

The transition from silent to sound movies research paper samples

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Of all kinds of entertainment, movies are, by far, the single most popular type. People are so used to watching films cablecast on TV that they cannot envision the time when no sound was to be heard coming from beyond the screen. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine soundless motion pictures, which used to be a reality more than 100 years ago. Cinematographic was an infant industry in the second half of the 19th century. However, in the early 20th century, experts created the first movie with a synchronized sound coupled to image reproduced on the screen. Actors and film directors had to re-adjust to the new genre and sound techniques implemented through the newly invented mechanisms. Hence, the silent movies transitioned to sound films, and actors along with movie directors had to get used to the new techniques and devices of filming.

According to the professor of history at Princeton University, Emily Thompson (n. p.), with Thomas Edison inventing phonograph as far back 1877, people gained the capability of recording sound and listening to it following the procedure. To do so, people had to sing or speak into a big horn that gathered the sound energy and dispatched it to a needle that wiggled up and down, which created the impression as though it were being tickled by the sound. While wiggling, the needle cut a long and wavy groove into a soft wax record. The sticky moldable substance was spun in a circle beneath the needle. The recording made, people were able to reproduce the record by means of placing the needle at the start of the groove as well as spinning the record circle-wise another time. The needle was moving up and down, thus creating the sounds recorded before and sending it out of the horn of the machine so that the audience might hear them. Such was the first

attempt of reproducing sound undertaken by Thomas Edison.

In the 1890s, the inventor went on to create moving pictures, otherwise known as movies. A special camera captured a strip of small photographs later run through a projector blending various pictures together with the aim of producing the illusion of motion and projecting such movie onto a large theatre screen. What Edison wanted was to unite these moving pictures and the sound reproduced via phonograph in attempts to produce life illusion.

Both mechanism baffled all synchronization efforts undertaken by Edison.

The idea was for the reproduced sound to match the motion of actors' lips displayed in the moving pictures precisely. A muted sound recorded by the phonograph left much to be desired since only a few individuals at a time could hear it emitted by the machine. Still, both inventions gained popularity separately. From then on, people could purchase music record to play them on phonographs, without having to playing musical instruments or singing. In addition, they started attending movie theatres, with dramatic stories showed there via soundless moving pictures. Seeing that there was no recorded sound to accompany the films, characters' cues would emerge in the screen, in special pictures, aka titles. Most of the screen time, actors would communicate their moods and thoughts by means of facial expression, without letting a word escape their mouth (Thompson n. p.).

Who was one of the first actors to appear in such movies was Charlie Chaplin impersonating The Little Tramp, a kind-hearted elegant vagabond who was constantly getting into different troubles. He did not utter a word, but for all that, the audience were quick to guess what he felt or thought. He had his body movement and facial expression explain it all. Even so, these films

connected with moviegoers worldwide. Theatres would hire musicians that movie might be reproduced to the accompaniment of pianos, music fitting overall film mood. At a time when people attended movie theatres twice a week, Edison's followers decided to pick up where he left off with the difference that they had electricity to produce and play the sound. The inventors turned out to be telephone company employees, making another attempt in 1920s, which was more than 30 years after the original attempts of Thomas Edison. They scrapped cumbersome horns to utilize small microphones for gathering sound. They also had amplifiers to make the sound louder, which mended Edison's sound issue that had rendered his efforts of combining both devices useless in his time. Electricity allowed making recordings loud enough for everyone in a large cinema to hear equally well. Electricity facilitated the synchronization of both sound and the image. After bringing this brand-new technique to Hollywood officials, the inventors met with a skeptical opposition that no more considered the device useful than they thought it worth trying (Thompson n. p.).

According to Thompson (n. p.), not until they had contacted the Warner brothers did the inventors manage to find application for the device. In 1925, Harry, Jack, Sam, and Al Warner were seeking to increase the popularity of their movie theatres and films they produced. Though a big fan of new inventions, as radio, Sam Warner went with the idea in the sense that he wanted music reproduced while showing silent pictures. He did not completely buy into the new development, neither did Hollywood functionaries when approached by the inventors. The process of transition stalled again. Warner brothers wanted the newly proposed devices to

replace live musicians, which was a real relief for provincial town theatres that could not afford to provide such accompaniment. By playing, the recordings created the illusion of the whole orchestra playing at the moment. Besides, there was no unnecessary improvisation on the part of hired musicians. According to Lyell (n. p.), originally, musical accompaniment fulfilled a double function, which was helping moviegoers become engrossed in the action and muting the noisy sound of the projector. Music could keep the audience from getting annoyed by the mechanical sounds of the film reel (Lyell n. p.). Sound technology having emerged, the need of musical accompaniment appeared to be lapsing into oblivion.

Hilliard (274) opines that, as of 1928, moviemakers were in rush to release sound motion pictures, which prevented producers from making an allowance for naturalness analysis. Experts later found that unnatural quality in speech was attributable to a flat overall frequency response characteristic. They began to realize that low frequencies being attenuated by appropriate equalizers during original recording made voices more natural. Such appliances received the name of dialogue or voice effort equalizers. They were shaped to produce the sound as natural as possible. Movie experts dedicated later researches to the question of why such equalizers were the ones to provide a subjectively flat sound quality (Hilliard 274).

The new sound movies were referred to as Vitaphone films, which means the sound of life (Thompson n. p.). Lyell (n. p.) notes that the new records were easily mixed up or lost, which made synchronization a delicate and painstaking process. Thompson (n. p.) suggests that Don Juan was the first romantic adventure Vitaphone film featuring a celebrated swordfighter who

loved plenty of women. Apart from a traditional music accompaniment, the movie had the sound effects, as ringing bells and clashing swords provide it with the sense of reality. A precise synchronization of both sound effects and music was the reason the film was a success. Vitaphone movies were making sound films extremely popular with the audience. Al Jolson, a popular American singer starred in *The Jazz Singer*, a 1927 movie shot by Warner brothers. Besides singing songs, the main protagonist kidded with and talked to his mother. It was after film producers realized people's desire of hearing characters talk that they decided to make it happen (Thompson n. p.). King (n. p.) refers to the movie as a blockbuster that had a limited dialogues and synchronized songs. According to Lyell (n. p.), *The Jazz Singer* was a real box office draw in terms of revenue, as was *The Singing Fool*, the sequel to the movie, also featuring Al Jolson. Alfred Hitchcock shot another early sound movie called *Blackmail*. The main actress, Anny Ondra was heavily accented, being Czechoslovakian by descent, which was the reason she had to mime her lines while an English-speaking actress uttered her words off-screen (Lyell, n. p.).

According to American Movie Classics Company (n. p.), after embracing the idea of sound movies, Hollywood started producing the two versions of the same film. Plot was not the only thing that differed. Different were also endings and sequences that were changed and reversed. *All Quiet on the Western Front* shot in 1930 is one of the most prominent examples of such double production, as it producers released both silent and sound versions of the film. Moviemakers would shoot such original movies by means of cameras installed on squeak-proofed moveable dollies. Microphones were

hung from camera cranes right above the action and beyond the reach of camera view. Ernst Lubitsch shot the first-ever musical called *The Love Parade* featuring the debuting Jeanette MacDonald. The film producer created the movie in line with all sound film requirements. He managed not to make it over-acted and stage-bound unlike his fellows-in-trade. Rouben Mamoulian revolutionized the sound concept by utilizing sounds as signals or cues and producing overlapping soundtracks in his film *Applause* shot in 1929.

According to Thompson (n. p.), what made Hollywood change their decision on sound movies was that the calculated amount of profits to be made out of producing them was lucrative. There was one serious but since such movies were expensive to produce. American Movie Classics Company (n. p.) note that technological innovations, costly new equipment, and sound-proofed stages made up decent operating budgets. According to Thompson (n. p.), studios had either to relocate or erect new buildings to keep airplanes or traffic noise off the shooting area. The already established film actors had heavy accents or funny-sounding voices, which made them hard to understand. With no way to alter them, new actors with proper articulation had to be found and turned into stars in their stead (Thompson n. p.). Doyle (n. p.) claims that popular stars found their professional careers stuck very suddenly after filmmakers had requested of them to speak while acting. American Movie Classics Company (n. p.) suggests that new actors lacked in stage experience and good voices, which critically reduced their marketability. Plenty of famous actors who had disagreeable voices and heavy accents had their careers shatter. Polish-accented Emil Jannings, Clara

Bow, Pola Negri, Ramon Navarro, Gilbert Roland, Blanche Sweet, Colleen Moore, Vilm Bankey, and Renee Adoree, to name but a few, all said farewell to their illustrious careers.

It is not that every single actor got fired due to articulation issues. Paul Muni, Ronald Colman, Gloria Swanson, Joan Crawford, and Greta Garbo and others succeeded in keeping their acting careers out of harm's way. However, transition survivors had to take articulation lessons from diction coaches (American Movie Classics Company n. p.). It stands to reason that the newly hired actors had little-to-no popularity with the audience; hence, it might have taken them years to win such. Since not only movies, but also popular actors themselves are box office draws, replacing popular stars has always been fraught with risk. Before the transition, silent movie actors let nonverbal means of communication do the talking. Thus, they used mimics, or facial expression, and body language, such as postures, gestures, and movements, expressing attitudes and feelings. After sound has become an integral part of motion pictures, actors had to master the whole new art of expressing emotions. American Movie Classics Company (n. p.) asserts that many directors and actors invited from the Broadway did manage to gain popularity regardless of their newness.

Thompson (n. p.) notes that the new actors were to memorize script lines ahead of time and stand motionless by talking to make sure the microphones would be able to catch the sound produced by their voices. There was also no way directors could shout out directions, with camera rolling. The sensitivity of microphones was such that it could easily pick up the whirring noise of filming appliances. Interestingly, camera operators and

their appliances were put in hermetically sealed boxes muffling whatever sound was trying to penetrate. In doing so, film directors managed to keep all kinds of noise off the recording process. However, for operators to be closed in boxes did not solve all the problems. Being inside did not allow moving the camera, as it produced the whirring sound nonetheless. Worse, camera operators sweated heavily while inside the booths. Those involved in moviemaking had to master the complete new ways of doing their job.

American Movie Classics Company (n. p.) suggests that these sound-insulated boxes equipped with blimps, or sound-impermeable covers, were extremely huge and awkward, though they did a lot to keep noise away from soundtracks. Actors who were lucky enough not to be subject to rotation felt the same awkwardness since microphones, whether stationary or concealed in costumes or other stage props, meant to record the live dialogues between characters hindered their movement a great deal.

Thompson (n. p.) notes that filmmakers, actors, and assistant personnel were not the only ones who encountered difficulties. Theatre workers, as projectionists had to spend their time working in the booths at the back of the cinema hall and running movies via projection appliances. Not only were they to operate phonographs, but also they were to run projectors; hence, they performed a double duty. There was always the possibility of the needle jumping around or skipping in the groove, which nullified the synchronization between the picture and the sound. The picture sometimes would no longer correspond with the sound, and such botch could have caused the audience to start stamping their feet at projectionists and booing them angrily. While the job turned harder, such employees at least managed to retain it. Cinema

musicians had no such luck, as they were no longer needed. Musicians other than those left working by Hollywood moviemakers had to seek pastures new to make their living. Sheza (n. p.) admits that the voice not matching the sound got the audience disappointed and irritable. Doyle (n. p) believes that this sound phenomenon came to be known as Talkie Terror, forcing the careers of many soundless movie actors to come to their end (qtd. in Sheza n. p.).

Thompson (n. p.) admits that not even audiences avoided re-adjusting since they had to sit silently for them to be able to hear actors' voices. As for those hard of hearing and the deaf, they had serious difficulties understanding the action. The better to hear the actors, people could use headphone sets that amplified the recording to the point when voices were perfectly discernable. Having said that, not all movie theatres had such at their disposal. Even if they did, completely deaf individuals could hardly hear what actors were saying. All such moviegoers had left to do was lip-read given that actors faced the camera at the point of speaking. Actors' speech for such people was not always perceptible, now readable, now unreadable. Whenever actors would stop looking in the camera, the deaf had no clues to consider, as there were no titles on the screen. As has been mentioned above, actors were to stand still; thus, there was no body language to give a hint at what protagonists were saying.

Unlike silent movies, their sound successors were devoid of action. Instead, actors could be seen talking, which labeled them as talkies. Then there came important improvement. No sooner had a few years gone by than talkies assumed such important attributes of silent movies as action. Not only that,

but also cameras became silent, which allowed operators to leave stuffy boxes and shoot the action at any angle by moving the now soundless cameras. Microphones modifications were what let actors move freely across the shooting area while talking. Filmmakers came to develop a new kind of movie, with the sound recording printed onto the film itself, which means it no longer had to be printed on separate phonograph records. Audio operators recorded the sound as a wavy pattern of dark and light, and it ran right parallel to movie pictures. While spectators could not observe the soundtrack on the screen, projectionists now had fewer problems keeping the picture and sound synchronized (Thompson n. p.).

Lyell (n. p.) claims that the number of movie theatres wired for sound had reached 75% by 1930s. Still, the cost of new technologies was too heavy for some cinemas to carry. What is more, the Great Depression struck around the time, which forces plenty of movie halls out of business. Hollywood studios remained afloat, applying sound developments, not without inventing new ones. Moviemakers adopted the Photophone system of sound on film developed by RCA, which further revolutionized the synchronization process. Hilliard (272) suggests that the system utilized the variable-area method. In moving a light beam of uniform intensity to and fro lengthways across a slit whose width and length were fixed, sound operators managed to produce the sound track. As a result, the soundtrack resembled a saw-tooth or serrated edge of uniform density and adjoining a uniform transparent region. RCA Photophone Inc. had equipped more than 5000 cinemas domestically and 2000 movie theatres internationally. Warner Brothers would not change the Vitaphone technique until 1933 to shift over to sound on film technique

granting benefits, as synchronization, standardization with other studios, and editing (Hilliard 272). American Movie Classics Company (n. p.) claims the first sound movies to be self-conscious, primitive, and crudely-made, with immobile microphones projected to take advantage of the sound innovation. Filming process was by no means an easy one since microphones hidden in costumes hindered actors' movement while noisy camera equipment forced operators into sealed booths where they had to sweat, without making additional squeak producing rotations. Moviegoers themselves had hard times adjusting themselves to the new way of experiencing an onscreen reality. Those with hearing handicaps could no longer take advantage of characters' script lines displayed on theatre screens. Instead, they had to watch every word escape their favorite actors' mouth and do what is called lip-reading in order to catch the idea of what the main protagonists were talking about.

Headphone sets with sound amplifiers were not universally available at that time. Cinema projectionists were also faced with the difficulties of making sound correspond to onscreen moving pictures. Failing to do so could have resulted in spectators' booing their unprofessionalism. Though somewhat primitive and technologically inferior, *The Jazz Singer*, *Don Juan*, *The Singing Fool*, *Blackmail*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Love Parade*, and *Applause* were among the first sound movies that were excellent box office draws for those days. The very first movies did contain little-to-no action since they displayed talks, jokes, and song singing. Then, such films gradually went from being devoid of action to becoming action-packed to meet the changing tastes of the audience. Overall, the transition from silent

to sound films was not an easy one, as actors, producers, projectionist, and musicians had to switch to new techniques and dodges of filming or face the inevitable career ends despite popularity with moviegoers.

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