

# Color and Sound on Film

Classic examples of how Science raises the already enormous gamble of Showmanship—the fastest revolution in industrial history and the stars thereof.

LATE summer advices from Hollywood were that several big producers are thinking of going back to silent films—an idea that has only to be mentioned in order to become ridiculous. A more reasonable proposition is that the musical comedy film is no longer good: but *Whoopie* is one of September's hits. The "Westerns" are to be the big thing this season—or have they already been overdone? Costume stuff has certainly been run ragged, yet costumes always come back. To a business of staggering proportions faced with impenetrable doubt, the Harvard Business School suggests a survey. Possibly a questionnaire might be sent to the inhabitants of First Avenue and Keokuk asking what kind of pictures they would like next spring. Then, when Hollywood is put on a Harvard business basis, the most exciting gamble since fish first tried to live on land will have been eliminated from human affairs.

Compared with the last twenty years' gamble in the film theatre, Monte Carlo is a friendly game of dominoes and Deauville a county fair. Essentially it has been the old game of guessing human emotions practiced by politicians, playwrights, and merchants everywhere and always. But also, in the film theatre the gamble of Showmanship has been complicated by its partnership with Science.

It was by the invention of the motion picture that Science for the first time in the world's history directly affected drama. Before then the only excursions of Science into this ancient and popular art had been represented by trivial developments such as footlights and make-up. But within half a generation after *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) the theatre of photograph-pantomime had completely eclipsed the spoken drama; it had established itself in the lives of all western people to a degree exceeded only by the church of the middle ages; it had produced in Charles Chaplin and Mary Pickford characters of incredible if not indelible fame. The only trouble with Science is that it does not know how or where to stop. It should have let

us have at least a century of photograph-pantomime. Instead, we were no sooner beginning to master the technique of this new and universal art than Showmanship saw a way to exploit what Science had had available for several years—the crude elements of photographic *spoken* drama. And now, with the talkie still in its infancy, both technically and artistically, comes the exploitation of color, while from around the corner falls the shadow of Television.

## Reflections on a revolution

The talkie revolution having been accomplished (beyond comparison the fastest and most amazing revolution in the whole history of industrial revolutions), the producers say

they are glad it happened. Talkies, they say, came just as the popularity of the movies was beginning to wane. Despite the general agreement on this proposition, it remains absolutely unprovable and extremely doubtful. Already—after only two years of talkies and long before they have been perfected—there is another distinct drop in movie attendance. Looking for a reason ("bad times" is inadequate) we find a circumstance which contains one of those strange paradoxes which haunt the showman's career. The talkies, bad though they may be, are *too* good. This is the theory: in the silent days people were kept movie-minded by the few great pictures (Chaplin, Fairbanks, etc.) which appeared every year; but also, and much more importantly, they made a regular habit of

going to the movies several times a week; if the picture were fair, they got a thrill; if it were poor, they communed peacefully and beneficially with their cud-like souls. Now the talkie brings them a definitely higher form of entertainment; from a good talkie they get a far greater thrill than from any except the very best silents; but before going to it they want to be sure that the talkie is good; otherwise, they are not thrilled but simply disturbed; in short, the talkie has made the public critical.

Nevertheless the talkie has completely nullified the silent screen. This is entirely characteristic of the machine. A new machine (or process) does not merely *add*; it *replaces*. In most lines the replacement is gradual, but in the show business nothing can prevent the replacement from being almost instantaneous. The reasons are obvious. Price, for example, is no object. A public which has tasted talkies cannot be lured to silents by offering the latter at cut-rates. (On the contrary, a conviction that brass pipes or colored porcelains are best for bathrooms does not lead to immediate replumbing.) Now this also results in the fact that in the show business it is quite possible for a relatively unimportant innovation to have consequences almost as serious as a major invention.



Courtesy Warner Bros.

A BILLION-DOLLAR BUSINESS: THE CLIMAX

## Color

An ideal illustration of the weird relation between Science and Showmanship is to be found in the most hotly disputed of current developments: color. The importance of color to drama is as nothing compared with the importance of voice. But, even though it may add little to dramatic interest, it obviously has the possibilities of replacing black and white. This replacement threat makes color a deuce in a game wherein all deuces are wild. While the players bet millions pro or con, let us see whether this latest threat can be rationalized from the side lines.

The first surprising detail about color is that it makes Boston a sort of sub-capital of the movie world. It is a better than ten to one bet that every color film you have seen was made in Boston. For the history of colored movies is almost entirely the history of Technicolor, which began in Boston years ago and whose main plant is still there. A new plant in Hollywood went into operation last spring. The hero of Technicolor is Dr. Herbert T. Kalmus.

Forty-nine next month, Dr. Kalmus stands about six foot three. Under brown hair that is fast turning gray, a pair of blue eyes expresses the unusual union of keen business ability with pure scientific excellence. Perhaps as a result of this his suits are always pressed, his words always precise. Conservative in taste, he favors blue, black, and gray color schemes, plays golf, and is absorbed in Technicolor. At the same time, his personality has its lyric side, developed by years at sea as a boy before working his way through M. I. T., where he graduated in 1904. For lyric satisfaction he listens to music, composes on the piano for his own amusement, owns the home of an old sea captain in Centerville, Massachusetts, and eighty acres of wooded land on Cape Cod, where he and Mrs. Kalmus camp and

rest. Lovely Mrs. Kalmus with titian hair is in charge of the Technicolor art department and used to pose for early Technicolor experiments in Florida. Thus is the entire family absorbed in the development of this most modern of arts, Dr. Kalmus having started his researches in 1915 and now being both president and general manager of the Technicolor Motion Picture Corporation. In

the facilities of the United Artists studio to make *Toll of the Sea*, starring Anna May Wong, and Nicholas M. distributed the picture through Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Paid for by Technicolor, this was the first all-color movie except for two sporadic attempts by other methods seventeen years before. M-G-M gave color a further boost by being the first to use it for a few scenes in their own

big pictures (*Ben Hur*, *The Merry Widow*). Jesse Lasky of Paramount was the first producer to gamble an extra \$100,000 on a all-color movie (*Wanderer of the Waste-land*, 1924), and Douglas Fairbanks followed with *The Black Pirate*. But it was the Warner Brothers who took the first real gamble on color, just as they were the first to gamble in sound. Having scooped the world in 1927 with sound, they undertook a color scoop in 1929 by contracting with Technicolor for no less than forty all-color pictures.

He who has seen a camera which will take color movies has seen a rare sight. There are only about fifty of them in the world—two years ago there were less than ten. Each costs about \$4,000 as against several hundred dollars for non-color cameras. The actual photography of a color-movie is done from beginning to end by Technicolor crew—not by a producer's own cameramen. When the picture is taken, the master negative is sent to Boston, where with infinite care and patience the positive prints are made. For this complete photographic service Technicolor is paid about eight cents a foot by the producer, as against about two cents a foot which black and white photography costs the producer.

This difference in mere photographic cost would stop anybody but a showman. A black and white feature picture contains about 7,000 feet of film and 200 prints will be required, making 1,400,000 feet in all. At two cents each, that is \$28,000. The same picture in color, at eight cents a foot, will cost \$112,000. Thus, simply for photography, a color picture raises the gamble by some \$84,000. But far more than that is spent in the extra time consumed in making a color



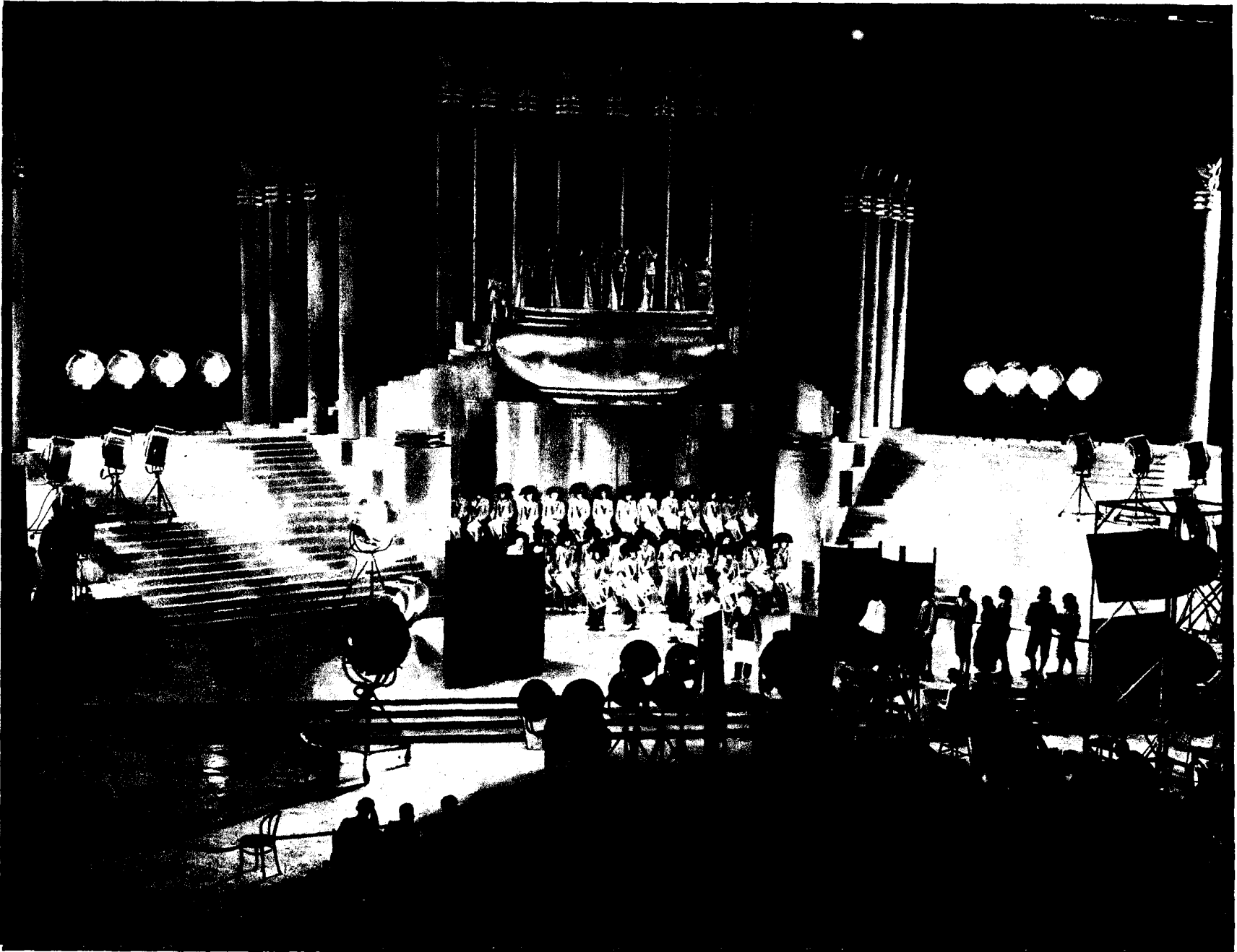
Courtesy First National Pictures

### ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS PER WORKING HOUR

Studio set used in Marilyn Miller's talkie version of her Broadway hit, *Sunny*. For sets in such a film \$40,000 is a probable cost. This picture (by First National) took eight weeks to produce: total cost about \$1,000 per working hour.

1912 he was head of the Research Laboratory of Electrochemistry and Metallurgy for the Canadian Government.

For fifteen years he has had only one occupation: to make color movies. Ten years ago he produced in the laboratory colored movies as good as or better than any we have seen in the theatres. But the gap from laboratory to theatre was immense. The first real opportunity came in 1922 through the Brothers Schenck; Joseph M. loaned to Technicolor



Courtesy Universal Pictures

A SET FROM KING OF JAZZ WHICH COST UNIVERSAL \$1,650,000 TO PRODUCE

For his performance in this picture, Paul Whiteman is believed to have been paid the largest salary ever known in Hollywood. In addition Universal ran a special train to the West Coast for the thirty-four members of the super Whiteman band. They took their wives. After arrival the theme for the story was changed, and it had to be rewritten. Universal sent the thirty-four members of the band and their dependents back East, in a special train. Later they returned to Hollywood

(but not on a private train) to make the picture. Altogether they were on the payroll nine months. John Murray Anderson was the director, and he knew nothing about the movies except the myth that Hollywood was made of gold. So a good time was had by all but Universal and their troubles were just beginning, because the picture didn't take in New York. However, the provinces have come to the rescue, and now Universal hopes to break even.

picture. Roughly, we may say that the same picture which would cost \$750,000 in black and white will cost at least \$1,000,000 in color. Let us hasten also to say that except for years of struggle in solving practical production problems, such a color picture would cost nearer \$2,000,000 if it could be made at all. Here we must also note that there are many other color processes in competition with Technicolor. But however fine their laboratory product may be, none of them can be taken seriously until it has actually taken a full-length picture under Hollywood conditions and at a price somewhere near eight cents a foot. Paramount is experimenting; Fox has built a plant since abandoned. Howard Hughes has Multicolor, with a plant in Hollywood, while perhaps most advanced of Technicolor rivals is the Colorcraft Cor-

poration, with a new plant on Long Island scheduled to be in production this fall.

Color and Competition

Now the producer is naturally reluctant to add \$250,000 to his ante on a special production or \$100,000 to his ante on the regular program picture. If there were only one producer in Hollywood, he would probably consign all color processes to the bottom of the sea, because it is scarcely arguable that color will materially increase the total "consumption" of movies. But competition being what it is, the producer must ask himself: will color develop to a point where black and white will fail to produce the illusion it always has produced? And therefore, will color, this season or next, or next, replace

black and white? That is the question.

A year ago the answer seemed to be: "Yes—and soon." The talkie revolution had come in 1928 so much faster than anyone could have foreseen that in 1929 all the producers, afraid of being scooped again, followed Warner's lead in making huge non-cancelable part cash in advance contracts for color in 1929-30—nearly all, of course, with Technicolor. And they were, of course, wrong. For two reasons: (1) because, as aforesaid, the importance of color to drama is as nothing compared to the importance of voice; (2) because imperfect color is far more noticeable than imperfect sound (our eyes are many times more sensitive than our ears). For these reasons, color caused practically no sensation (few people realize how many

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1929-30 pictures were made in color), and as for black and white pictures being obsolete in contrast with color pictures—that simply did not occur to the movie public. So for 1930-31 the trend seems definitely in the direction of less, rather than more, color. First National and Warner Brothers are postponing the fulfillment of their contracts with Technicolor—a procedure which was in any case necessary, since Technicolor simply could not print the pictures as fast as Hollywood thought it wanted them a year ago. So far has the color wave declined after its tidal sweep last winter that some movie executives have pronounced it of small importance. But in this they are likely to be quite wrong again. To be specific, there are two kinds of film plays for which color will almost certainly become essential: the musical comedy and the costume or spectacle drama. Both these types will rise and fall in popularity, but they will always be a big factor in the business. The talkies definitely added the musical comedy to the movie repertoire. From now on it seems likely that this type will increasingly become associated in the public mind with color, so that a film musical without color will not seem like a film musical at all. A similar mental association will not occur so definitely in the spectacle drama, but anyone who saw *Song of the Flame* or *The Rogue Song* will realize that if a producer is offering the spectacular he can hardly afford to omit the spectacular qualities of red and gold and purple. A public accustomed to red torches flaming in the night will not accept a parade of ghostly candles without the ghosts.

However, all of this sort of stuff is *not* the backbone, the meat and drink, of the movies. The big elaborate or sensational pictures are essential to the movie business, but they do *not* account for the bulk of the box office receipts. People go to the movies primarily to watch and to hear two or three human beings collide with each other in what is represented to be life. With the silent, and now more than ever with the talkie, the play is the thing. So, after allowing that 20 per cent or even 30 per cent

of the movies must be in color for the special reasons just indicated, the great question is: is the time near when the ordinary play of love or adventure must be made in color?

Certainly the time has not yet arrived; it is probably several years and perhaps a decade away. Simply put, the reason comes down to this: to the degree that we are aware of the imperfection of color it is a distraction and consequently hinders rather than promotes dramatic action. To cease to be a distraction, color must be so perfect as to be *unnoticeable* except by contrast with absence of color. Or, what is more likely, we must become so accustomed to the imperfections of color as not to be distracted by it. Such perfection or such psychological adaptation is in all probability many, many years away. As for perfection, it is almost certain that an entirely different scientific principle must be employed before it can be expected. As for psychological adaptation, the more imperfect color we see, the less it will distract us until finally we will accept it as a convention and will be distracted when it is absent. Ultimately *all* movies are likely to be in color; until then every producer will be on his guard against failure to keep up with the color convention.

Meanwhile, technical improvement, however slow, may be expected. And almost as important as technical advance will be advance in the film theatre use of color. Two examples: use color to lengthen the life of favorite stars, for color hides the wrinkles: use it more soberly and hence less distractingly—green lawns, green trees instead of a continued riot of roses.

## Historic date

Undoubtedly producers jumped too fast at color this year. But to understand why they have good reason to jump at *any* new offering of invention, it is necessary only to grasp a few dates in the history of sound. These are dates in what we have already described as by all odds the most remarkable single revolution in industrial annals. Sound came so fast (it became "natural"

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## Color and Sound on Film

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so soon) that practically nobody (and least of all the movie critics) realized what was happening until it happened. Even the producers were in the condition of learning on Tuesday that what they thought might occur a year from Tuesday had actually happened a week ago Monday. In April, 1929, Fox's Mr. Sheehan, simultaneously with his company's complete surrender to the talkie, boldly predicted that by January 1, 1931, there would be 3,000 theatres wired for sound. There are today 10,000 such theatres. Let us fix a few essential dates in mind because, for once, a mechanico-economic development happened with the historical exactitude of a Napoleonic campaign. The first date is October 6, 1927.

On that night the Warner Brothers' theatre on Broadway and Fifty-second Street (the only one they owned—now they own 700) was flashing in electric signs: *Opening Tonight—Al Jolson in The Jazz Singer*. A fashionable crowd streamed through its portals, for Al Jolson was the embodiment of Broadway; now as a film product of Hollywood he was as great a novelty as would be King George V in the guise of President of Canada. He had been in Hollywood for months: tonight would appear the strange result of his new labors. They had been labors indeed—singing bit by bit to a microphone while being photographed bit by bit, and trying to act a part the while. Not only was it new to him; it was new to everyone of the dozens of cameramen, directors, other actors, and mechanics that crowded about him while he pretended to be a Jewish boy singing devoutly in the choir or fondly patting his mother in an obscure flat in the Ghetto. Out of all the labor and confusion what had come? The smart audience wanted to know. But most curious of all were the Warner Brothers. This picture had cost them more than \$500,000, and there were less than 100 theatres in the whole wide world where it could be shown. Would the sensation be great enough instantly to cause 100 other theatres to wire themselves? But Warner Brothers' gamble was even greater than that. On the development of sound they had at this point

invested about \$5,000,000, and this was the final test. For while *The Jazz Singer* was not a talkie, it was the first full-length film drama containing sound as part of the dramatic action. If this excited the public, then Warners with an *exclusive* contract with Western Electric had an unbeatable lead on the entire movie industry and might make hundreds of millions of dollars. If this failed to excite, then the chances were that the Warner Brothers were through.

The actual making of *The Jazz Singer* was supervised minutely by Brother Sam Warner. He had finished it in August. From Hollywood he dispatched the film and sound records to Senior Brother Harry in New York. He expected to come on to the opening, but on October 1 he went to the hospital. Pneumonia. Brothers Jack and Albert were at the bedside. Next day the news was so bad that Brother Harry left New York for Los Angeles. At short intervals across the continent he got bulletins about Brother Sam, who was not only the most beloved of all the brothers, but also the one who had first seen the possibilities of sound and had done most to develop it from apparently hopeless beginnings. In Arizona, Brother Harry got a special train. When he arrived in Los Angeles the morning of October 5, Brother Sam had been dead three hours. On the night of October 6 *The Jazz Singer* opened on Broadway.

Born in a cloud of theatrical glory and under the shadow of death, the career of sound was from that moment dramatic in each and every detail. For example, there was the matter of the noises that would get into sound records, despite all human precautions. One sound record was unexpectedly found to contain the words "This is Station ZXZ"—so sound recording had to be insulated against the inaudible inference of radio waves. But particularly baffling was a continuous buzz that seemed to pervade all sound records. The Western Electric experts could find no explanation. One day Old Frank Murphy (old only in Warner service: a mechanic Brother Sam had picked up years ago) was called in. He



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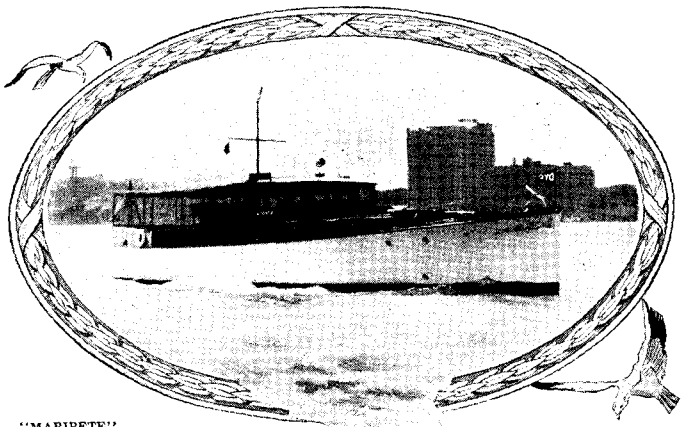
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looked, looked, looked, finally said: "The lights." From that moment Klieg lights were doomed, and today only incandescent lights are used in Hollywood—quiet but terribly hot, making paint melt on the face. (But, also, incidentally these new lights do not require the ghastly extremes of make-up with which silent cinema actors used to be plastered.)


*The Jazz Singer* was a tremendous hit. Jolson's "maamie" came out in a glorious thunderous plaint, his vulgar negroid lips trembling visibly while the notes echoed. But it was not the songs which made *The Jazz Singer* historically famous. It was one line—one spoken line, which happened by accident. Out on the Hollywood lot Jolson had stepped up to the microphone to sing. In order to re-create the correct mood he had said, "Come on, Ma. Listen to this." The recording device had begun too soon, accidentally recording those words, and the director had decided they might as well be left in, even though all the non-song part of the picture was silent. The night of October 6 the smart folk were thrilled by the most famed of all blackfaces visibly singing before them, but what took them out of their seats was that one remark in the natural Jolson speaking voice. That made them forget mechanism. That gave them the complete illusion of Jolson's physical presence. From that moment the silent picture was as completely doomed as the lantern slides, with which Warner Brothers had begun their astounding career—from poor sons of a Polish immigrant in Newcastle, Pennsylvania to impresarios of the fastest revolution in industrial history.

### And the new epoch

But on October 7 the big producers (Paramount, Fox, M-G-M, United Artists) were not convinced or at any rate refused to admit that they were. They said *The Jazz Singer* merely proved that songs by Jolson could carry one whole picture; they ignored that one true talkie sentence. But the Warners were convinced. They immediately introduced talkie sequences into the three pictures they then had in production (*Glorious Betsy*, *Tenderloin*, *Lion and the Mouse*), and in February, 1928, they released the first all-talkie: *Lights of New York*. For this last, great credit must go to Bryan Foy, who for a

year had been getting out talkie "shorts." These shorts had taught him how to do it. By spring of 1928 the dam had burst—big producers could no longer resist the infatuation of a public for what it correctly sensed to be a new epoch in the film theatre. But it was autumn of 1928 before any producers except Warner Brothers could get even so much as some talking sequences into their pictures. And by that time they were out with Al Jolson's *The Singing Fool*, were making all their pictures all-talkie. The year's start had put millions in their pockets—some eight or nine during the year 1928. *The Terror* (Louise Fazenda) had netted \$110,000 after it had played in just one theatre—Warner Brothers, New York. *The Singing Fool* grossed \$40,000 a week for months at the Winter Garden. All of which in one year took Warners from among the least to among the greatest of all movie companies. They bought out First National and the Stanley Chain of theatres. Their assets increased from \$5,000,000 to \$160,000,000 in two years. Last year they bought out several of the leading music merchants of Broadway, as well as a producer of Broadway plays.

But now, the autumn of 1930, Warner Brothers are far from having a monopoly of the art which they invoked and induced. During 1929 all the other producers, with harrowing expenditures of nerves and money and ingenuity, caught up with them by transforming themselves from silent to talkie. Western Electric persuaded Warner Brothers to alter the terms of their exclusive contract. Between Western Electric and Warner Brothers some feeling now exists. Without inquiring into the rights and wrongs of this matter, it would seem that such a colossal development could not be left as the prerogative of one concern. But as it is, Warner Brothers get 3 per cent of all the money taken in by talkie licenses—a great pain, of course, to their competitors. The adaptation of talkie was just as remarkable in the case of those who followed Warner Brothers, for while they borrowed much of the experimental knowledge, they had to absorb it much faster. Consider Paramount. In 1928 it released seventy-eight silent pictures, no talkies. In 1929 it released twenty silents and forty-seven talkies. In 1930 it released sixty-five talkies, no silents. (These are full-length



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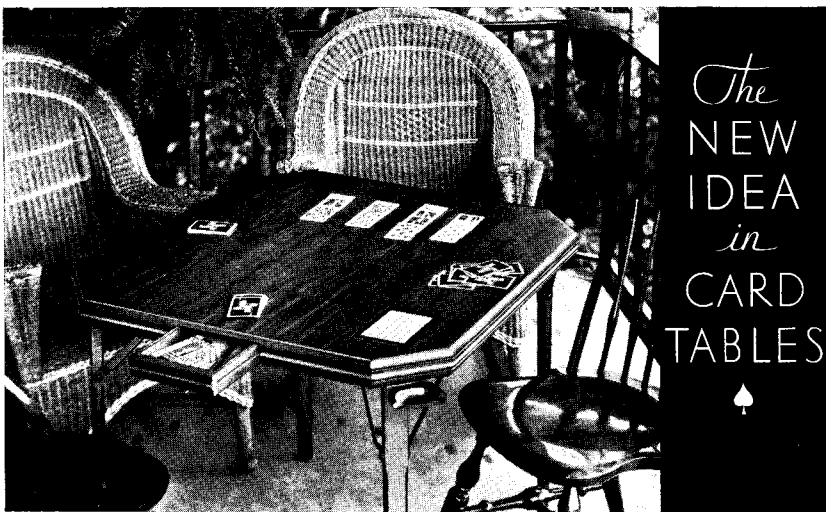
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So great was the public's infatuation that in 1929 every producer made big money and, far more remarkable, nearly every single talkie made money. Net profits for leading concerns:

	1929	1928
Warner	\$17,271,805	\$2,044,842
Fox	9,469,950	5,957,217
Paramount	15,544,544	8,713,063
Loew's	11,756,956	8,568,162

But now, as we have said, the first golden harvest is past; the public is taking its talkies critically. And meanwhile, new problems present themselves, the most obvious being that of foreign markets. In its Paris studios, Paramount is making each picture in four or five different languages, each with a different cast. Where the original English picture cost \$400,000 or \$500,000, the "translations" cost \$50,000 or \$75,000 each. The Spanish version may well repay the extra cost from the South American market. But it does not pay to make a version in Czechoslovakian. Thus, while the revolution in the greatest of all show businesses is a completely accomplished fact, there remain the resultant problems otherwise known as "gamble."

It is probably true that the greater complications of the talkie and color (as well as other mechanical developments such as "wide film" and the newly announced stereoscopic effects of the Spoor method) will make it harder to make money out of movies. A few small firms are making good money (Tiffany scored heavily with *Journey's End*). But it is no longer a business for the lone adventurer. Not only have mechanical developments speeded the logical concentration of the business into a few hands, but the whole character of the business has changed by reason of the control of theatres by producers. With complicated finance as well as mechanics, it is natural that the hand of the trained financier should be more evidenced: Kuhn, Loeb in Paramount, the "electric interests" in Fox and RKO, Goldman, Sachs and recently Hayden, Stone in Warner Brothers. But let no one suppose that these financiers intend to run the show business. They know enough to know that only a showman can make a movie which even they themselves would care to see. So it would be a mistake to credit financiers for

subsequent success or failure of any company with respect to gate receipts. There is, for example, the question of stars.

For years, producers have been "trying to get rid of the star system." They had good reason: the big stars were demanding everything in sight and jumping their contracts when something more appeared. The talkies gave producers an excellent chance to reduce the importance of stars, and it was further thought that the Wall Street influence was strongly against the fantastic Hollywood salary scale. But as the first all-talkie year comes to a close, one fact looms: the stars of silent days are surprisingly intact. Of the thirty or forty leading names and faces, all but half a dozen are names and faces which had achieved a momentum of public favor over a period of years. Thus in spite of the completely new deal which talkies represented, it was not so easy to put over the unknown face or name. And together with this fact is a growing conviction: that there will arise talkie stars whose magnetic influence upon the public will exceed anything ever seen in the days of Chaplin or Pickford. Cost what he or she may, the company which has him or her on contract will earn its dividends on a picture or two, while other companies bite the dust for their lost opportunities. Certainly the showman, his imagination fired by such a prospect, must not become hysterical in reaching for this or that star. But actually he knows that the star system is immortal and universal, operating from Lillian Russell in the nineties to Mei Lan-Fang in China to the Greta whose picture could be advertised simply and solely by saying: "Garbo Talks." Executive and financial committees can prevent the system from disrupting the industry, but they cannot fundamentally alter the system. On pages 36-43 FORTUNE describes some of the cinema actors who are found to be most successful at this stage in talkie-development. Leaving aside such special performers as operatic tenors or Will Rogers, this list represents the first winners in the race for popularity in the photographic spoken drama. None of them commands the adoration given to silent stars of four or five years ago, and perhaps none of these ever will. But as the first to succeed in a new art, they have a collective historical value which no later and greater group can equal.