**Video Script**

**Lecture 11 – Sound**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Last week, we finally got to Hollywood. We looked at how the Independents moved West in the 1910s and became the powerful, vertically integrated studios of the 1920s and 1930s, marking the beginning of what we call the “studio era.” We also looked at how the studios made—and made money off of—our earliest cinema stars.

This week, we’ll be moving into the late 1920s to address the end of silent film and the birth of sound.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this week. It’s also worth mentioning that this lecture draws heavily on your reading by Douglas Gomery on sound.

**Silent Film (1)**

By the mid to late 1920s, silent film is a mature industry and an art. But, in all honesty…

**Silent Film (continued)**

I’ve been lying to you, right to your faces, by calling it “silent” film at all! Because in reality, silent film was never truly silent. **[ANIMATION]**  First off, even the most rinky-dink little theaters provided *some* kind of live musical accompaniment, even if it was just a single piano or guitar player. That musician might play existing music, like classical compositions or popular songs, or they might improvise a score based on what was going on on the screen.

**Cue Sheet**

As film grew into a full-fledged industry, trade magazines about the movie business began to publish what were known as cue sheets. Eventually, film studios put out their own cue sheets or even complete musical scores for their supposedly silent films. Here, you see one such cue sheet for the 1929 Clara Bow film *The Wild Party*. The cue sheet contains suggestions of musical themes and motifs to play at certain points in the film and the on-screen action that would prompt that musical cue.

**[ANIMATION]** For example, at the bottom of the first page it says that when the title card saying “And a draw it remained” shows up, the musicians should riff on that last little snippet of a melody, play it in a “hot jazz tempo,” and keep it up for about two and a half minutes. I’ll include this whole cue sheet for any musicians in the class who might be curious about it, and I’ll also link you to a whole database of digitized silent movie sheet music if you’d like to keep exploring.

**Abe Lass**

**[ANIMATION]** Now, I’d like for you to pause the lecture for a moment. You are in for such a treat. When I was poking around for some examples of silent film accompaniment, I found a 4-minute WNYC radio interview with man named Abe Lass, who was a piano player in a small theater in Brooklyn when he was young. **[ANIMATION]** I’d like you to click the link below and listen to this interview—it is *so charming*—and it’s helpful because he walks you through how he would improvise music to a scene. When you’re done, come on back.

**Silent Film (continued)**

Any little movie theater might have an Abe (though I doubt any other piano player was quite so winning). **[ANIMATION]** Movie palaces, on the other hand, programmed a whole musical entertainment extravaganza around a silent feature film.

**Radio City**

Take for example Radio City Music Hall, a gorgeous art deco performance space in New York City that operated as one of the city’s premiere movie theaters in the 1920s and 1930s.

**Radio City Interior**

Here’s the interior, which has mostly been preserved. It looks almost the same if you were to go today. **[ANIMATION]** At a picture palace like this, a movie presentation would include live acts like singers or dancers (think vaudeville), followed by a series of short films like cartoons or serials. Serials, just briefly, were short films that continued one story from installment to installment. *Flash Gordon*, a science fiction serial, is a set of serials might have heard of.

Then you’d get some newsreels, which were documentary footage of important events from around the globe. I’ve already linked you to a couple in this class, like Valentino’s funeral. And finally, there would be your feature film. In a big picture palace, musical accompaniment might come in the form of a pipe organ, but it was more likely provided by an orchestra. In fact, by the mid-1920s, theaters were the foremost employers of musicians in the country!

**Silent film (continued)**

So, we know that there’s a bunch of live entertainment happening in theaters that adds music and noise to a film presentation that might otherwise be called “silent.” But we also know from earlier course content that **[ANIMATION]** there were some talking and singing pictures made with experimental systems in the early and transitional eras. Your documentary screening *Be Natural* is helpful, here.

**Chronophone**

Remember Gaumont, the company Alice Guy-Blache worked for? They invented the chronophone system, which succeeded in providing synchronous sound. Actors would first record their parts on a disc. Then, the disc would be played on set and the actors would lip-sync their pre-recorded lines on camera. The chronophone playback system would help synchronize the picture and the audio.

**Gaumont poster**

Alice Guy-Blache produced more than 150 films for this system! I’m not sure if any of them are pictured here, but I’m willing to bet that at least one of these films is hers. I should note that while these early synchronous sound systems existed, they *were* experimental and didn’t disseminate widely across the country, though. Most people didn’t see a talkie until the late 1920s.

**Silent**

But speaking of talking…**[ANIMATION]** the last reason that silent films were never truly silent is that the audience was hella chatty! Social norms of the early, transitional, and early studio eras made it perfectly okay to cheer, boo, or even chat a bit during a film.

**Mabel’s Dramatic Career**

I went poking around to see if I could find any depictions of movie theaters within early silent films to see how they portrayed audiences. What I turned up was 1913 slapstick film directed by Mack Sennett (who you also see here—he’s one of the stars) called *Mabel’s Dramatic Career.* The story is simple—this character jilts his girlfriend, who then goes off to become a famous movie actress. He sees her on screen, gets upset at the movie villain that’s trying to hurt her, and then tries to find and kill the guy who plays the villain in real life. He’s a bit of a dumdum.

**[ANIMATION]** What’s interesting for our purposes is the part of the film that takes place inside a 1913 theater. You can see here that he’s included the piano player, **[ANIMATION]** who is shown providing musical entertainment in the intermission between one-reel films as well as during the actual film.

**Sennett & Arbuckle**

Sennett also includes a number of shots of the audience, who clap and respond to the film in measured ways, but yell at him to cool it when he gets too animated. You can see some of the people in the background being irritated with him when he’s disrupting them *too* much. So, to the degree that you can use a fictional film as a document of historical practices, it seems like there was an acceptable range of audience chatter that had an upper limit. I’ll include a link to this film so you can see it for yourself if you’re curious.

**[ANIMATION]** Incidentally, this film has a cameo from an infamous and scandalous silent film star named Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle. Remember his name, because Fatty Arbuckle’s going to become an important part of our upcoming lectures.

**The Vitaphone**

Okay! Now we’ve dispelled the myths about silent film and we know that no one really ever sat in silence staring at the screen…let’s get into what we commonly think of as sound: the talking picture, a.k.a. the talkie, a.k.a widespread synchronous sound.

Companies and studios started experimenting with sound during the 1920s. Some were recording sound on discs while others were trying to record sound directly on film. **[ANIMATION**] The device that ushered in the talkie is a sound-on-disc system known as the Vitaphone. It was developed by Western Electric based on the work of a very eccentric man named Lee DeForest, who we’ll talk more about when we get to radio, and it was acquired by the Warner Brothers studio in 1925.

Here’s a key point: Warner Brothers *didn’t* invest in the Vitaphone with the idea that they were going to incorporate sound into feature films. Remember how we talked about big picture palaces having live entertainment? Warner Brothers thought they could use this technology to produce what they called “canned vaudeville.” What does that mean? Well, they recorded short sound films of singers or dancers to sell to small theaters who couldn’t afford fancy pre-show entertainment. But people are *way* more fascinated with the talking pictures than they are any crummy old live entertainment, and thus the runaway success of those shorts made it clear that there was a market for talkies. It should be noted that the Vitaphone wasn’t a *great* system, though. There were problems keeping the film and the discs synchronized and the amplification was poor.

**The Jazz Singer**

Warner Brothers goes all-in on sound. In 1927, they release what’s generally considered to be the first talkie, which is called *The Jazz Singer*. This film stars an entertainer named Al Jolson, who was a big name singer of his day. He’s kind of a wholesome personality, kind of schmaltzy—I’m trying to think of an equivalent. Like, a little Josh Grobanesque? Regardless, let’s watch a little clip of the *The* *Jazz Singer*. **[Play clip through 1-2 lines of singing.]**

And he just kinda goes on singing like that. Now, did you notice anything about the *acting* portion of this film? Why yes, astute 308 student, there *were* intertitles! The first talkie contained a lot of singing but not a whole ton of talking—the acting was still for the most part silent-style acting, explained by title cards.

This film is out there if you want to watch it but, I dunno, it’s not the greatest film ever made and it’s got an awful lot of blackface in it. Plus **[ANIMATION]** you might have recognized the name of our old friend Warner Oland here. Does he play a stereotypical Chinese character, you ask? No! Happy to report that this time he plays a stereotypical *Jewish* character. He’s got the range, folks.

**Pause**

**[ANIMATION]** Okay, I’d like you to pause and think for a moment. Imagine you’re the head of 308 Pictures, an influential Hollywood studio in the 1920s. You’ve watched The Jazz Singer and you see all the money Warner Brothers is raking in….but you’re not convinced. What are some reasons you might NOT want to adopt sound technology?

**[ANIMATION]** I’ve put thirty seconds on the clock. **[Play clip.]**

**Results**

Here are some of the reasons I was able to think of. **[ANIMATION]** First of all, it’s expensive to implement a whole new technology! **[ANIMATION]** That cost seems particularly egregious when talkies might just be a fad. Who knows if it’ll be the studio head equivalent of putting all of your money in beanie babies?

**[ANIMATION]** Finally, will it limit the market reach of my films? International distribution of silent films was pretty simple. All you had to do was slice out the English intertitles, replace them with ones in the local language, and voila, a lucrative foreign product. How the heck do you make sound films for a multiple markets in multiple languages?

The title screen you see here is for a 1931 Laurel and Hardy short made for Germany. If you’ve never heard of Laurel and Hardy, that they’re a popular comedy duo from this era and that’s really all you need to know. As you can see, it seems like they’d previously been known as “Dick und Dof,” in Deutschland, and this film has been retitled *Hinter Schloss und Reigel* from the English *Under Lock and Key*. What you might not expect is that Laurel and Hardy recorded a whole second version of their English film in German, which they really do not speak. And then a whole third version in Spanish, which they speak even less! I’ll include the link to a compilation of their non-English shorts so you can take a peek. This certainly was not a tenable solution, but the problem of international sales was a real one for studios.

**Microphone**

The reality, though, is that *The Jazz Singer* was such a runaway hit it convinced the other major studios to jump into sound films. And the coming of sound impacts the film industry in four big ways. **[ANIMATION]** The first impact is on cinematography. Actors have to learn how to use microphones, and filmmakers have to figure out how to silence noisy equipment. Microphones weren’t particularly powerful during this era and they were bulky, so the solution in the earliest days of sound was to hide microphones in the set, in a potted plant or on a shelf, and the actors had to stay very stationary in order to talk into them. The camera had to be put in a box so the microphones didn’t pick up the whirring noise, and even lights had to be changed for quieter bulbs. The result is that early sound films kind of look like films from 1900 again. Neither the camera nor the actors can move much.

So, a couple of images to illustrate Impact no. 1.

**How the Talkies are Made**

It’s wild to think of a time when a microphone was new technology. I’m talking into one right now. They’re so embedded in our belongings and lives some of us just randomly yell in our homes and an Alexa or Google Home microphone picks up our voice and responds. But **[ANIMATION]** this article from film magazine *Photoplay* from 1929, which is explaining this newfangled sound business to movie fans, includes “mike” on its list of inscrutable new terminology that needs to be decoded.

**Singin’ in the Rain**

If you’ve ever seen the film *Singin’ in the Rain*, the problem of silent film actors having to learn what to do with the microphone is dramatized to great comedic effect in this scene. I’ll link you to it in the optional clips.

**Arclight**

Finally, let me show you this video of a carbon arclight. This was one of the noisy pieces of on-set equipment that was just fine until they began using microphones, and suddenly it wasn’t okay to have a light that sounded like an old Buick. This is amateur footage I found on YouTube, so it’s not perfect, but I think you’ll be able to hear how loud this light was. **[Play clip.]**

**Impact 2: Theaters**

Impact number two was on how theaters operated. Wiring a theater for sound was an enormous investment, and the studio-owned movie palaces were able afford to get that work done first. Smaller, mom and pop theaters couldn’t pony up the cash to hop on the sound bandwagon right away. The twin blows of only being able to offer silent films *and* people being willing to travel to movie palaces to see talkies drove many small theaters out of business for good.

Wiring for sound is actually a money *saver* for big picture palaces, because they could then lay off their orchestras. Some theaters employed up to fifty musicians, all of whom were rendered obsolete by synchronous sound.

Sound also has the effect of standardizing film speed, which during the silent era could be faster or slower than intended and it didn’t really matter.

And finally, once the talkies debuted, film audiences had to be quiet. Films weren’t just telling their stories visually anymore. Audience members needed to be able to hear the film if they wanted to know what was going on.

**Talking/Not Talking**

As historian Robert Sklar put it in his book *Movie-Made America*, **[ANIMATION]** talking audiences for silent pictures became **[ANIMATION]** silent audiences for talking pictures.

**Impact no. 3: Stars**

Impact no. 3 of sound is on stars. Which stars can make the transition to sound? Which new kinds of stars are studios interested in? And which stars fall away?

Well, who did and didn’t make it was influenced by a star’s skill and adaptability, but also by issues of class and race. Stage performers became a hot commodity in Hollywood following *The Jazz Singer*. Movie studios increasingly turned to Broadway actors for early talkies because they knew how to memorize lines, act with their voices, and sometimes sing.

The stars that *didn’t* make the transition were often pushed out of the industry because they could not or would not speak with a specific American accent. Historically, it’s important to locate the proliferation of sound film in 1929, a year that marks the beginning of the Great Depression and the end of a decade of increased immigration to America from around the world. Speaking stars and their voices were held to performance standards inflected by both classism and nativism—accents that reveal a performer grew up working-class or grew up speaking another language were both liabilities that might tank a career. Clara Bow, one of the biggest stars of silent film, was unable to make the transition to talkies because she got bad press about her thick, Brooklyn accent.

The woman you see here, Dolores Del Rio, similarly struggled. Del Rio grew up in Mexico. She met filmmaker Edwin Carewe at a wedding in 1920s and he convinced her to come to Hollywood, positive he could turn her into kind of a female Rudolph Valentino. In silent films, she played all kinds of different roles. But once sound was introduced, her *extremely lightly accented* English meant she was only offered “ethnic roles” that cast her as a stereotypical Latina temptress. She eventually left Hollywood and returned to Mexico where her career blossomed; she became one of the most important actresses in the history of Mexican film.

**Flying Down to Rio**

I’d like to show you about 90 seconds of one of her last American films, a 1933 Fred Astaire movie called *Flying Down to Rio*. You’ll hear her speak just a handful of lines. **[Play clip.]**

As you can see, her accent is almost imperceptible, but it marked her as too “foreign” for most leading roles. Talkies helped codify a preferred American accent, and that accent excluded a lot of people

**Impact no. 4: Genres**

Finally, the fourth impact of sound on the movie industry was that it ushered in a few new genres of film. These were genres that capitalized on sound and leveraged it to great and thrilling effect. After sound, you get a lot of gangster films with tons of gunfire and screeching tires. You get musicals, with lots of singing. And you also get screwball comedy, which the British Film Institute helpfully defines as “a breed of quick-talking romantic farces that fused silliness with sophistication.”

Screwball comedies are *famous* for how fast the actors talk. I’d like to play you just a couple of minutes of *His Girl Friday* from 1940, perhaps the most iconic example of the genre. **[PLAY CLIP through “auctioneer” bit.]**

Could you *imagine* trying to fit all of that on a title card? Screwball comedy simply couldn’t exist without audible dialogue, which let the actors play with words, use puns, and quibble with each other at a blistering pace in order to convey sexual tension.

**Sound on Film**

So, where does all of this leave us? Well, technologically, Vitaphone broke open the market with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, but by 1930 everyone (including Warner Brothers) had moved on to the superior sound on film system. Industrially, silent movies and the theaters that showed them were effectively dead by 1929, but movie attendance was up by 40-50%.

But sound *wasn’t the only thing* happening in 1929. In our next two lectures, we’ll look at how the Great Depression forced filmmakers to make some wild and risqué choices, and how the industry is forced to respond lest the federal government step in.