

Okay for Sound?

The reception of the Talkies in Britain 1928-1932

Abstract

The arrival of the talkies in Britain evoked mixed responses. While popular audiences enthusiastically embraced Hollywood musicals like the Al Jolson hit *The Singing Fool* (1928), the literati were often scathing of 'mechanical' music and dialogue. Hollywood dictated the speed of change and economics and public demand soon forced the British film industry to convert to sound, but critics, intellectuals, educators, artists, literary figures and musicians were openly hostile to the new art form, opening a chasm between popular taste and intellectual response. The cacophony of dissenting voices was joined by various official reports from bodies like the Trades Union Congress and the Federation of British Industries who predicted the deleterious effect of the talkies on everything from British jobs in manufacturing to diminishing Britain's influence across its colonies and dominions. This article will map these discourses and examine attitudes to the introduction of the talkies in Britain between 1929 and 1932 as the new technology gathered momentum across the UK and film criticism developed as a distinct discipline.

Introduction

The number of articles, arguments, discussion, lectures, manifestos, conversaciones and debates on the merits and demerits of the talking and silent film has been positively amazing. The general public have had ballots; the Press have had columns; and the atmosphere in the studios themselves has been unprecedented. Probably no other invention for public entertainment has had so much free publicity as the 'talkie' (Rotha 1930: 304)

Paul Rotha's assessment of the wordage generated by the arrival of sound cinema in Britain was entirely accurate and he contributed to the 'conversaciones' in no small measure with his own publications *The Film Till Now* (1930) and *Celluloid: the Film Today* (1931). The transition to sound provoked an extraordinarily intense period in the development of British film criticism as the intellectual Left awoke to the philosophical, social and ideological implications of the talkies and started to mourn the death of 'the art of the silent film'. Intellectuals looked nostalgically to Europe and the Soviet Union for cinema as art, rather

than embrace American talkies debased by commercialism. Middle-brow arts critics opined that American talkies threatened English literature, language, theatre, music and cinema. Government and trades bodies, seemingly indifferent to the cinema as an art form, argued that 'trade follows the film' and commissioned reports investigating the wider effects of American talkies on the British economy, Empire, trade and jobs (Dickinson and Street 1985: 15).

The transition also coincided with a period of flux in the British film industry, sandwiched between the 1927 Cinematograph (Quota) Act and the looming socio-economic Depression of the late 1920s, which inevitably wrought changes to the economics of cinema production and cinema going. Towards the end of the 1920s, British producers bathing in the afterglow of the Act were largely unprepared for the talkies during the phoney war of 1927 and 1928 when synchronised sound cinema still seemed far from inevitable. Many remained loyal to silent film and had stockpiled a back-catalogue of silent productions designed to take advantage of the Act, fully anticipating a return on their investment. But forced to compete with the influx of Hollywood talkies in 1929, these last-gasp silent films were effectively shelved and their producers faced bankruptcy. Even successful film companies like Gainsborough and British and Dominions (B&D) were forced to recalculate the value of their assets where these consisted of a backlog of now worthless silent films. Eight out of the twelve British film companies set up in 1927 to take advantage of the Act had disappeared by 1931 indicating the level of upheaval during this period (Murphy 1984: 152). But the commentaries on the arrival of talkies discussed in this article reflect deeper concerns beyond the instability of the British film industry and reveal anxieties about the

changing nature of British culture, class, national identity and Britain's wider relationships with Europe and America during the interwar years.

Hollywood talkies and anti-Americanism

The influx of popular Hollywood backstage musicals into Britain following on the heels of *The Singing Fool* (1928) comprised a succession of pre-Code¹ Broadway follies with predictable titles like *Broadway*, *Broadway Babies*, *The Broadway Melody*, *Broadway Scandals*, *Fox Movietone Follies* and *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (all 1929) and designed to turn a quick profit while the novelty of the 'all singing and dancing' film held sway with British audiences. These popular talkies of varying quality helped British exhibitors fund their capital investments in wiring for sound, but they also fuelled a middle-to-high-brow critical backlash against American culture in a renewed wave of anti-Americanism.

Despite the fact that Hollywood films had dominated British screens since World War I, American talkies created new and different threats to British culture (often referred to as 'English' culture). Criticism shifted onto the perceived grubby-commercialism of American culture and its lack of artistic values and heritage. Writing on this theme in 1949, director Adrian Brunel cited politician, columnist and diplomat Harold Nicholson:

Talkies... I record again my horror at the early talkies. I believe it was Harold Nicholson who said that America was the only example of a nation going from barbarism to decadence, without an intervening period of civilisation ... I might justifiably have approved [this opinion] during the first year that American talkies were in full blast in our country. (Brunel 1949: 156)

The popular press echoed these sentiments. For example, the *Leicester Mercury* a local syndicated newspaper claimed that America had yet to produce any great artists. Like other commentators, the author looked to mainland Europe for evidence of 'art' in cinema:

Art is a spiritual movement, and America is essentially materialistic ... America has not yet given birth to a great artist, a great poet, a great musician, or even a great playwright. Germany has done more to make the film an artistic movement than all the money-grubbing producers of Hollywood, with their exploitation of "stars" before "art". (Henderson 1929: n.p.)

The general opinion was that the talkie revolution needed to be spearheaded by the older cultures of Britain and mainland Europe, particularly France and Germany, irrespective of linguistic issues. Attacks on American cinema also masked British anxieties over its own loss of cultural hegemony as it clung onto traditional notions of high art and culture in the face of the encroaching commercialism and modernity that America represented. This backlash gathered momentum by 1930 and was manifest in some bizarre ways beyond the confines of cinema, including claims that American talkies threatened Britain's control over its overseas territories, cost British jobs and manufacturing and offered a gateway for the influx of American-made products at the expense of British ones through the dangerous exposure to products and lifestyle which encouraged Americanised consumerism in Britain (Slow, 1931). Silent film had likewise exposed audiences to American culture, but it was the mass consumption of early American talkies that appears to have alerted the Government to the power of cinema. As Julian Petley observed, 'compared to... France or the USSR there was at this time little interest in the art of the film, or in the cinema as what might be called a "cultural industry"' (1986: 32).

In his *Report on the American Control of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain* for the London Trades Council in 1931, George D. Slow asserted that American propaganda aimed to sabotage British talkies by creating 'in the public mind a contempt and sort of disgust of British films' enabling American distributors a clearer run at the British market (Slow 1931: 6). Recognising that American films created a desire for American goods and lifestyles, the Federation of British Industries (FBI) and Trades Union Congress (TUC) produced a joint

report stating 'The Film is a most powerful factor for national publicity and has a direct reaction on industrial and commercial relationships between nations':

As a result of seeing such an overwhelmingly large proportion of American films cinema audiences are familiarised with American products of all kinds and this is an important aid to their sale in this country, in the Dominions and Colonies and elsewhere. Cases have been brought to our notice moreover of American films deliberately decrying British goods and boosting American products (FBI and TUC 1931: 2)

At times, zealous anti-Americanism bordered on paranoia and the Report argued that American producers would now concentrate on colonising the British Dominions as the talkies had curtailed American growth in non-Anglophone markets. In comparable vein, the cinema trade paper *The Daily Film Renter*, summarising a Canadian Royal Commission report concluded that Canada had now become an American monopoly and '... a combine controlled by US interests exists in the kinema industry in Canada to the detriment of the distribution of British films' (Anon. 1931a: 1). A similar situation was reported in Australia and New Zealand where Paramount, Fox and Warner Bros. manipulated tax schemes to flood these markets with American talkies (Anon. 1931b: 11).

The FBI and TUC report was contemptuous of American culture, which was fine for Americans, but 'English' values needed protecting. It also implied a cultural consensus by claiming to speak for 'our own people' on these matters:

... We say nothing at all in disparagement of American speech, customs, and cultural standards. These are matters for the American people and they are entitled ... to their own tastes in these things. But we prefer for our own people what may roughly be called English speech, customs, and cultural standards. (FBI and TUC 1931: 2)

The idea that a consensus existed around English culture was certainly not borne out by middle-brow British critics and intellectuals who disparaged working-class tastes and cultural preferences represented by American talkies, as we shall see below.

Battle lines were also drawn around the purity of the English language in the face of the 'American idiom', but the talkies also foregrounded differences in the British regions and nations in terms of speech and accent, a particular concern for Scotland where the talkies were accused of 'poisoning the Scottish mind' (Neely 2018: 174). The survival of the 'English voice' was a major concern and film critic Iris Barry implored 'Let us keep our English voices' claiming that 'Familiarity with broad American speech might, one fears, bring tolerance and even lead to imitation, unconscious or deliberate' (Barry 1929: 10). The elision between English and British is also significant here and extended beyond the promotion of standards of spoken English often referred to as 'BBC English', into wider concerns about English literature, art and theatre. 'English', rather than 'British', was often used to imply quality, tradition and middle-class cultural values and tastes.

*The Film In National Life*² (1932), a report published by the Commission on Education and Cultural Films, was prompted by a growing awareness of the power of sound cinema to educate and inform and its potential significance in constructing a national identity. The Report offered fulsome and measured recommendations for how a British national cinema should develop in the sound period but expressed concern that 'cinema [had] lost for the moment many of its most intelligent patrons' (ibid.: 80). It hoped that the worst expressions of "all-talking," singing and dancing' would be 'abandoned for a subtler and selective use of sound' (Ibid.: 80). Again, opprobrium was directed specifically at the popular musical; a genre ostensibly born with the talkies and viewed as the epitome of low-culture and poor taste. The Report's authors regarded sound as a mixed blessing that transformed cinema into a powerful weapon that needed to be controlled for the greater good. Serious in tone and intention, it lamented that British producers had been forced to adopt sound technology before they were ready, resulting in a lowering of standards that

impeded cinema's development as an art form. It looked to the 'Informative Film', epitomised by the *Secrets of Nature* series (1922 – 1933) for its ability to instruct and educate unambiguously, as setting appropriate standards with the hope that reciprocal arrangements with the Dominions would result in the exchange of educational sound films for schools (Ibid.: 81).

The future of English culture was also seen as threatened by a disinterested British working-class who increasingly chose their own popular entertainment rather than adopting the tastes of their 'betters'. The growth of super-cinemas in the early 1930s offered emphatic testimony to cinema's role in driving popular culture and fuelling urban cultural economies. The protectionism of English culture occasionally segued into xenophobia and racism as we shall see with Aldous Huxley's reference to Jewish involvement in Hollywood talkies. Even the Musician's Union, while understandably supportive of its members whose jobs were under threat with the arrival of recorded sound, was not above racial slurs against black musicians and American jazz (Williamson and Cloonan 2016: 83).

Elsewhere the influential religious press had responded negatively to proposals for contentious Sunday cinema opening. Blaming America too, *The Methodist Times* argued that Hollywood was a 'sweated industry' whose origins lay in 'lithographed lewdness':

Perhaps you would like to hear something about the origins of the Czars of the film industry... Practically all of them commenced... via penny arcade and cheap vaudeville routes. The American penny arcade of these gentry was a 'peep show' whose lure was lithographed lewdness, but which never yielded quite so much pornography as it promised. (Anon. 1932a: n.p.).

The national press fed into these anxieties, featuring individual hard-luck stories that blamed the talkies for personal downfall, like an ex-cinema violinist imprisoned for selling pornographic pictures that he 'took at a party two years ago' who claimed the arrival of

talkies had cost his legitimate livelihood (Anon. 1931c: 7) or theatre producer, Florence Smithson, who filed for bankruptcy following the failure of her 1930 touring 'Showtime', allegedly due to the talkies (Anon. 1932b: 4).

Film criticism before the arrival of sound in Britain

While the tone of government and institutional debate around the talkies emerged from concerns around trade and economics, intellectual debate drew on existing traditions of arts criticism. British film criticism is understood to have begun in 1912 in the *London Evening News* which ran regular columns by W.G Faulkner. But it was the pioneering American poet and philosopher Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of Film* (1915) that was used as a reference point for the British film intellectuals who emerged in the 1920s. Lindsay's often florid prose applied the language of art appreciation to film and interestingly predicted the birth pangs of the talkies:

If the talking moving picture becomes a reliable mirror of the human voice and frame, it will be the basis of such a separate art that none of the photoplay precedents will apply. It will be the *phonoplay* ... it will be unpleasant for a long time. (1915: 56).

By the mid-1920s, writing about film was becoming fashionable among the literati. W. Somerset Maugham and Elinor Glyn had gone to Hollywood in the early 1920s and wrote for fan magazines describing their experiences and the film culture they witnessed (Slide 1992: 106, 70). In Britain, Evelyn Waugh had a 'twice a day cinema habit' during the 1920s, and although he bemoaned the arrival of the talkies, his 1930 novel *Vile Bodies* with its pacy dialogue and use of cross-cutting between scenes and characters, is considered a product of cinema-age modernity.³ While some British writers embraced cinema as mass entertainment, the cultural elite often struggled to hide their contempt for the audiences

who patronised its 'crudest Victorian melodrama'. Bloomsbury acolyte Clive Bell could barely contain himself in the following diatribe in *Vanity Fair*:

A FEW (sic) months ago I never dreamed of such a thing: the cinema, I should then have said, is too low in the scale of human activities to reveal the insufficiency of anything but itself and its admirers. It appeals exclusively to the lowest common factor of humanity. Why, instead of taking the world where it found it about the year 1900, it has actually gone back to the crudest Victorian melodrama; on the literary or dramatic side, it is below the meanest lending-library novel or the silliest west-end play. The cinema, I should have said, is too hopelessly obvious and unreal to have any effect on the at all civilised. They must see that it is merely ridiculous. (1922: 40)

Fellow Bloomsbury writer Virginia Woolf's opinion on the cinema in 1926 was hardly less damning:

... while all the other arts were born naked, this, the youngest, has been born fully-clothed. It can say everything before it has anything to say. It is as if the savage tribe, instead of finding two bars of iron to play with, had found scattering the seashore fiddles, flutes, saxophones, trumpets, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein, and had begun with incredible energy, but without knowing a note of music, to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time. (1926: 5)

Woolf felt that cinema's rapacious appetite plundered literature and theatre to the detriment of both, claiming that the realms of the eye, the brain and the spoken word were incompatible. Like George Bernard Shaw, she found the talkies inadequate to literary adaptation.

Popular debate on cinema became ubiquitous with the arrival of the talkies particularly in newspapers like the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Times* and *Daily Mail* who all devoted countless column inches to the talkies, with pundits and critics arguing for, or more often against cinema sound. Female newspaper critics like Iris Barry, Nerina Shute and C.A. Lejeune all gained a significant voice during this period. Working for the *Manchester Guardian* and *Observer* in the 1920s, Lejeune published her monograph *Cinema* in 1931 and embraced what she felt was the inevitability of sound. Despite her university education, (she was also

studying for a PhD which was highly unusual for a woman in the 1920s), Lejeune often wrote in a lively and conversational style unlike many of her male counterparts, and like Barry and Shute, bridged the intellectual with the popular. Lejeune had no loyalty to British film but viewed developments in sound cinema as broadly progressive and offered a measured opinion on the British talkie as it attempted to find its own identity:

The British cinema has been handicapped in every way - bad brains, shortage of money, lack of confidence, injudicious flattery, misdirected talent, unfortunate legislation - and is making a tough fight for recovery, which may or may not eventuate in a sound cinema with national characteristics a national force of its own. (1931: 9).

Elsewhere in 1928 and 1929, magazines like *Britannia and Eve*, *The Bystander* and *The Tatler* included regular film columns where theatre and cultural critics like James Agate, Sydney Tremayne, Maitland Davidson and E. Temple Thurston reflected on the arrival of sound cinema with varying degrees of opprobrium for cinema and its audiences in general and the talkies in particular. Comparing cinema and theatre in 1928, Temple Thurston unequivocally claimed that 'the cinema public is about the least intelligent, the least possessed of any taste or culture, of any mass of people who seek relaxation and entertainment' for example (1928: 763). Tremayne argued that the failure of talkies to combine 'old art with new mechanics' had 'killed stone dead the serious film critic' (1929:78). Davidson was more nuanced in his attitude, but still predicted that the future lay with silent cinema, applauding the German silent *Hungarian Rhapsody* (1928) for making 'the prophecy that these vocal travesties will cause the silent cinemas to "pass out of entertainment service" sound singularly foolish' (1928:348). Writing in *The Tatler*, Agate grudgingly accepted 'the ever detestable talkies' and offered a series of conditions by which they could be redeemed including 'that canned music be utterly abolished', orchestras

returned and no writer below the level of Frederick Lonsdale be allowed to write for them (1929: 6).

While middlebrow critics admonished cinema audiences for their lack of taste and docile acceptance of talkies, fan-based magazines like *Picturegoer* and *Picture Show* played to their curiosity and offered gossip around film stars coping with the dreaded microphone. Trade papers like the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association's magazine *Kine Weekly* and the long-running oracle of the British film industry *The Bioscope* proffered neutral and pragmatic advice to Britain's beleaguered cinema exhibitors on the costly challenges of wiring the nation's cinemas for sound.

The intellectual response to the transition to sound in Britain

The transition to sound coincided with a period in which popular culture and the working-class experience faced increased scrutiny from sociologists, public intellectuals and statisticians. Cambridge scholar and literary sociologist Q. D. Leavis wrote despairingly about working-class cultural tastes in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) and Charles Booth's massive sociological and statistical study, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour: 1929-1931* with volume IX devoted to *Life and Leisure* was published in 1935, two years before Mass Observation further scrutinised public habits, tastes and lifestyles. Philosophical opinions on sound cinema as art form or populist entertainment were variously expressed by Dorothy Richardson and H.D in *Close Up* and by public intellectuals and writers such as George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley and G.K. Chesterton (Geduld: 1972). These often pitched the 'mechanical' talkies with their 'canned sound', against the photographic 'art of

silent film' with its live musical accompaniment and invariably mourned the loss of the latter.

Writing about cinema in the age of modernity has been thoroughly documented by Laura Marcus (2007) and Antonia Lant (2006) who focussed on female critics including philosophical debates from *Close Up's* women contributors. Lant and Marcus both detected a gender bias with women less favourable to the talkies than men. Modernist writer Dorothy Richardson was especially interested in the relationship between women and the spoken word in cinema and associated the visual language of silent film with the 'feminine' and the talkies as the fulfilment of a 'masculine destiny'. In 'The Film Gone Male' she claimed

In its insistence on contemplation [silent film] provided a pathway to reality... In becoming audible and particularly in becoming a medium of propaganda, [cinema] is doubtlessly fulfilling its destiny. But it is a masculine destiny. The destiny of playful becoming rather than purposeful being. (Richardson 1932: 36)

Richardson's argument that talkies 'masculinised' cinema came from a sense that sound cinema rapidly became an instrument for European nationalist propaganda on the one hand and facilitated the march of American hegemony across Europe on the other. Preceding second-wave feminists like Julia Kristeva (1974) by almost five decades, Richardson argued that spoken language marginalised female experience and privileged the male voice, while silent film operated on the level of feelings that were instinctual to women spectators and offered them an important space for contemplation and reverie. The observation that sound cinema prioritised the male voice is borne out by current research which shows that women consistently occupy only around 30% of all speaking roles in the top 250 films released annually; a bias can be traced back to the arrival of talkies.⁴

Poet Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) shared the valid concern of many on the intellectual Left that the talkies would curtail the international language of silent film which for three decades had transcended language, race and nation. This was also the time when Esperanto was being developed to promote an internationalism to overcome linguistic boundaries, but by the arrival of the talkies, European politics were fracturing into their respective nationalisms that gave rise to Hitler, Franco and Mussolini *et al.* The Left's critique of the talkies with its sympathies directed at Stalin's USSR and the films it produced, needs to be understood in the context of the polarised European politics of this period.

In 'The Mask and the Movietone', written two years before sound feature films had fully arrived in Britain, H. D. argued that synchronised sound rendered the performer mechanical and robotic (1927: 21) and threatened cinema's 'half-world of lights and music and blurred perception' (Ibid.: 31). This sense of sound cinema as robotic was shared by many critics witnessing early talkies when the 'science of sound' was seen as an imposition on the photographic art of the moving image. Consequently early sound technicians were viewed as 'men in brown coats' who mostly came from the BBC. Producer Walter Mycroft talked about the resulting clash in culture as these men exercised control on the film set:

Expert gentlemen, dreadfully called "recordists", who came to Elstree from the BBC, would insist that actors and actresses must speak up. And in early talkies, sound men were the fires of the machine. It took years to put them in their place. (2006: 86).

Silent cinema became recast as a space for peaceful reverie in an increasingly noisy and mechanised world made worse by electro-acoustic products like public address systems, radio, loudspeakers and sound reproduction systems which represented the 'soundscape of modernity' and marked an evolution in aural experience (Thompson 2004: 7). Fellow *Close*

Up writer Wilbur Needham hoped that the talkies were a passing fad and longed for the 'oblivion' of the silent film:

... they are driving away many half dollars brought to the theatre by unhappy people who come to the films for oblivion, relaxation—or to sleep! If you are among those sensitive people whose mental ears catch the faintest sounds of life as a story projected tellingly on the screen, you will not need the raucous howls of the talking films. Let us hope you will never have them thrust upon you. (Needham 1928: 28-9)

Writer, novelist, poet, editor and co-founder of *Close Up*, Bryher (real name Annie Winifred Ellerman) referred to the silent film as 'the art that died' (1963: 265). Bryher was the co-producer, with the Pool Group, of the *avant garde* silent film *Borderline* (1930) and argued that synchronised sound increased the cost and technical complexity of film production making it inaccessible to those amateur cineastes who had used silent film to experiment with 'film as art'. She claimed that by 1934 'about sixty of these groups had ceased to exist' including *Close Up* itself:

We felt that we could state our convictions honourably in the twentieth-century form of art and it appealed to the popular internationalism of those so few years because 'the silents' offered a single language across Europe... The golden age of what I call "the art that died" because sound ruined its development' (Bryher 1963: 248)

Woolf, Bryher, Richardson and H.D. all variously considered sound to be a gendered and clumsy technology that destroyed the meditative relationship between spectator and silent film. *Close Up* also took every opportunity to denigrate early British talkies, with the exception of Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), for their unadventurous use of sound. Particular opprobrium was directed at A. E. Dupont's early sound film *Atlantic* (1929) for its ponderous dialogue and leaden delivery. Hugh Castle offered a withering critique in his satiric round-up of 1929 which deployed *The Singing Fool* as an ironic comment on the talkies in general:

The dialogue cinema has had one Fool. He was a Singing One. the year began on Jan. 1st, 1929 ... when we first learnt what it meant to talk American. It culminated ... in the presentation of *Atlantic* which, true to the British tradition, came in at the

death and looked like it Much could be said about this film. Its cinematic vision, its subtle—very subtle—rhythms, its sound-cinema distortion, its stark realism. And the way it showed the undying heroism and stoicism of the Englishman Facing Death. It was unfortunate we saw it within a week of the Film Society's presentation of *Potemkin*. As it was, there was a tendency to compare Dupont and Eisenstein. But only a tendency. After *Atlantic* Dupont stands alone. (Castle 1930: 20)

Writer and philosopher, Aldous Huxley's vociferous anti-talkie rhetoric was evident in the unequivocal title of his 1929 essay, 'Silence is Golden: Being the Misanthropic Reflections of an English Novelist on First Hearing a Picture Talk'. Writing three years before his seminal novel *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley expressed revulsion at the close-ups of human faces and mouths which, to him, the talkies demanded. But worse still, the talkies featured jazz and popular music:

... the human countenance smiles its six-foot smile, opens and closes its thirty-two-inch eyes ... the jazzers were forced upon me The performers belonged to two contrasted races. There were the dark and polished young Hebrews, whose souls were in those mournfully sagging, sea-sickishly undulating melodies of mother love and nostalgia and yammering amorousness and clotted sensuality which have been the characteristically Jewish contributions to modern popular music. And there were the chubby young Nordics, with faces transformed by the strange plastic powers of the American environment into the likeness of very large uncooked muffins, or the unveiled posteriors of babes. (Huxley 1929 in Geduld 1972: 68)

Huxley's description of 'young Hebrews' was a racist swipe at Jolson's Jewish heritage and his expressions of 'mother love and nostalgia' which he associated with Jewish culture and here referred to Jolson's hit songs 'My Mammy' and 'Sonny Boy' in *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool*. Huxley's misanthropic intellectualism cloaked in ostentatious language was echoed by many of the male writers on cinema at the time.

Writer, journalist and cinema critic Ernest Betts straddled the popular and highbrow, writing for *The Evening Standard* and *Sunday Express* but also publishing *Heraclitus, or the Future of Films* in 1928, the very title of which would have rendered it incomprehensible to

the ordinary reader unfamiliar with ancient Greek philosophers. Betts claimed that the talkie returned cinema to the status of a freak show:

Personally, I am convinced that film should be seen and not heard. The business of the film is to depict action, not to reproduce sound ... the spoken word, mechanically introduced, is not proper to the film medium ... There is something monstrous about a speaking film ... The soul of the film—its eloquent and vital silence—is destroyed. The film now returns to the circus whence it came, among the freaks and the fat ladies. (1928: 88)

Betts, like Huxley and H.D., felt that sound not only destroyed the illusion of the silent film but evoked a kind of repugnance. University-educated intellectuals struggled to understand the popular appeal of the talkies and sought to distance themselves from what they viewed as retrograde and mechanistic technology.

For Rotha, a committed communist, sound was political and he differentiated between the 'cinema proper...discovered and built by the Russians up till the beginning of the dialogue era' and 'the vast output of ordinary narrative talking films of sensational interest that occupies the capitalist studio organisation of Western Europe and America' (1931: 15). Rotha envisaged that the Soviet sound film, when it arrived, would be underpinned by Kuleshov's theories and herald the second phase of cinema's evolution.

Contemporary publications like Huntly Carter's *New Spirit in the Cinema* (1930) and William Hunter's *Scrutiny of Cinema* (1932 and published as part of F. R. Leavis's *Scrutiny* quarterly review), contributed to the flowering of intellectual and sociological interest in cinema that placed the coming of sound into broader aesthetic, political, economic and sociological contexts. Carter's bombastic and apocalyptic tone evoked the Russian Revolution (1930: xix) and the Bible (1930: 217) to describe the impact of sound on cinema

and like Virginia Woolf, he felt that the talkies had 'stolen their voice' from theatre and literature

Then it seemed as though a Demon or Conjuror waved a wand. And there was chaos. In the midst of unheard of confusion the Film Kings fitted the Voice which they had stolen from the Theatre (1930: xviii).

Like *The Film Till Now*, Hunter's *The Scrutiny of the Cinema* (1932) took stock of the achievements of world cinema to date with a gloomy postscript on the talkies.

A recent American book on the talking film pointed out that no words should be used in a talking film that would be incomprehensible to a child of ten ... Aply supported by the press and other manifestations of the popular mind, the cinema is doing its share in accelerating the final decline of Western civilisation (1932: 11).

Hunter bemoaned the building of 'super cinemas' as a visible manifestation of the talkies' stranglehold on the 'popular mind' echoing concerns among the educated elite around the unstoppable growth of popular mass culture which the talkies seemed to represent. He derided them as 'the personification of the daydreams of a shop-girl and bank-clerk... more thrillingly "real"' with the addition of sound (Ibid: 51), and was bemused that people flocked to see them in ever greater numbers while 'The "intelligent" critics were gloomy' (ibid: 50). *Scrutiny* (which ran until 1953) offered radical approaches to cultural criticism and Hunter's references included Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Like many British commentators developing the language of film criticism at this time, he drew on the fine arts, mythology and theatre and described cinema as little more than 'popular anaesthetic' (Ibid: 9). He argued that sound film was still going through a 'technical phase' hampered by inadequate technology that forced it into 'cramped spaces' and a descent into the kind of banality that silent film had never been forced to endure.

Like his *Close Up* contemporaries, Hunter admired the work of Clair, Pabst, Vertov and Pudovkin who he felt instinctively understood the 'art of sound' film beyond its commercial exploitation by Hollywood. Hunter's predisposition to the silent film was heavily influenced by the flowering of great music scores in the late silent period, like Edmund Meisel's music for *Battleship Potemkin*, *October* and *Berlin* and Ilya Trauberg's *The Blue Express* (all 1929), George Auric's *A Nous la Liberte* (1931) and Chaplin's own score for *City Lights* (1931) that emphasised silent cinema's status as art. Hunter felt these scores 'spoke' to the films' themes rendering dialogue and diegetic sound largely redundant. For Hunter sound was a 'weapon' which needed to be handed back to the artists once the technicians had completed their job:

Sound is unlimited. The cinema has doubled its potentialities by the acquisition of this new weapon. But a weapon is of very little use until its power is fully discovered and ... its capacities developed to the utmost. And even then it needs men to direct and control it. When the technicians have finished the artists must be found. (1932: 61)

The London Film Society and anti-talkie critique

A good deal of the anti-talkie critique referenced above was generated by the metro-centric intellectuals of the London Film Society which had been founded in 1925. By the arrival of the talkies the Society and its acolytes had pinned their colours firmly to the mast and venerated European and Soviet silent films. Only the occasional, educational British film such as *The Secrets of Nature* series or early Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks animations *Springtime* and *Summer* (1929 and 1930) were considered worthy of their programmes. The Society included personalities who would later figure prominently in mainstream and alternative British film and broadcasting industries including the young Sidney Bernstein who had converted his father's music halls into cinemas and would later go on run Granada

Television and Adrian Brunel, a trained opera singer with a career as a film booker, who later directed the early talkie revue film *Elstree Calling* (1930). Ivor Montagu, a twenty year old Cambridge graduate who had written for his university magazine *Granta* and in 1926 became the *Observer's* first film critic was another Communist and a close friend of Eisenstein. Iris Barry was a polymath arts and literature critic and at aged twenty-nine became *The Spectator's* film critic, published her own book of writings about cinema *Let's Go to the Pictures* in 1926 before going on to curate the film collection at MOMA in New York. Other Film Society founders included actor Hugh Miller, sculptor Frank Dobson and critic and producer Walter Mycroft. Along with *Close Up*, this influential group represented the intellectual heart of British film criticism and the cultural preferences against which the talkies were measured. They were young, influential, well-educated and well-connected; and they tapped into modernist art and literary movements. Film maker Thorold Dickinson, who served on the Society from 1929 to 1939 claimed to finally dislodge their prejudice against sound 'by discriminating between the mass-produced talkie and the more selective and imaginative sound films made in Germany and under German influence elsewhere...' (Dickinson 1969: 90).

The talkie threat to British theatre and entertainment.

Elements of the entertainments industry sensed the threat to live music and theatre with the Musicians Union vociferous in its campaign against the talkies⁵. The Theatrical publication *The Era*, which ran from 1828 to 1939, called for suggestions to 'safeguard British artists' from the "'Talkie Invasion'" and the threat to legitimate theatre, though it reckoned the consensus was that 'inferior touring companies' would fall first (Anon. 1929a: 4). However, the manager of the Granville Public House in Waltham Green offered a rare

pragmatic perspective on the exigencies of working-class tastes when he claimed that dog racing and the Stamford Bridge Dirt track represented bigger threats to his business than the talkies (ibid).

George Bernard Shaw, an influential public intellectual and playwright on both sides of the Atlantic, was outspoken on cinema in general and the talkies in particular. He himself had appeared in an earlier Fox Movietone newsreel in 1928 filmed in the garden of his home in which he parodied Mussolini but was reluctant to allow his plays to be adapted 'because their greatest strength was in their dialogues' which he initially felt would be sullied by the talkies:

The nicest thing about film so far was that it kept its mouth shut. It would have been terrible if one had accompanied with words the stupidities which were played.
(Anon. 1929b: 26)

Shaw was relatively even-handed, if inconsistent in his attitude to the talkies and predicted that low-budget touring theatre would be the biggest potential victim and could 'not imagine any provincial audience being satisfied with a £50 touring [theatre] production when a £50,000 talkie is being shewn in a cinema' (Dukore 1997: 59). In the debate about acting for talkies versus the theatre, Shaw argued that the talkies required a totally different set of skills due to the screen's intensification of the actor. Nevertheless, on witnessing Sybil Thorndike performing the cathedral scene from *St Joan* in a 1927 Deforest Phonofilm, he became convinced that with the right producer, the talkies were indeed up to the job of adaptation and his attitude became more equitable (Ibid.: 61-62).

If the talkies were seen as threatening British theatre, it was to British theatre that producers often turned in the scramble for source material resulting in the early dominance of theatre playwrights in British talkies, which in turn proffered a cinema based on adaptations and gave early British talkies their reputation for being little more than filmed

plays in 'cramped spaces'. Producer Basil Dean's record of his tetchy correspondence with John Galsworthy over filming his 1926 play *Escape* as an early talkie (in 1930) reveals that the writer expected his words be filmed verbatim rather than 'diluted by dialogue written by Thomas, Richard and Henry (to give them more than their due of dignity)' (Dean 1973: 86). Despite his enthusiasm for the talkies and his background as a theatre producer, Dean admitted that early talkies lost the aesthetics and rhythm of silent films.

The sceptics said that the new medium was not more than a passing fancy, unlikely to last longer than the recent craze for roller-skating. Argument grew fiercer when the highbrow magazines began to point out that the pure art of the screen was based upon rhythm, and that was being debauched by the addition of speech ... a view that had much point ... (1973: 83).

However, Vicky Lowe (2011) argues that Dean's recollection in his 1973 autobiography, may not be entirely accurate, a caveat that probably should be applied to other commentators, like Brunel, writing in hindsight and before revisionist attitudes to British cinema of this period offered more nuanced perspectives. Dean and Galsworthys' early talkie *Escape* certainly merits critical re-evaluation as Lowe argues, not least for its creative use of sound.

The music paper *Melody Maker and British Metronome*, published between 1926 and 2000, promoted live cinema music and became the voice of the Cinema Musical Directors Association whose untimely inauguration in 1927 coincided with the twilight of their business. Because many musicians worked in cinemas and many people's experience of musical performance was in cinemas, *Melody Maker* featured regular columns supporting live music and in April 1929 claimed that that 'ONLY WE CAN PUT THEM OVER' and the vain hope that 'Talkies must have Living Music' (Owen 1929: 413). The hope that silent cinema would continue as a parallel art form alongside the talkies was expressed in a debate held on October 1929 in which Hollywood talkies were pitched against the English stage.

Playwright Cosmo Hamilton claimed that talkies were 'so full of vulgarity, bad taste, and horrible noises' that hundreds of people were walking the streets of London and New York searching for a silent film (1929: 15).

Conclusion

The transition to sound prompted an extraordinarily rich period in British film criticism, largely polarised around the idea that sound debased cinema. But finally, cinema became taken seriously by Government, educational and trades bodies who realised its potential in education, propaganda and the construction of national identity. These discourses often became defined in terms of cultural and economic protectionism and xenophobia that reflected larger anxieties around Britain's fading role at the head of its diminishing empire, threatened by American hegemony on the one hand and its isolation by language from Europe on the other. During the silent period Britain had sat more comfortably between Hollywood and her European co-producers, but the talkies demanded a commitment to the English language and a battle for Anglophone markets that Britain could not hope to win. The idea that British talkies could achieve international recognition by relying on her traditions of great art and literature were moribund. Instead, the economics of Britain's sound film industry were driven by popular tastes and it was the perky working-class comedies of Gracie Fields like *Sally in Our Alley* (1931) and *Always Look on the Bright Side* (1932) that would define commercial success. But British talkies and the people who watched them were damned by association as 'the average British film of today is far more offensive than its American *confrere*' (Rotha 1931: 8-9). The chasm between popular tastes and intellectual responses to cinema was thrown into sharp relief as competing forces and interests battled for the hearts and minds of the British public. The

Left's misplaced faith in Soviet sound cinema appears ludicrously out of step with an increasingly Americanised popular culture that spoke to the desires of ordinary working-class audiences. While in Europe, the artistically ground-breaking early German sound films that British critics venerated were soon curtailed by Hitler's fascism from 1933.

The debates discussed above offer a fascinating insight into the transition, but their influence remained largely within the elite circle of intellectuals for whom they were written, having little impact on the industry or the ordinary cinema goers who purchased cinema tickets. Absent from these debates were the voices of ordinary cinemagoers who flocked to the new talkies and drove the economics of the transition to sound in Britain. Their opinions, given value in recent years, crop up in oral testimonies, in local cinema studies and in projects like Annette Kuhn's study of cinema and cultural memory (Kuhn 2002). Yet according to most British writers of the day, it was the 'shop-girls and bank-clerks' who needed protection from the talkies.

But ultimately it would not be the opinions of university-educated elites and middle-brow critics or government, business and trade reports that drove the talkies forward and it is perhaps fitting that the final word goes to an ordinary cinemagoer for whom the coming of sound transformed her experience of cinema.

It was not until the era of the 'talkie' that people like aunt Kate and Janet went to the pictures and I'll never forget when Mum and auntie Liz persuaded aunt Kate to go and see her very first film, 'The Singing Fool.' Everyone was singing 'Climb upon my knee, Sonny boy,' and aunt Kate set off in joyful expectancy. What a scene they had with her when she came home! She cried and cried all night, and half the next day too, standing at the corner and wiping her eyes on her apron, the tears making rivulets down her powdered face. "Oh my Gawd, it was lovely. I haven't slept all night for thinking about it." (Bailey 1981: 75-77)

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¹ 'Pre-Code' refers to films made before the Hay's Code (1930) was fully enforced in Hollywood in 1934, although the voluntary regulation existed prior to 1930. Clauses forbidding the use of revealing dance costumes, amongst others, were repeatedly flouted in the succession of early talkie backstage musicals produced between 1929 and 1930.

² *The Film in National Life*, funded by the Carnegie Foundation, called for a National Film Institute and led to the formation of the BFI.

³ See the Evelyn Waugh Society on <https://evelynwaughociety.org/2016/evelyn-waugh-and-film/> (accessed 10 January 2019).

⁴ See Smith, Stacy; Choueiti, Marc; Pieper, Katherine (2017) 'Inequality in 900 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2016', USC Annenberg, Los Angeles, CA.

⁵ The Musicians' Union archive held at the University of Stirling includes the *Musicians' Journal* which campaigned tirelessly against the talkies between 1928 and 1930. See also: <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/readwatchlisten/imagegallery/discordantnotes/>