

## **The Development of the Talkies in Britain: What kind of resistances were there to the Talkies in the late 1920s and why were they eventually overcome?**

by Christian Hayes

In this essay I will focus on the reception of synchronous sound film in Britain. By looking at the trade paper *The Bioscope* I will explore what kinds of criticism the new sound revolution faced and what kind of problems arose in light of the new technology. 1928 is the year in which sound appeared at the forefront of discussion within the pages of *The Bioscope*. The debate arose suddenly; after June 1928 it occupied every weekly news section and its major articles. Through these news items and articles I will see how the approaching talking films affected both exhibitors and critics.

One of the key problems exhibitors faced at the time of the coming of sound film was the wiring of their cinemas for sound and discerning which sound system to use. During the first half of 1928, however, there is still much discussion of live and mechanised musical accompaniment in cinemas in *The Bioscope*. Advertisements such as that for the 'Phonovox', a 'device that enables the old-fashioned gramophone to be convert d[sic] into a full volumed, true-toned reproducer' for reproducing 'the world's greatest orchestras' are still prominent in *The Bioscope*.<sup>1</sup> There is little evidence of a sound film revolution at this point, but there is much discussion of live versus mechanised music. Although mechanised music, wherein gramophones are amplified to accompany the film, are designed as substitutes for the orchestras smaller venues could

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bioscope Service Supplement*, January 5 1928, p.viii.

not afford, it suggests that many cinemas were wired for sound prior to the sound film debate. Rachael Low states that at the start of 1929 there were 400 cinemas wired for sound, a number which grew to 685 by the following year.<sup>2</sup> Mechanised music was so prominent in 1928 that *The Bioscope* introduced a new section of the paper designed especially for the discussion of mechanised music, reviewing gramophone systems and records.<sup>3</sup> This makes clear that ‘the number of instruments for the reproduction and amplification of gramophone records already installed in cinemas must approximate to a thousand’.<sup>4</sup>

The coming of mechanised music, then, posed a great threat to cinema musicians,<sup>5</sup> and with the imminent shift towards sound film their fate would soon be sealed. In 1928 there were still advertisements for live instruments. One in particular perfectly articulated the battle between live musical accompaniment and the mechanised or sound film with the words ‘CHRISTIE UNIT ORGAN’ in large letters and underneath it the words: ‘The perfect voice of the film’.<sup>6</sup> Music companies were engaging with the debate, trying to make a case for the survival of its industry and using the sound debate as a marketing device. With this shift to mechanised music, many cinemas would therefore have already been wired for sound, albeit with systems designed only for the

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<sup>2</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1929-1939* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), p.75 ; quoted in Amy Sargeant, *British Cinema a critical history* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), p.114.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Mechanised Music’, *The Bioscope Service Supplement*, January 12 1928, p.x.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *The Bioscope*, June 20, 1928, p.vii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

amplification of music from a gramophone. If one of the major hurdles of playing sound film in cinemas was that of amplification, one wonders whether the adaptation of those cinemas already wired for mechanised music would be more easily adapted for sound film.

This brings into play the question of which sound system was best and whether the equipment was universal. The mechanised music section of *The Bioscope* was introduced because ‘we believe that one type of instrument alone is fitted in over 700 cinemas.’<sup>7</sup> This almost suggests a smaller sound revolution that occurred prior to that of the talking film. However, when talking film equipment comes into question, it poses great problems for the exhibitor in terms of which system would suit their cinema. Discussing the acquisition of ‘talking topicals’, seemingly bite-sized sound films that arrived prior to feature films, *The Bioscope* states (in June 1928):

when talking pictures come along he will have to take them from the same firm [as the topicals] or a firm using the same device, because at present practically every system of sound film demands different apparatus. Should the talking pictures really win public approval, this would place the exhibitor in a very difficult position. Unless he had apparatus installed for every system, which as costs go at the moment would be almost impossible, his sources of supply might be very strictly limited.<sup>8</sup>

An industry-standard sound system had therefore not yet been agreed upon and therefore sound films at the time, namely sound topicals, had been seen functioning using varying

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Sound and Sense’, *The Bioscope*, June 27 1928, p.20.

audio devices. This suggests two points: that sound film had already been seen at this time, and that Britain was in fact waiting for America to work out which system was best.

There is talk of sound films prior to this, such as a very short article on a ‘Sound Film of Bone-Setting Operations’ in which the author was ‘amazed at the realism’ the sound gave a filmed operation, adding that ‘If the public could stand it, the film would prove a marvellous revelation.’<sup>9</sup> This ‘revelation’, however, does not seem to refer to the sound technology of the film but to the realism of the scientific operation. This almost nonchalant regard for sound film is consistently evident in the *Bioscope* articles of 1928. One author writes, ‘American observers are expressing some surprise that this country has shown no tendency to excitement over sound films.’<sup>10</sup> This appears to be on the one hand a case of sober stiff-upper lip Britishness, but as we shall see later, *The Bioscope* was in fact far from excited about the prospect of sound film. Though this detachment also suggests that the authors of these articles had either already witnessed the sound film, causing it no longer to be a ‘revelation’, or that although they had witnessed it in small doses, such as in the bone-setting film, they saw it only as a novelty, a device completely separate from the feature fiction films that dominated the paper. However, even when *The Jazz Singer* (1927) is reviewed in February 1928, barely any attention is paid to the fact that it is a sound film.<sup>11</sup> Even the advertisements for *The Jazz Singer* that

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Talk of the Trade’, *The Bioscope*, January 12, 1928, p.36.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Is It Suprising?’, *The Bioscope*, August 15 1928, p.26.

<sup>11</sup> ‘The Jazz Singer’, *The Bioscope*, February 23 1928, p.58.

appeared around the same time did not draw attention to its sound sequences, remarkably choosing not to use them as a marketing ploy.<sup>12</sup>

This theory of talking pictures as a novelty dominates the debates of *The Bioscope* in 1928. While there are often reports from America of producers increasingly signing up to make talking pictures,<sup>13</sup> the *Bioscope* writers and British exhibitors often view their reservations and anxieties over the new film form. In an article titled ‘Golden Silence’, a *Bioscope* writer laments the possible demise of the silent film. One expresses concerns that sound film may be a novelty, albeit a ‘dangerous novelty’ that will be difficult to undo.<sup>14</sup> It goes on to list those directors who are against sound, including Cecil de Mille and Charlie Chaplin, taking a stance that champions silent film as an art form too precious to be tampered with.

The anxiety that film would become constrained by the addition of sound, undoing those qualities unique to cinema and reverting to the conventions of theatre, an argument that the Soviet filmmakers famously articulated,<sup>15</sup> is apparent here. The writer suggests,

If the film is to live, it must improve and develop along progressive lines...if spoken dialogue became an integral part of every production, the result would not

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<sup>12</sup> *The Bioscope*, February 9 1928, p.3; *The Bioscope*, March 15 1928, p.17.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Talking Film Developments’, *The Bioscope*, May 17 1928, p.29; ‘Sam Goldwyn’s Talking Pictures’, *The Bioscope*, June 6 1928, p.31.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Is It Surprising?’, *The Bioscope*, August 15 1928, p.26.

<sup>15</sup> Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Alexandrov, ‘Statement on Sound’ in Eisenstein, *Writings 1922-1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1988)

be a film at all, but a curious cross between the stage and the film, which might incidentally fail to retain the merits of either.<sup>16</sup>

This writer imagines a talking picture to be a hybrid of separate arts that would cancel each other out, creating a lifeless monstrosity that ‘would not be a film at all’; in other words, this writer is bleakly forecasting the death of the cinema. This lament for a striving art form quickly slipping away is strongly evident throughout *The Bioscope* of 1928, taking on an almost funereal tone. This leads to such headlines as ‘Is the Silent Drama Doomed?’<sup>17</sup> which battle with ‘America’s Black Forecast’.<sup>18</sup> One article, entitled ‘Depressed Optimists’ conveys an almost schizophrenic reaction towards talking pictures. It reads:

The closer we look at this talking-film proposition and the more evidence we collect as to the situation in America, the more optimistic we become of the future of these films and the more depressed it makes us. If that seems to be a silly paradox we have no apology to offer, for it represents exactly how we feel.

We are becoming satisfied that the talking film is the greatest box-office fillip an eager showman ever had—and we could almost cry about it!<sup>19</sup>

This projects a definite sense of the sound film as inevitable at that point yet welcomed with a very heavy heart. Another article that compiled the opinions of British exhibitors conveys an anxiety that although sound film may prove to have initial novelty value, they may not prove successful in the long run and exhibitors are cautious not to decide too

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Golden Silence’, *The Bioscope*, June 6 1928, p.32.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Gray, ‘Is the Silent Drama Doomed?’, *The Bioscope*, July 4 1926, p.25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Depressed Optimists’, *The Bioscope*, August 22 1928, p.30.

soon. One exhibitor almost reverses Edison's old adage, stating, 'we should have to depend upon features being pleasing to the ear as well as to the eye—a difficult combination.'<sup>20</sup>

The frenzied reportage from America and the holding out until America has decided upon an industry-standard sound system highlights the subordinate position of Britain to Hollywood and therefore Britain's subordinate position in the transition to talking pictures. Britain can do nothing but wait until Hollywood has decided upon its commitment to sound film and specific audio technologies before beginning its own technological revolution. One article states, 'British exhibitors will be unwise to do anything until they have thoroughly investigated the respective merits of rival systems'<sup>21</sup> and another reviews the various rival systems, including Cortellaphone, Vocafilm and Western Electric.<sup>22</sup> Another article suggests that America is caught up in a frenzy, resulting in impaired judgement, whereas Britain is waiting for the Atlantic waters to have calmed, for America to confirm a universal system and undoubtedly waiting until this Hollywood-centric 'sound-film craze'<sup>23</sup> proves itself as more than a mere novelty. Another article attempts to distance Britain's stance from that of Hollywood's, making it appear as though Britain has its own choice: 'American observers are expressing some surprise that this country has shown no tendency to excitement over sound films. In

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<sup>20</sup> 'Sound or Silence? Exhibitors Debate the Future of Sound Films', *The Bioscope*, August 1, 1928, p.28.

<sup>21</sup> 'Sound Sense', *The Bioscope*, July 25, 1928, p.26

<sup>22</sup> Peter Vischer, 'Sound Films Boom', *The Bioscope*, July 18 1928, p.33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

America there has been something like panic... in this country the exhibitor is keeping a much steadier pulse.<sup>24</sup> However much it is debated within *The Bioscope*, Britain can therefore have little influence on the outcome of talking pictures. The resistances to talking pictures in Britain were overcome, then, by their inevitability in Hollywood. Technical standards were fought over and decided in America, as well as the functioning of talking pictures themselves.

Natural problems emerged during the shift from silent to sound film. It was a Hollywood revolution that greatly affected other countries, an effect that resonated right down to the exhibitors on a local level. The gravity of the situation had been noted by writers in *The Bioscope* and the sound revolution may therefore have been seen as a very dark age for cinema, if not the end of cinema. Not only was silent film thriving at the time, the critics at *The Bioscope* held firm belief that it was indeed a new art form that had come to fruition, having developed its own unique qualities, separate from the other arts. It therefore posed theoretical and ideological problems for film critics, and on the one hand there was the integrity of a noble art to uphold, and on the other hand there was an entirely new form to get to grips with. The exhibitors were faced with practical and technical problems. Without a clear idea of which expensive sound system to install in their cinema, they were thrown into limbo, waiting for the rival sound companies to battle it out in America before crossing the Atlantic. This could ultimately only be a positive development for Britain. British exhibitors would not have to be the first to make mistakes with the new technology but use the American exhibitors as a template for their

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<sup>24</sup> 'Is It Surprising?', *The Bioscope*, August 15 1928, p.26

own exhibition. However much critics or exhibitors protested, they nonetheless had no power over the arrival of talking pictures. If they were to continue selling American pictures, an essential product for the British film industry, they were left with no choice but to sell talking pictures.

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