’s command, from hot baths adjoining the dressing rooms to an outside lot containing 30-40 standing sets (Mander, 1925). In 1927, the same magazine gave Germany’s studio operations another bouquet of praise: ‘They start early every morning; their scenarios have time-schedules for each day’s work; and their cameramen with £1,000 outfits are not treated as handle-turners. Has the British producer nothing to learn in these directions?’ (Rayment, 1927). Two years later, the introduction of synchronised speech severely compromised Germany’s push towards a ‘Film Europe’. It also had the effect of suddenly reversing perceptions of the industries’ relative strengths. Britain in the 1920s may not have mustered the German industry’s technical capacity, its discipline, square feet, or sophisticated technicians. But then Germany in the talkie world of 1929 did not share a language with the United States, the conqueror of cinema’s world market, and a territory that welcomed *Blackmail* in October with relatively open arms.[[5]](#endnote-5)

**A ‘picture obsession’, but not many pictures: the French industry and sound**

In keeping with its weaker industry, France’s collaborations with Britain in the 1920s were smaller and less significant than Germany’s, though that did not reflect the country’s general passion for cinema. During his 1928 European visit, Sinclair Hill was struck by the ‘feverish concentration and picture obsession’ evident on the studio floors both in Paris and Berlin, and absent in UK studios: ‘The lowest-paid technician is picture-mad. He lives for pictures, thinks in pictures, talks of little else but pictures’ (Hill, 1928).

According to Hill, the conversational topic mostly absent from French studios was sound, though France had no shortage of technical experiments in the area. The first documented experiment was in 1857, when Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville patented the Phonautograph, a device for inscribing sound wave undulations in lines traced on blackened glass or paper. With the invention of film, synchronising devices followed, most significantly Gaumont’s disc-based Chronophone, popular in the 1900s. In the mid-1920s, the Gaumont company began exploring optical sound, adopting the technology developed by the Danish engineers Petersen and Poulsen; the technology also served as the basis for what became the most widely used British sound system, British Acoustic Films, operated by Gaumont in Britain. In 1928, one year after the Vitaphone disc presentation of *The Jazz Singer* in New York, the result of Gaumont’s explorations, Cinéphone, made its public debut with a demonstration programme on 18 October, including a feature, *L’Eau du Nil*, shot silent but shown with a synchronised orchestral score. In response, the *Cinématographie Française* urged the nation to make more synchronised films in order to stop America increasing its market dominance (Crisp, 1993, p.97). Instead Gaumont dithered, along with other companies, and the first significant step towards sound production only came when Tobis intervened in the spring of 1929, renting and equipping the former Menchen studio at Épinay-sur-Seine as the basis for its own French productions, channelled through a new satellite company, Films Sonores Tobis (Bock, Mosel and Spazier, 2003, p.40). On 22 June, *Cinématograph Française* declared Tobis to be ‘our European champion’, and looked forward to direct combat with Hollywood and the production of ‘the first fine French-language films’ (Phillips, 2004, p.34), though it took until November for the level of production activity to justify inviting the press to visit.[[6]](#endnote-6)

At Films Sonores Tobis, recording was put in charge of Hermann Storr, a Klangfilm veteran from Berlin and a key colleague and facilitator on Clair’s early sound films (Barnier, 2011, p. 206). Studio conversions slowly continued over the summer, at Joinville and elsewhere. Sound shorts and the modestly dialogued historical drama *Le Collier de la reine* emerged, but several producers willing to take on the challenge of a full talking feature had to seek studio space in London and Berlin. The compact studio at Twickenham, newly equipped with RCA Photophone, proved particularly welcoming. In August 1929 it housed André Hugon’s production of *Les Trois masques,* a mediocre drama set in Corsica, made for Pathé-Natan, the new owners of Paris’s Joinville studios (then awaiting delivery of their own RCA set from the States) (Anon., 1929k). In October, Twickenham and the French producer Jacques Haïk collaborated on A. E. W. Mason’s detective novel *At the Villa Rose*,filmed in English and French (Green, 1930); the arrangement continued in 1930 with two other popular properties. *La cancíon del dia,* Spain’s first significant talkie production, made in an English copy (*Spanish Eyes*), followed in March (Anon., 1930a).

Also in October, BIP, a much more prestigious studio, rented space to the young producer Pierre Braunberger and his opportunistic *La Route est belle*, featuring the operetta singer André Baugé in a musical drama clearly patterned upon Al Jolson’s film successes. The British trade press reports noted the set’s lavish trappings, though the memories of its director, Robert Florey, were only of penny-pinching, intrusive thick fog, and ‘pitiable’ technical equipment, particularly the three ailing cameras (Florey, 1948, pp.160-161). Possibly BIP kept the sturdiest technical equipment for its own use. Braunberger and Florey’s next musical talkie, the multi-lingual *L’Amour chanté*,was shot at Ufa’s comparatively an Neubabelsberg complex in Berlin.

Despite any shortcomings in these 100% per cent talkies, their continuous displays of French speech and song were enough to guarantee enthusiastic audiences in France. The *Variety* reporter covering *Les Trois masques* thought its premiere ‘an epochal event’ that seemed to prophecy ‘a serious blow to the supremacy of American pictures in this territory’ (Anon., 1929l). But the novelty value of films talking in French and the sophistication of subsequent product, from Clair’s *Sous les toits de Paris* (‘Under the Roofs of Paris’) to Marcel L’Herbier’s playful treatments of Gaston Leroux thrillers, still left the French industry’s lingering problem untouched: the slow rate of cinema conversion. By the end of August 1929, the total of wired cinemas was 18, 16 of them in Paris. By the end of 1930, the number had risen only to 552, around 14% of the 4000 that formed the country’s approximate total. By the end of 1930, Britain, with a similarly sized stock of cinemas, had reached 3000 conversions (Crisp, 1993, p.101). This represented the fastest rate of cinema re-wirings in Europe.

**Quality control and the theatre**

The paragraphs above have attempted to map and contextualise the progress of Britain’s transition to sound in 1929 in tandem with related technical and operational developments in Germany and France. But an investigation into matters of artistic quality – as it was perceived, as it seems now – is also required to widen the picture. Admittedly, such an investigation, in some areas at least, carries dangers and limitations. Watching surviving copies of early talkies, it is easy to spot the soundtracks’ imperfections: including muffled or distorted speech, shifting thicknesses of ‘ground noise’, wayward dynamic levels, and the untreated ‘blips’ left as scars by editing incisions (the last still found in British films from the mid 1930s and beyond). But any attempted objective assessment of that sound quality today must face the impossibility of duplicating the 1929 viewing experience of the original 35mm prints – an experience subject then as now to so many sonic variables, from the equipment used, a cinema’s acoustics, to the cleanliness of the projection booth. Even at the time, if bad sound was experienced critics regularly had difficulty identifying the reason. In the *Cinema News* review of Gaumont’s prestige first sound feature *High Treason*, patchesof ‘marked inaudibility’ at the trade show were implicitly blamed on the original British Acoustic recording. A separate note followed: ‘Since the above review was written, it has been ascertained that the patchy reproduction was due to a piece of grit in one of the sound pick-ups’ (Anon., 1929l).

We will move on, then, beyond missing sibilants or stray dirt to an enquiry into the choice of film material and creativity in the exploitation of sound. In Britain and elsewhere, the material brought to the microphones often had a theatrical source, for the obvious reason that the theatre offered studios subjects already brimming with speech, as well as a ready supply of actors experienced in speaking. If we use Denis Gifford’s *British Film Catalogue* as a guide, the transition year of 1929 generated 28 British features derived from theatrical material. 1930 brought 37, with a bumper crop of 66 in 1931 (Gifford, 1973). Given the limited movements of cameras and performers associated with the earliest talkies, the resulting product had a reasonable chance of resembling ‘canned theatre’ – the prospect that so disturbed Britain’s cinema intellectuals, especially after the influential Soviet statement on sound film was published in *Close Up* in 1928.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In BIP’s *Atlantic*, based on Ernest Raymond’s play *The Berg*, recently produced in the West End, stilted line readings and statuesque group formations of scenes in the doomed liner’s bar and lounge certainly bring the nightmare to mind. Writing in the *Graphic*, Herbert Farjeon, himself from the theatre, could not believe the time Madeleine Carroll took over each syllable, and accurately complained that the dialogue ‘seems to proceed from the mouths of the photographs but not from the hearts’ (Farjeon, 1930). On the other hand, with sound effects to hand Dupont and his technical team easily overcame a common criticism of the play’s production: the lack of hubbub from the ship’s panicking passengers. From the start, sound recordist Alec Murray whips the ears with sea spray and wind as the ship’s prow, in repeated shots, digs a noisy path through the sea. Once the fatal iceberg arrives, out come three warning bells from the crow’s nest, the wail of the foghorn, the buzz of shooting flares, the passenger hubbub, the ship’s band soldiering on: atmospheric effects, however, briskly undercut once the dialogue of the first-class passengers crawls back.

Yet for all their impact, the sound effects in *Atlantic* essentially remain theatrical effects writ large, with most of them, like the wind-machine wind, probably generated by the same theatrical tools. In *Blackmail*, based on Charles Bennett’s play, Hitchcock went beyond sound as surface illustration, at least in the famous ‘knife’ scene, where the word reverberates inside Anny Ondra’s head after she uses a knife to protect herself from a sexual assault. This subjective use of sound immediately received critical approval. The critic Ernest Betts, known at the time for opposing the talkies, devoted a long paragraph to the scene in *Close Up*, presenting it as an encouraging example of sound and action subtly interwoven (Betts, 1929). Another subjective effect appears in Hitchcock’s *Murder!* (1930), where Herbert Marshall’s anguished interior thoughts are spoken on the soundtrack as he contemplates his bathroom mirror while the prelude to Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* runs in counterpoint on a radio. (The scene is better directed, and more persuasively acted, in the German version, *Mary*.)

Even British and Dominions’ version of Ben Travers’ farce *Rookery Nook* (1930), the most popular of Herbert Wilcox’s opening flourish of British sound productions and an easy candidate for being filmed by a camera nailed to the floor, managed to duck and weave round its characters and interject location shooting.[[8]](#endnote-8) There is the further British example of Basil Dean, a leading theatrical producer turned cinema practitioner, who made his British talkie debut in 1930 breathing new life into John Galsworthy’s play *Escape* with a symbolic fox hunt (plus yelping hounds) and desolate Dartmoor exteriors (Brown, 1986, p.152-154).

Improvements in technology, from boom microphones to ‘blimped’ cameras with soundproof padding, played their own part in increasing fluidity and imagination in films based on stage material. However, that had no effect on any limitations built into the material itself – material largely conceived for the comfort of West End theatre audiences. For all the success of the play adaptation of Walter Greenwood’s novel *Love on the Dole* (1934), eventually filmed in 1940, the theatrical bias in Britain helped to limit the industry’s treatment of national life, especially apparent at the dawn of a decade marked by political upheavals and social distress. The range of the coverage appears suffocatingly narrow in another Wilcox stage adaptation, *Canaries Sometimes Sing* (1930) – 80 minutes of cardboard upper-class characters murmuring nothing but Frederick Lonsdale’s palely witty lines, yet a film warmly welcomed at the time. As C. A. Lejeune observed in the *Observer*, ‘It seems to be essentially British to put up the spy-glass to the blind eye’ (Lejeune, 1932a).

**The limits of technique: Britain, Germany, and France**

Another limiting British characteristic emerges in the field of technique. As a BIP talkie release quickly constructed from a completed silent film, Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* demonstrates far greater sophistication than Saville’s close BIP rival *Kitty*, where the jumble of old and new footage featured in the film’s last half-hour never approaches a smooth blend. Yet there are still boundaries to Hitchcock’s success. For all his established position as ‘one of the first directors to use sound in an imaginative way’ (Larsen, 1950, p.80), the subjective sound moments in *Blackmail* and *Murder!* exist within their films as individual directorial stunts, rather than composite parts of any overarching design. In *Kinematograph Weekly,* Lars Moen went so far as to suggest that if talkies did not seriously probe new areas of artistry like subjective sound, the public might ditch their regular cinema visits for ‘ice-skating or backgammon or even the lost art of conversation’ (Moen, 1930, p.47). The public stayed in the cinemas. But so did the stunted subjective mode, left as one small patch in a patchwork – something particularly apparent in the stylistically uneven *Murder!,* containing both sinuous roving camerawork and stiff scenes of bald talk that wrongly suggest the material was derived from a play. It is this patchwork quality above all that separates even the liveliest of early British sound features from the liveliest contemporaneous products of Germany and France.

When Ufa in Germany entered the lists in December 1929 with *Melodie des Herzens*, directed by Hanns Schwarz, it did so with a swaggering soundtrack consciously designed to make the sound elements a full partner in the film’s narrative design. Reviewing the French version, René Girard ironically observed that Schwarz’s search for realistic sound effects was such that you couldn’t see any object without wondering if it was going to make a noise (Icart, 1988, pp.231-232). The showpiece sequence occurs early on, offering a vivid aural kaleidoscope as the film’s heroine, a Hungarian country girl portrayed by Dita Parlo, arrives for the first time in Budapest. The whistle of trains and their grinding wheels, the bustle of passengers, the clanging trams, the officer offering a few directions: every sound in Thiery’s assemblage is pitched at a level that both advertises the virtuosity of Klangfilm’s recording apparatus and spotlights Parlo’s isolation and bewilderment. Further scenes offer gutsy singing, loud factory whistles, vigorous cock crowing, a prominent accordion, and a cuckoo clock. Yet beyond this exuberant bombardment, you still sense a guiding intelligence, using the full technical arsenal to interpret and strengthen the story. Placed alongside *Melodie des Herzens,* the sonic tapestry in BIP’s *Atlantic* seems a model of British reserve. For that matter, contemporary critics noted differences between *Atlantic* and *Atlantik*, almost all favouring the latter, with its quicker speech, more natural acting, and increased tension (Collier, 1930).

The modest amount of speech in *Melodie des Herzens* caught the attention of several critics, including Clifford Howard in *Close Up*. Commenting on the English language version, he marvelled at its ‘restrained, natural use of dialogue’ and ‘felicitous blending of sound with action and photography’ – a revelation, he wrote, when an overdose of talk in Hollywood films kept threatening ‘cinematic unity’ (Howard, 1930, p.454). Critical complaints about American 100% talkers mounted as their novelty value faded; and the average British film, drawn from theatrical material or the languid imaginations of scenario writers poorly regarded within the industry, could not offer much of a bulwark.[[9]](#endnote-9) In a column headed ‘Cut the Cackle’, after almost three years of British talkies, C. A. Lejeune declared that she had ‘never seen an English director who knew what to do with talk at all’ (Lejeune, 1932b, p.17). That would include Hitchcock.

For critics like Lejeune, with cinema tastes strongly influenced by the quality silent imports of the 1920s, particularly from Germany and France, continental sound releases often provided better nourishment than any English-language product. In her ‘Cut the Cackle’ column, she praised Pabst’s realist-inclined mining drama *Kameradschaft* for its ‘real stereoscopy of sound and silence’, with voices standing out ‘ominously’ against a background of silent action. ‘This,’ she wrote, ‘is sound-cinema as it should be.’ Other German films singled out by British critics for their sonic restraint or cleverness included Sternberg’s Ufa production *The Blue Angel* (‘[it] gives us talk in a new way that lets us in on people’s minds’: Herring, 1930) and the playful operetta fancies of *Die Drei von der Tankstelle* (‘Three from the Filling Station’)*,* the biggest success among Pommer’s early Ufa musicals, seen in Britain in its French version, and praised as ‘a pictorial witticism from beginning to end’ (Betts, 1931).

No film, however, presented the continental alternative with quite the force of Clair’s sound debut, *Sous les toits de Paris*, the most notable product to emerge from Films Sonores Tobis at Épinay, principally shot during the first three months of 1930. Clair’s antipathy at the time toward constant film chatter is clear enough from his 1929 *Pour Vous* reports, where he expressed the fear that cinema was ‘conquering the world of voices but losing the world of dreams over which the silent film reigned’ (Clair, 1972, p.141). His solution in *Sous les toits* was to create a film exquisitely balanced between silence and sound, threaded with a theme song seemingly on everyone’s lips in the humble Paris streets, houses and bars where the simple story, climaxing in a triangular love conflict, takes place. In the most aurally striking scene, largely stripped of dialogue, the triangle’s two male buddies, played by Albert Préjean and Edmond T. Gréville, come to blows in a bar, accompanied by a gramophone just launched on a record of the *William Tell* overture. At the brawl’s height, the needle gets stuck, churning repeatedly through the same few notes, as a sozzled customer looks on bemused. Laconic dialogue between the two friends briefly appears, only to be muted as our viewpoint shifts and we observe the characters through the glass of the bar’s exterior doors. Even after nearly 90 years, the eloquence of this scene remains startling, built from discrete blocks of silence and sound with all dogged realism avoided.

Presented like *Tankstelle* in its original French version, *Sous les toits* received rapturous British reviews, with Lejeune again to the fore, praising its new approach to montage, ‘rhythmically and psychologically true’ to the needs both of sound and image (Lejeune, 1930). The week after its London release, Mark Forrest of the *Saturday Review* came face to face with *Canaries Sometimes Sing*. The contrast, he wrote, gave him ‘something of a shock’. Dialogue was now uppermost; and the camera, far from floating above Paris streets, was reduced to showing ‘excellent photographs of a sofa, some chairs and the four members of the cast’. ‘This form of direction,’ he added, ‘does not appear to me to be direction at all’ (Forrest, 1930). Unfortunately, any dedicated researcher into the BFI’s stockpile of early British talkies will recognise the symptoms of visual impoverishment that Forrest diagnosed.

A year later, however, Forrest was almost as dismissive of Victor Saville’s 1931 version of Stanley Houghton’s play *Hindle Wakes* – ‘a very ordinary production’ (Forrest, 1931). This time his judgment is unfair: though the film’s quality certainly wobbles, Saville’s handling of dialogue in the best scenes shows a marked improvement within two years on the bluntly shot exchanges in the part-talkie of *Kitty*, and serve as a partial sop to Lejeune’s comment about British directors’ treatment of talk. A prime instance is the confrontation scene between Belle Chrystal’s independent-minded mill girl and her iron-hearted mother (Sybil Thorndike), sparked by Chrystal’s secret weekend away with the factory boss’s son. The argument begins in the family living-room, then spills dramatically onto the staircase outside, when the cramped space and angled camera placement further sharpen the tension already generated by the tautly written and delivered lines. The effect is simple, straightforward, and powerful. Without fanfare or subjective tricks, Saville in this film reveals a new capacity for harmoniously fusing spoken dialogue with its visual setting, something equally evident in Maurice Elvey’s parallel play adaptation, *Potiphar’s Wife*. The development marks a British victory of a very British kind: small, quiet, conservative.

**Explanations and a conclusion**

How to explain the British tendency for comparatively cautious sound techniques with the more thoughtful and diverse approaches seen in some of the frontline product from Germany and France? On one level, it may be partly because continental filmmakers prepared themselves more thoroughly for the task of tackling sound. Clair, Schwarz, and Pommer adopted painstaking production methods, with guidance and support from the studios’ German technicians. For *Melodie des Herzens*,each shot was precisely timed in advance, each sound effect carefully positioned and described in the script. Actors rehearsed to a metronome, to help foster synchrony with the proposed music. Clair used a metronome too, and generated scripts of immense and unusual technical detail, with each shot assigned a colour code to indicate the required sound/image relationship (O’Brien, 2005, pp. 79-80).

British film-makers operated differently. Trade reports for the period indicate that dialogue rehearsals for these early talkies regularly took place before the shooting schedule began. Brief rehearsals, around 15 minutes, were also slipped in between specific shots, as shown in David Cunynghame’s invaluable diary of 1929 documenting his sound unit work at BIP, particularly on the long-running production of *Under the Greenwood Tree*. But there is scant evidence from the period of sustained, microscopic production planning or German levels of technical rigour, certainly not in BIP’s ambitious but frenzied schedule for 1929. Given the details in Cunynghame’s diary – the constant equipment failures and technical delays, the eccentric directors, dithering management, noise trouble with planes, nesting birds, and squeaky shoes – the surprise must be that BIP’s product of that summer, sonically jumbled but relatively clear-toned, actually emerged as well as it did.

Beyond the area of studio procedures, it is tempting to invoke Britain’s cultural climate to help in explaining the qualitative differences in technique and cinematic ambition that I suggest. A passion for ‘advanced’ films and the experimental arts in general flourished in Britain, promoted by influential platforms like the Film Society and *Close Up*; but Britain’s own film-making explorers – I am avoiding using the term ‘avant-garde’ – were smaller in number and strength than those abroad, certainly in France, and usually only survived on the fringes of the commercial industry.[[10]](#endnote-10) No British director of early sound features had the Surrealist connections of Clair, whose openness to cinematic experiment was clear from his earliest film*, Entr’acte* (1924). No British director of long-form non-fiction in this period came close to Walter Ruttmann – expert in experimental abstractions, creator of the photographic whirlwind *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (‘Berlin: Symphony of a Great City’, 1927) and the abrasive sound travelogue *Melodie der Welt*. Though Pudovkin’s influential theories about montage, sound, and the use of ‘types’ received generous exposure in 1929 on the front page of the *Cinema News and Property Gazette* (‘Amazing Vista for Sound: Pudovkin the Prophet’)[[11]](#endnote-11), the trade’s attitude towards film intellectuals and the adventurous usually veered between the condescending and the dismissive. Arrows were aimed at the theories held, the jargon used, even their ‘berets and synthetic plus-fours’ (Chappell, 1929).

Against the background of the industry’s conservatism, some of the printed statements about sound emanating from those outsiders with industry connections make poignant reading. Oswell Blakeston, a former Gaumont camera assistant, co-director with Francis Bruguière of Britain’s pioneer abstract film *Light Rhythms,* and a key *Close Up* contributor, veered away from the anti-sound stance of that journal’s editor Kenneth MacPherson (and others) and sought ways to make sound the independent film-maker’s friend. Sound, he declared, could be coloured and shaped with expressive devices similar to those used with cameras in silent films: blurring the focus there, sharpening here, pruning the sounds into vignettes, distorting them, smudging out details (Blakeston, 1930, p.50). Four months earlier, shortly after the unveiling of his cornerstone film *Drifters,* documentary pioneer John Grierson had warmed the pages of the left-wing journal *The Clarion* with his own rapturous vision: ‘We can photograph sound and, photographing it, we can organize it…the whispering nuances of life itself...meanings in footsteps, voices in trees, and words of the day and night everywhere. There must be massed choruses of sound in the factory and the street and among all men alive…’ (Grierson, 1981, pp.34-36).

In both cases, British reality clashed with the theorisers’ dreams. Instead of enhancing Blakeston’s own film-making practice, sound effectively ended it through the financial burdens on impoverished independents that the use of a sound system required. After working with Bruguière on several advertising shorts in 1931, Blakeston’s independent experiments faded away, though he continued to be adventurous in print (Sexton, 2008, pp.136-138). At the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, Grierson’s vision of microphones picking up ‘whispering nuances’ and factory roars equally lay in abeyance, needing for its fulfilment lightweight, portable recording gear and mixing and editing equipment not yet available. The Unit had no sound equipment of any kind, nor did its successor the GPO Film Unit until early 1934: delays caused not just by finance, but by a fear among Grierson’s team of synchronised speech and effects puncturing montage and destroying visual rhythm (Sussex, 1975). Fruitful experimentation then began, encouraged by the arrival of Alberto Cavalcanti as producer, leading to the adventurous audio-visual tapestries of *The Song of Ceylon*, *Coal Face*, and *Pett and Pott*. But the waste and damage caused in the interim is clear in the EMB’s *Industrial Britain,* shot by Robert Flaherty in 1931, then forced into a commercial straitjacket in 1933 by its eventual distributors, Gaumont-British, and released with a starchy narration and a retrogressive compilation score. Seen now, the film appears prissy and academic, old before its time. For an example of what was being achieved elsewhere, we may compare it to Joris Ivens’ electrifying salute to the youth workers of industrial Russia, *Komsomol* (1932), shot and recorded among Magnitogorsk’s furnaces with portable Russian equipment; a film pulsing with blasting, hammering and hissing steam, matched to an exuberantly belligerent Hanns Eisler score (Ivens, 1969, pp.67-76).

So, did Britannia really rule the sound waves in Europe? Britannia certainly ruled in the matter of European cinema re-wiring. In April 1929, with BIP’s work on *Blackmail* in its temporary sound studio, Britain also set the European record for launching a programme of sound feature production not through a declaration of intent but through action, though Germany quickly caught up. Both British advances were helped by the value of the English language in the world film market, as well as the power and security of the American electronic giants that provided most of the British industry’s technical support. But did the industry make the most imaginative, most creative use of the sound technology that it pioneered, however briefly, in Europe? Despite Hitchcock and his famous ‘knife’ and the GPO Film Unit’s late-flowering experiments, evidence suggests a mostly negative answer; though Victor Saville’s development from *Kitty* to *Hindle Wakes* certainly shows that British films could achieve sonic competence, if not virtuosity, within the limits of making well-modulated commercial packages – exactly the kind of films that the industry was set up to deliver.

This conclusion should not leave us too downhearted. No revolutionary fervour lasts forever, and once past the turbulent transition period the adventurous deployment of sound apparent in some German and French product soon declined. Following *À nous la liberté* in 1931, another film with little speech and a scrupulously designed soundscape, Clair’s work steadily moved closer to conventional uses of image and sound, with synchronised dialogue playing a much larger role. German films lost much of their sparkle and spunk when Jewish talent fled or was stifled with the arrival of Hitler. Technical improvements helped drive the change, with better focused microphones and new facilities for mixing and editing helping to build soundtracks with a smoother, more ‘realistic’ flow – in the process knocking out the aural excitements of the heroine arriving in Budapest in *Melodie des Herzens*, or the panicking passengers in *Atlantic.* This loss of command over Europe’s sound waves and the failure to build any sustained creative advantage cannot have pleased Britannia, poised with her trident on the BIP logo, seemingly mistress of all she surveyed. But almost 90 years after BIP’s heyday, and over 80 years after the logo disappeared, this is a loss that Britannia has had plenty of time to absorb and accept.

**Notes**

1 Advertisement for the trade show, *Kinematograph Weekly,* 20June 1929, back cover.

2 Detailed evidence of the strain on BIP’s apparatus is found in the 1929 production diary kept by David Cunynghame, later a key production associate of Alexander Korda, then a lowly but meticulous sound department employee (David Cunynghame collection, BFI Special Collections).

3 Advertisement for British International Pictures, *Film Weekly*, 18 November 1929, p.36.

4A French version, using some reconstructed sets, was separately made by Jean Kemm at BIP in March 1929.

5 *Billboard* magazine called it ‘one of the best pictures that has yet been imported to America…a dramatic intensity that few American productions during the current sequel have equaled’ (12 October 1929, p.23).

6 Marcel Carné reports on the Tobis studio visit in *Cinémagazine*, 8 November 1929, collected in Carné, 2016, pp. 165-169.

7 Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov, the statement’s signatories, prophesied a ‘terrible’ period of film production utilising synchronous speech and sound effects in ‘photographic performances of a theatrical nature’ (*Close Up*, October 1928, pp.11-12).

8 Wilcox’s American technical director Byron Haskin, a veteran of *Black Waters,* gives an enjoyably jaundiced account of his British and Dominions experiences in Byron Haskin (1984).

9 P. L. Mannock commented in *Kinematograph Weekly*: ‘The average scenario writer is a sorry mockery; the average dialogue is bald and boring’ (Mannock, 1930). Mannock in his time had written a few bad scenarios himself.

0 For a more generous view, see Jamie Sexton (2008).

1 6 February 1929, p.3. The article presents a re-arranged version of the talk Pudovkin gave to the Film Society in London on 3 February, later published as ‘Types Instead of Actors’ in his book *Film Technique* (1929)*.*

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Anon. (1929c) ‘British Intern’l Set On All-Talker Program’, *Film Daily*, 28 March, pp.1 & 7.

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Anon. (1929g) ‘Ufa’s Sound-Film Studio’, *Cinema News and Property Gazette*, 6 November, vi.

Anon. (1929h) ‘How to Become Film Famous’, *Film Weekly*, 29 April, p.5.

Anon. (1929i) ‘Wardour in Convention’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 27 June, p. 28.

Anon. (1929j) ‘The Multi-Lingual Film’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 November, p.19.

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1. Advertisement for the trade show, *Kinematograph Weekly,* 20June 1929 (back cover). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Detailed evidence of the strain on BIP’s apparatus is found in the 1929 production diary kept by David Cunynghame, later a key production associate of Alexander Korda, then a lowly but meticulous sound department employee. (David Cunynghame collection, BFI Special Collections.) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Advertisement for British International Pictures, *Film Weekly*, 18 November 1929, p.36. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A French version of *Atlantic*, using some reconstructed sets, was separately made by Jean Kemm at BIP in March 1929. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Billboard* magazine called it ‘one of the best pictures that has yet been imported to America…a dramatic intensity that few American productions during the current sequel have equaled’ (12 October 1929, p.23). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Marcel Carné reports on the Tobis studio visit in *Cinémagazine*, 8 November 1929, collected in Carné, 2016, pp. 165-169. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov, the statement’s signatories, prophesied a ‘terrible’ period of film production utilising synchronous speech and sound effects in ‘photographic performances of a theatrical nature’ (*Close Up*, October 1928, pp.11-12). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Wilcox’s American technical director Byron Haskin, a veteran of *Black Waters,* gives an enjoyably jaundiced account of his British and Dominions experiences in Byron Haskin (1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. P. L. Mannock commented in *Kinematograph Weekly*: ‘The average scenario writer is a sorry mockery; the average dialogue is bald and boring’ (Mannock, 1930). Mannock in his time had written a few bad scenarios himself. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a more generous view, see Jamie Sexton (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 6 February 1929, p.3. The article presents a re-arranged version of the talk Pudovkin gave to the Film Society in London on 3 February, later published as ‘Types Instead of Actors’ in his book *Film Technique* (1929)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-11)