

# The Transition to Sound: A Talking Revolution in the History of Cinema

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‘If George Valentin could speak, he’d say “Wow! Victoire! Génial! Merci! Formidable! Merci beaucoup!’”. These words were spoken by the French actor Jean Dujardin during the Academy Awards ceremony held in February 2012 in Hollywood, Los Angeles. He had just won his first Oscar for Best Actor for his role as the 1920s silent film star George Valentin in the film *The Artist* (figure 1).



**Figure 1** Jean Dujardin during his acceptance speech at the Oscars, 26 February 2012. He is the first French actor to win the famous gold statuette for Best Leading Actor.<sup>1</sup>

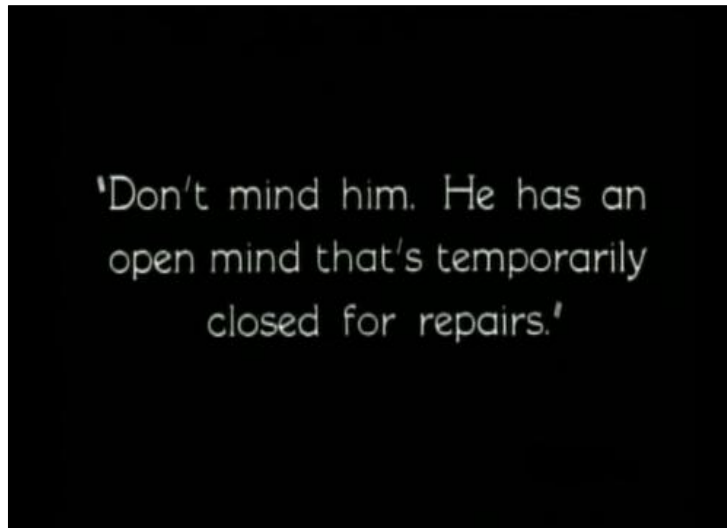
That same night at the Academy Awards in Hollywood, *The Artist* won the Oscar for Best Picture. The last time a silent film won the Oscar for best film was the year 1929, during the Academy’s first ever ceremony.

The success of *The Artist* has led to a renewed interest in the history of silent film and the introduction of sound. So what would George Valentin have sounded like in the 1920s if he could speak? This guide will introduce you to the key developments in the introduction of sound to cinema and the different approaches taken by different countries.

## 1 The cinema has never been soundless

Since its early days, filmmakers have used music, human voices and other sound effects to accompany the moving images on the screen. But these sounds generally (although not always) did not come directly *from* the film. In other words, they had not been recorded during the shooting of the film but added *afterwards* to accompany its screening. Film exhibitors (cinema owners) and projectionists could be responsible for adding these sound effects for the public's entertainment.

The instrumental music accompanying silent film screenings was, for example, a piano or orchestra accompaniment. Music could come from a gramophone or musicians could be hired to perform live and positioned next to the screen or behind it. Sound effects would be, for example, the noise made by galloping horses, marching feet, trains' whistles, and so on. Human voices were also added. For example, a speaker or a master of ceremony would be hired by the exhibitor to introduce the film to the public, to interpret the film's moving images during the screening, and also to read aloud the inter-titles, short written lines of text occasionally inserted in the film, generally inside a black frame and printed in white letters (figure 2). The speaker's commentary would also help those in the public (e.g., children, elderly) to follow the extra information given in the inter-titles. It should not be forgotten that, one hundred years ago, a good part of the public was not able to read properly if at all.



**Figure 2** Example of intertitle taken from the film *The Patsy* (1928, directed by King Vidor).<sup>ii</sup>

Each individual cinema house was in charge of producing or buying its own sound accompaniment and would offer it on a custom basis. This meant, for example, that someone watching a 'silent' film in a cinema house in London – let's call this spectator George – would be listening to a different music-track or a voice commentary than somebody else – let's call this spectator Jane – watching the same film in New York. The film itself was silent, but the experience of watching it wasn't.

This was, in very general terms and with exceptions, the way people such as Jane and George watched a film in a big city in Western Europe and in the United States between the 1910s and the late 1920s. However, from the late 1920s onwards, sound technology in cinema spread so rapidly to the point that, in less than ten years, the production of silent films almost totally stopped. By the mid-1930s, an intense period of technological innovation in sound had revolutionised the entire film industry (production, distribution, and exhibition) all over the world.

What exactly caused silent films to become out of fashion? To answer this question we need to take a step back and to look at the transition years between the late 1920s and the early 1930s. We will focus on the film industry in the United States and in Western Europe.

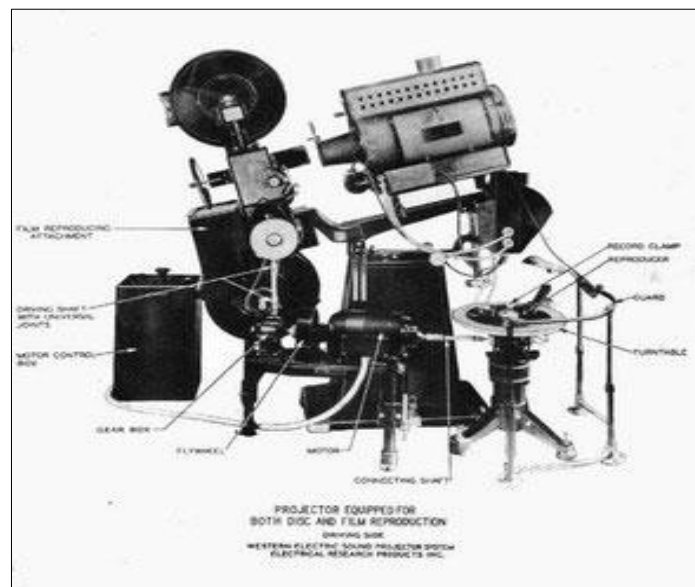
## 2 Sound and film technology in the 1920s

During the 1920s American and European film production companies such as Warner Brothers had started investing serious money and resources in a series of technological inventions which had to do with sound recording in film. They successfully experimented with sound which was synchronised to film, i.e. it was matched closely with the images which appeared on the screen. The sound was not only music, but also sound effects (e.g., a clock ticking, a door opening, gun shots, etc.) and human (actors') voices, which were heard as if they were coming directly *from* the screen, and not as though they were added afterwards and somewhat external to the film's story. 'Talking films', or 'talkies' as they came to be called, soon became the new technological attraction in cinemas.



**Figure 3** The *Scala Theatre* in Brighton, UK, ca. 1930.<sup>iii</sup>

The music, the actors' voices, and the different effects could be recorded onto a disc. In such cases, the film companies would provide the cinemas with a recording machine, a turntable which read the disc at the same time while the film was projected. This system was a sound-on-disc system; the most popular of these systems was called the *Vitaphone* (figure 4). The sound was not printed on the film, but on a disc which would be played by the projectionist alongside the screening of the images.



**Figure 4** *Vitaphone's* sound-on-disc projector.<sup>iv</sup>

The system had some disadvantages though, because disc and film were sometimes difficult to play at exactly the same time (e.g., the audio was delayed in respect of the images on the screen). Moreover, the film exhibitors often had to keep more than one copy of the disc and of the film print in case the disc was broken or the corresponding film print was damaged or even burned. (Film at that time came in print footage which was made of a highly flammable material).

At the same time, other sound-on-film systems were experimented with and proved successful, for example in Germany and in the US. Two of these systems in use in the mid and late 1920s were called *Tri-Ergon* and *Photophone*. With these systems, the soundtrack was printed on the film meaning that the sound could not go out of synch as it was read together with the film. It should be noted that sound-on-film experiments which projected films with synchronised sound had been around since the late nineteenth century. Early examples of sound-on-film experiments are for instance Léon Gaumont's and Thomas Edison's inventions during the early 1900s. However, it was during the 1920s that sound-on-film innovations were improved further and, eventually, they won the competition against the sound-on-disc systems for their higher audio-with-video synchronisation quality.

What both sound-on-disc and sound-on-film systems had in common, however, was that the films were now matched with a specific soundtrack so that, if we refer to our earlier example, George in London and Jane in New York would hear the same music/voices/noises while watching the same film.

From the late 1920s onwards, films with spoken voices, music and sounds synchronised to the images, started to tell stories to the public in the same way we still experience today. But another problem had to be taken into account in the late 1920s: the international distribution of spoken films. If George in London and Jane in New York spoke and understood the same language (well, more or less), then what about Pierre in Paris, Mario in Rome, Karl in Berlin, Ferrán in Barcelona or Beatrijs in Bruxelles?

### **3 International film distribution: the foreign language problem**

The use of synchronised speech in films became a central problem to the distribution of films around the world. In practical terms, producing sound films with spoken dialogues meant that, for example, a film produced in London would be spoken in English and so could only be understood by people who spoke English; and English in the 1920s and 1930s was not as commonly spoken in Europe or everywhere else in the world as it is today.

Jean Dujardin's speech at the ceremony of the Academy Awards in 2012 has indirectly highlighted that important difference between a silent and a sound film: if George Valentin was the character of a 'talkie', he would speak French (the native language spoken by Jean Dujardin and by *The Artist's* director and most of its cast). Instead, because the film is silent, the public does not know (or the audience cannot find out just by watching the film) that Jean Dujardin is a French actor. The silent film can be understood and liked by many people all over the world. Instead, the sound film can be understood if spoken in an understandable language, or otherwise actors' voices need to be "translated".

Since the early 1920s film trade barriers (also known as quota laws) were regulating the exchange of films between Europe and the United States. Countries such as Britain, Germany, France and Italy had passed laws to protect the national film market from foreign competition (mainly American). For example, in 1925 Germany allowed the screening of one foreign film for each domestic film shown. The French government also restricted the number of films which could be exported into the country, as did the British government in 1927 which demanded that a percentage of British-made films be screened. The Italian government also restricted screenings through its Italian film programming. Various restrictions continued until the end of the Second World War.

In the attempt not to lose its foreign-language markets and to standardise its means of producing films, US film companies started shooting multi-language (or foreign sound) film versions (known as MLVs or FLVs). MLVs were films which were shot simultaneously in different languages. For example two, three or more language versions were shot, one in English, one in German, one in Dutch and one in French. The actors were chosen according to the language they spoke, but polyglot actors (actors who spoke more than one language) were also often cast to act in more than one language version. In the late 1920s and early 1930s the MLVs were produced by the US film company Paramount in Joinville, near Paris in France, and by Metro Goldwin Mayer in its film sound studios in Los Angeles. The German film company UFA produced MLVs at the studios in Babelsberg, near Berlin. A famous example of a Berlin based MLVs is the film *Der blaue Engel* / *The Blue Angel* shot both in German and in English.



**Figure 5** One of the German posters for *Der blaue Engel* (1930, directed by Josef von Sternberg).<sup>v</sup>



The MLVs were, however, very expensive foreign language projects doomed to failure. At the same time, different audiovisual translation modes, mainly dubbing, voice-over dubbing, and subtitling were experimented with; films with dubbed speech (e.g., American English translated and then re-voiced into Italian) or subtitles (German into English) obtained different reactions from the public all over the world.

Dubbing, intended as a film translation practice, consists of a first stage of written translation and adaptation of the dialogues, followed by a voice re-acting (or re-voicing) phase in a recording studio when new dialogues are created to replace the original voices (for example, actors speaking German will substitute the speech in English). Voice-over dubbing is an alternative practice to ‘full’ dubbing, and generally consists of a single or two commentary voices narrating over the original dialogues, which in turn can still be heard in the background. It is still popular in some Eastern European countries (e.g. Poland) to translate foreign films. Together with subtitles, voice-over dubbing is also a practice used today in British television to translate interviews with foreign speakers who do not speak English. In general terms, subtitles are strings of written text that translate the spoken dialogues and are generally placed on the lower side of the screen.

In the early 1930s in Europe, subtitled films were popular in countries with a smaller population: for example, in the Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal or Greece. In the larger European markets (e.g., in France, Spain), subtitled ‘talkies’ did not do particularly well at the box office, that is to say, they did not sell many tickets, or were not even allowed distribution (e.g., in Italy, Germany). The dubbing of films in a country’s native language was supported at the time by the American film companies for economic reasons. Similarly, dubbed films were preferred by the German, French, Spanish and Italian governments for their own political and economic reasons. A special case is Britain, as the British public did

not need any translation to the majority of the early sound films, which were spoken in American English.

There were (and are) nations or geographical areas where different ways to translate a film were used to target different language or age groups (e.g. in Belgium, Finland, Estonia etc.). There are also many historical and technical developments to audiovisual translation modes such as dubbing and subtitling which should be taken into consideration if one wishes to look more attentively at the translation and international distribution of films spoken in different languages.

## **Conclusion**

This introduction is designed to be a more generalised introduction to the transition to sound in cinema and outlines changes and developments that took place in the USA and in Europe between the late 1920s and mid-1930s. If you would like to explore the topic in greater depth, the following films and books will allow you to explore the topic further:

### Suggested Films

*À Nous la Liberté*, 1931, directed by René Clair; starring Henri Marchand, Raymond Cordy and Rolla France

*The Artist*, 2011, directed by Michel Hazanavicius, starring Jean Dujardin, Bérénice Bejo and John Goodman

*Blackmail*, 1929, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, starring Anny Ondra, Sara Allgood and Charles Paton

*Der blaue Engel/The Blue Angel*, 1930, directed by Josef von Sternberg, MLVs starring Marlene Dietrich, Emil Jannings and Kurt Gerron

*The Broadway Melody*, 1929, directed by Harry Beaumont, starring Charles King, Anita Page, and Bessie Love

*La canzone dell'amore*, 1930, directed by Gennaro Righelli, starring Dria Paola, Isa Pola, and Elio Steiner

Introductory speech by Will H. Hays, 1926, *Vitaphone* short

*The Jazz Singer*, 1927, directed by Alan Crosland, starring Al Jolson, May McAvoy and Warner Oland

*M*, 1931, directed by Fritz Lang; starring Peter Lorre, Ellen Widmann and Inge Landgut;

*The Singing Fool*, 1928, directed by Lloyd Bacon, starring Al Jolson, Betty Bronson and Josephine Dunn

*Singin' in the Rain*, 1952, directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, starring Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor and Debbie Reynolds

### Suggested Reading

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- i Image taken from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/oscars/9107793/Oscars-2012-Jean-Dujardin-wins-Best-Actor-for-The-Artist.html> [Accessed 19 July 2013]
- ii Image taken from <http://silentintertitles.tumblr.com/post/3910716408/from-the-patsy-1928> [Accessed 19 July 2013]
- iii Image taken from <http://talkieking.blogspot.co.uk/> [Accessed 20 July 2013]
- iv Image taken from <http://heathenmedia.co.uk/prayer/page/5/> [Accessed 22 July 2013]
- v Image taken from <http://www.cinemarts.com/viewitem.aspx?id=2610> [Accessed 22 July 2013]