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Discovering the Limitations of Nationality in Hollywood: Foreigners and their Linguistic Struggle in Hollywood from 1926 – 1935

by Jennifer Kidson

"*a language is enriched by the slang of the generation becoming the orthodox [language] of the next; but it is another matter when the young of one nation seem on the eve of spending the most impressionable hours of their lives listening to the pronounced accent and often crude colloquialisms of another*" (Chicago Daily Tribune May 2nd, 1929)

Historical newspapers from 1926 – 1935 prove an invaluable resource in determining the public's immediate and post reaction to the advent of the talking pictures in Hollywood. Talking pictures are in and of themselves an insurmountable evolution in the film industry, but they also pose linguistic concerns for foreign directors, actors, screenwriters, and production crews in Hollywood. In 1927, immediate technical issues ensue, forcing directors to establish new framing and filming methods to compensate for loud camera equipment being picked up on external microphones. The American market abroad also suffers drastically and, according to Hansen and Griffith, the universal language of silent cinema is replaced by a new Tower of Babel. While textbooks such as Lewis's *American Film* and Bordwell's and Thompson's *Film History* provide streamline historical narratives, they fail to capture the excitement and anxiety that emanate from the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Hartford Courant*, *Atlantic Constitution*, *Chicago Tribute*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. By cross referencing the various articles with Lewis's and Bordwell's and Thompson's books, peculiar details or omissions seem either neglected or exaggerated in each. It is ironic, moreover, that the major issues concerning language and foreign film markets are described through newspaper language, which is also problematic in many instances. Newspapers are both political and social tools that are able to easily sway mass readership, and as such, are subject to rash opinions and heightened expressions. Thus, in examining American historical newspapers from 1926 – 1935, it is productive to understand that each article attempts to represent a microcosm of information which does not, in fact, speak to an entire sample. Furthermore, each is subject to relay opinionated and differing ideas in regards to the issue of the language and accent crisis in Hollywood.

While foreigners have been coming to Hollywood since the early days of the silent era, an article in the Hartford Courant, in 1926, focuses on the current interest of the "internationalism of casts" ("Hollywood Lures European Talent" C4). The writer adopts an ironic tone and justifies that an individual company "completeness" only exists with a foreign presence. While dismissing the "usual invasion stuff" that dominates most articles of the day (see "Says Aliens Will Return to Talkies" or "Hollywood Stands By Foreigners") the article instead focuses on the journey of the foreigner in his plight to win over the hearts of American production companies. In one

stab, Carl Laemmle, the "dumpy" Universal president, is singled out as a "melting hump of ice cream" when it comes to signing contracts with immigrants in Hollywood. The business of signing contracts, portrayed in a "paternal" sense, takes place after foreigners have visited publicity offices with "wide eyes" and eager expressions. A foreigner is infantilized and figured as someone who needs a parental guiding hand, and this is supposedly where Laemmle and others come into play. While the article attempts a positive review of growing immigrant population in Hollywood, there is an underlying sinister quality. The main issue lies with the word 'foreigner,' which does not signify geographical proximity but a national barrier of cultural differences from the United States. As such, many "émigrés and exiles in Hollywood… attempted to fulfill the national imaginaries of Europeans and Americans of each other" (Naficy 284) because this is one of few successful strategies that allows them to remain contracted in Hollywood. In an idealistic representation, Murnau himself in *The New York Times* suggests that

> there has been some cry in the trade press of the so-called "foreign invasion." This is of course the attitude of a somewhat sensational section of the press. It is not the attitude of the great majority of filmmakers, because there are no national boundaries in art. (27 Mar. 1927)

The representation of émigrés and exiles in Hollywood in newspapers appears boundless, and this is critical in understanding the performative on-screen and off-screen role offered to them during the introduction of the talkies in 1927.

"Hello, this is a demonstration of a talking picture. Notice, it is a picture of me and I am talking. Note how my lips and the sound issuing from them are syn-chro-nized together" (*Singin' In the Rain* [Donen and Kelly 1952]). The idea of 'talkies' initially in the twenty-first century seems humorous as represented in *Singin' in the Rain*, yet it becomes a shocking success in 1927. While early experiments around the globe began before the 1920s, the "U.S. film industry was the first to move successfully into sound production" (Bordwell and Thompson 178). The first film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), is in fact a part-talking picture and "in 1928 the first 'all-talkie,' *The Lights of New York* (Brian Foy)" (178) becomes a hit for Warners. Most newspapers present a positive reaction to the talking phenomenon, and Karl Vollmoeller is most optimistic. In his article he displays nationalistic pride and hope because "the English language will come to the world in one generation." Moreover, it is assumed that the foreign competition in "Europe won't be able to compete with American talkies" because of Hollywood's exceptional aggression and technical excellence. Positive language and nationalistic pride are important marketing tools that several newspapers adopt in order to encourage the increase of box office receipts. Fear of a reciprocal reaction finds its wake in dominant theorists during the era which sadly waved goodbye to the "universal world language" (Vollmoeller) of silent cinema. In Lewis's *American Film*, he reinforces the positive feeling by instigating that "films with sound that accurately reproduces the on-screen characters' voices as they deliver their lines or sing their

songs – [are] more modern, more lifelike, and more central to the evolving American experience than their silent counterparts" (92). The press similarly adopt a jargon that creates a hyper-exaggerated optimism for the new technology that has the potential to erase any lingering public nostalgia for the silent era days – quickly becoming a ghost-recollection.

"What Europe visions, America visualizes. Lumière and other foreigners invented the motion picture; Edison developed it. [...] Germany made the camera mobile, and Hollywood put sticks under it" (Scheuer "America Does The Work"). How, then, did America contribute to the developing sound technology? The two dominate systems in 1927 America are Fox's "Movietone [responsible for the] musical score for F.W. Murnau's 1927 feature *Sunrise*" (Bordwell and Thompson 178) and "Vitaphone" (Lewis 98). The five big companies, realizing that their films are exhibited at other company theatres, sign "the Big Five Agreement" (Bordwell and Thompson 178) which is a pledge to adopt one sound technology. With sound came an industry-wide "struggle to cope with the unfamiliar, often clumsy, new technology" (179). Thus it becomes an intellectual battle with the new equipment in developing shooting techniques. One technique, "*multicamera shooting*, [is] widely adopted because each scene [has] to be filmed straight through in its entirety" (180). Directors such as Lubitsch adopt different techniques: by having the "character complete the lines a few seconds before the cut and resume speaking a few seconds into the next shot" (179) editing proves more flexible. Another technical drawback is responsible for creating the "*academy ratio*" (181) industry standard; because the left part of each film frame is occupied by the sound track and editors are forced to place two black bars on the top and bottom to give the film a more rectangular look. A 1933 sound exhibition demonstrates how "sound engineers have developed subtle and beautiful art" (6) since the first 1927 models. By 1933, however, little recognition is given to "technical engineering staff" (Merrick "Film Sound Experts..."). Recognition, instead, falls to the directors and filmmakers who learn to utilize the new equipment in juncture with loud camera apparatuses.

While Americans celebrated the new technology, at first it only created a tremendous amount of anxiety for immigrants working in Hollywood during the silent period whose native language and accent in 1927 became a barrier. Many newspapers articulate similar ideas concerning "the problem of language. It was easy enough to translate the titles of a silent movie into whatever language was demanded but it is difficult to translate speaking parts" ("Invention of Sound..."). One foreign director working in Hollywood, Korda, tells *The Hartford Courant* that "producers have seen fit to dismiss them because of their accent... but... the time will come when they will return" (D5). Newspapers, directors, and actors themselves delight in taking various stands concerning accents. Victor Varconi, in a *Los Angeles Times* article titled "Accents Must Be Removed," admits that "in some parts it would be good to have [an accent]. In others, no. In the majority of cases, no" (C13). Eleven months later the opinion that "Foreign Accent Held Valuable in Talkies" appears in the same paper,

suggesting that "a slight twang is proving to be an invaluable asset" (B12). A change in opinion may have resulted from a recognition on behalf of America itself, when Washington officials begin to investigate and "Check Up for Alien Artists" whose papers they believe violate "immigration laws" (A9). Fortunately, "Hollywood Stands By Foreigners" because the "public and not [Immigration Officials] create stars" (Merrick 8). What Merrick is hinting towards is that producers only cater to the demands of the American audiences. Thus, while the general feeling resonating from papers is that of loss and hopelessness, the popularity of silent film stars from overseas forces Hollywood to take action by beginning to create films that can cater to foreign markets abroad.

While Hollywood standardizes its sound equipment, so too does Ufa in Germany with a patent for Tobis-Klangfilm equipment. During the silent era, American silent films are easily distributed abroad and become popular favourites with foreign audiences. Yet, talking films put an initial halt to economic advances overseas. American companies soon realize that they are responsible for not only planting sound technology in their own theatres but European theatres as well in order to continue foreign film relations. As such, in an enthusiastic report Coffin remarks that Hollywood begins "installing sound equipment as fast they can get their hands a hold of it" (D7) across seas. A second distribution issue arises in Germany with Warners's attempt to open a talkie using its own sound equipment, forcing Tobis-Klangfilm to claim "that the Vitaphone equipment Warners had installed in the theatre infringed its patents … [thus the] (MPPDA) declares that all American films [will] stop sending films to German theatres and stop importing German films to United States" (Bordwell and Thompson 185). An agreement follows settling the European market divisions and allows Hollywood to continue sending its pictures to Europe. This issue also occurs in France, and in 1933 a "decree restricts exhibition of foreign language talkies to five screens in Paris and ten screens in provinces" ("American Films May Quit France" 7). Left to find a new alternative, Hollywood pushes forward in its creation of talkies through a method that foreign markets will not ignore.

"An army of men, women, and children … the disembodied voices of the talking picture … the 'ghost stars' of the screen" (Scheuer A1). Dubbing, ghosting, doubling, or superimposed dialogue: this is the ultimate American solution. With the accumulation of foreigners in Hollywood and the now established sound equipment across Europe, American film companies only naturally try to "preserve foreign markets [by reshooting] additional versions of each film, with the actors speaking a different language in each" (Bordwell and Thompson 194). Originally, studios shot every scene multiple times, with a different cast that spoke a different language. However, *The New York Times* communicates that audiences did not "accept understudies in place of their old-time heroes and heroines" (Hall X5). Bordwell and Thompson also report the same dislike across seas as "the market for each version was too small to warrant the additional expense, and audiences did not welcome minor actors in roles made famous by stars" (194). Some stars even started learning new languages: the foreigners

acquiring English and the American's learning Spanish, French, and German. In one instance, Lubitsch's *Monte Carlo* (1930) turned to the dubbing method after "realizing that the performers would have a variety of accents in the hastily acquired German. The producers eliminated the sound track from the film and called upon real German players to speak the lines in synchronization with the lip movements of the screen image" (Hall X3). Thus, "a few [ghosts]... 'double' the voices of recognized stars" (Scheuer "Business of 'Ghosting'..."). Ghosting references a negation of physical presence, a voice that does not require its owner's body. A situation that benefits native Hollywood stars but speaks to an émigré's and exile's experience: their bodies are not awarded space in film and are masked by an American counterpart. Nearing 1933 – 1935, dubbing also becomes problematic both in Hollywood and across seas as American "Stars are Dimmed" by having a voice not their own speak out to the foreign public. These and other issues are raised which prove that the 'talking solution' is far from being solved.

What is originally regarded as a sensation proves increasingly problematic to all nationalities as each country rediscovers its own national boundaries through linguistic barriers. Learning a new language is not enough to ensure filmic success in another country. Ironically enough, even many native born American actors are forced to relearn their own language. This process is referred to as "the now articulate screen" ("Talkies Send Actors Back..."), invoking a new sense of American patriotism by establishing "a set standard of speech" (6). Though obvious to the concept of talking, at the time a new realization hit each actor: "words are actually important – that it is their daily exchange which produces and preserves the nation life" (6). And as suggested by many newspaper articles, if English is to be the universally spoken tongue, which English? While Americans promote their own nationally inflected English, Britain does so too. Many headlines express a British anxiety through their titles: "Fears Talkies Bring Yank Dialect, Crook Slang to The Britons" or "English English is to be Spoken." With the introduction of language in film come the issues of dialect, accent, vocabulary and correct pronunciation. The chief difference, as argued by one paper, is that Britons "enunciate more clearly than do Americans" ("English English..."), and as such, should be the one English-styled speech spoken as a representation for all English-speaking nations. In an effort to cool this quickly broiling debate, *The Christian Science Monitor* offers a peculiar metaphor about World War I and how honour and courage is awarded to any man, no matter how that man pronounces or speaks. It concludes by suggesting that "the method of speech does not make the man" ("Talking Like The Talkies"). Not only are nationalities rediscovered but variations within each country, which newspapers initially and carefully bypass in an effort to reinforce their own country's claim to dominance in the world film market.

The language of some articles creates, in some form of reference, a comparison of silent cinema to the new sound technology. Victor Varconi strictly suggests that "great historical pictures cannot be made in talkie form ... [as Pontius is] a more believable, a greater figure silent than with dialogue tacked onto him" (C13). Moreover,

in Korda's optimistic account of the foreigners' place in the talkie industry, he describes that on set his "gestures were much more understandable than [his] attempts at the English language" (D5). While not conscientiously making any nostalgic statement for the pantomime acting style of silent cinema, his observation taps into the ease at which audiences respond to silent cinema in all countries. In Hansen's and Griffith's words, this talking issue is called the Tower of Babel. The silent era is not devoid of sound entirely, Hansen notes, only "sound functioned differently during the silent era … essentially it produced effects in the cinema that recorded sound could not, a sense of immediacy" (43). Thus sound is always a natural part of the cinematic experience, almost a neglected fact which 1927 newspapers casually forget in order to enhance 'recorded' sound and film. Griffith, in his silent era days, notes that "A picture is the universal symbol, and a picture that moves is a universal language. Moving pictures… 'might have saved the situation when the Tower of Babel was built'" (qtd. in Geduld 56). The thought that visual representation is the long awaited communication that will be able to unite all countries together seems both a grand statement and somewhat idealistic. The fantasy is grudgingly short-lived, and many directors and theorists are forced to move to talking pictures due to box office receipts. During the silent era, a foreigner in Hollywood is able to play the part of any character in a film because their acting spoke for them and not their own words. Thus, there is less of a performative aspect involved as accent and linguistic barriers are non-existent. 1927 – 1935 American newspapers optimistically promote the advent of the talkies to their cinema-going readers in an attempt to erase the success of the silent cinema era by using exaggerated and often hyper-opinionated language to strengthen their economic and marketing initiatives at home and abroad.

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