

# THE CRITICS WERE WRONG ABOUT THE "TALKIES"

(continued from previous page)

day World on August 15, 1926, following the premiere of the programme at Warners' Theatre, a critic predicted that sound on the screen would produce a revolution because of the possibilities it offered for musical film—what he called "literally mechanical grand opera." But he went on to say, "This writer predicts that 'speaking movies' will never be given."

Know who said that? James M. Cain, whose novel *Double Indemnity* was most successfully filmed a year or so ago, and whose *Mildred Pierce* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* will be seen soon—all three of them being, of course, all-talking pictures!

And here is Richard Watts Jr. writing in the New York *Herald Tribune* at the same time as Cain:

"Once the photoplay begins talking, I want nothing more to do with it. In essence, the motion-picture is pantomime combined with music, and the two together form the most inviolable assault on the emotions yet devised. The Vitaphone takes romance out of music. When the close-up of a beautiful singer in action is shown, the facial distortions are likely to be unpleasantly realistic enough to destroy every illusion of beauty the music itself is able to supply."

Talking pictures did come in, of course, and Watts did have a good deal

to do with them, continuing on as a film critic for the paper for several years.

THERE were other interesting reactions to Vitaphone. Some felt that now the British film-makers would take international leadership in movie production. Here is a New York editorial opinion:

"Two officials of a British film company have just arrived to survey the talking film situation here. They think British-made talkies will be more popular in America than the Hollywood product. As for the latter in England, it will not be well received. Our idiom, our accent, our humour and our slang are unintelligible to the English, while the English manner is eagerly imitated here."

And Frederick Lonsdale, the English playwright, said:

"We speak the orthodox English the Americans themselves seem to prefer. We have the best dramatists in the world. We have more than our share of the best actors and actresses. Lastly, we have in addition some of the most charming and exquisite scenery in the world, all sorts of historic architectural backgrounds which in America can only be reproduced at enormous expense, and then only unsatisfactorily."

HERE is another important New York paper's reaction: (*Herald Tribune*, March 28, 1929):

"The 'speakers' still leave much to be desired. Long accustomed to subtitles which, when deftly written, add much to the appeal of a

motion picture drama, the public is not quite sure whether the metallic sounds which reproduce the human voice are a satisfactory substitute for them. Moreover, the sounds themselves are still 'like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh.'"

A famous silent film star publicly issued a nationally-syndicated story on April 17, 1929:

"Talkies are spoiling the oldest art in the world—the art of pantomime. They are ruining the great beauty of silence. They are defeating the meaning of the screen, the appeal that has created the star system, the fan system, the appeal of beauty. Motion pictures need dialogue like Beethoven symphonies need lyrics."

Do you know who said that—Charles Chaplin. His film *The Great Dictator* was all-talking, of course, and few critics objected to it on the grounds that it "defeated the appeal of beauty."

In November, 1928, critic Gilbert Seldes under the heading "The Movies Commit Suicide" said:

"The introduction of speech is suicide for the movie. According to enthusiasts, the silent movie is doomed. I should say in that case the stage . . . will also go under. The talking pictures can undermine the other."

George Jean Nathan, the eminent critic, delivered himself of the following vigorous essay in the *Morning Telegraph*:

"The theatre need not be worried over the Vitaphone, the mechanical invention which synchronises the movies and human speech and was just recently given its first public demonstration. If there is any worrying to be done, it is the movies that should do it. The Vitaphone possesses no light and shade; it is deafening. It makes the actor and musician so

many boiler factories. But that is not the point. The point, rather, is that aside from its commercial value in certain short-reel subjects, such as an opera singer doing her bit, or a politician exuding the usual platitudes, it will bring to the motion picture exactly the thing the motion picture has no use for, to wit, the human voice. When the regular and enthusiastic movie patron is asked to use his ears, that is enough. To bid him to use his ears as well . . . is to ask the impossible."

The moviegoer of to-day is still using his eyes and ears and seems happy enough about it, too.

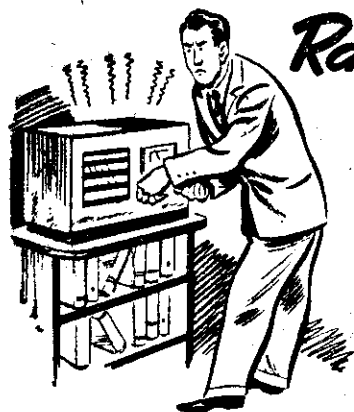
George Klee, eminent critic of the cinema in Germany, was quoted in "Taegliche Rundschau" as follows:

"The talking film means neither progress nor simplification, but merely complication. The cinema will become poorer, duller, less digestible."

Like another one of his countrymen many years later, Herr Klee made a very grave error.

## NATIONAL FILM UNIT

"WHALING IN COOK STRAIT," presented in the National Film Unit's Weekly Review released on August 30, is an interesting and exciting sea story. The cameraman closely followed the work of the men on the whaling boats, taking many risks to obtain pictures of the harpooning. With whale oil at a high price on the world markets and whale steaks being exported to famine-ridden countries, the industry is an important one to New Zealand. Other items in this reel are: "Cross-country Champs" (the harriers running in very wet weather at Trentham); "Bishop Holland Farewelled" (at Otagi); and the return of the "Victory Contingent."



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