The Impact of *The Jazz Singer* on the Conversion to Sound

JONATHAN D. TANKEL

*The Jazz Singer* rates mention in most film histories as the first dialogue feature motion picture; but most historians, like Rothen and Griffith, quickly add that the film was indifferently acted and directed, its story banal and heavily sentimental. In the following article, the author reviews the literature on the conversion to sound and attempts to discover how an analysis of *The Jazz Singer*'s aesthetic qualities figures in the conversion process. Currently an instructor in Radio-Television-Film at Shaw University, Professor Tankel has expanded this article from his Master's thesis, done at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

The conversion from silent films to sound films is a well known, yet widely misunderstood, event in the history of film. In recent publications, there has been an effort to correct some of the misconceptions contained in past accounts of the conversion process. Gomery, for instance, has taken a fresh look at the corporate data and the trade journals of the time; he has presented a well-documented alternative to the accepted explanation that the conversion was undertaken in panic and confusion against the better judgement of the major film companies. On the basis of his analysis, Gomery concluded that “as profit maximizing oligopolists, the majors reacted to the innovation of sound wisely and sensibly.”

Largely untold, as yet, is the story of how the aesthetic values of early sound films hastened the conversion process. All we have been offered thus far are observations such as Rothen and Griffith's that any sound film, no matter how bad, could fill any theatre, however ratty, while across the street [the majors'] most super silent picture played to empty seats in the most sumptuous of motion picture cathedrals.

The accepted explanations proceed to tell us that this situation was created by the fantastic success of Warner Bros.'s *The Jazz Singer* (1927). The film's extraordinary success at the box office convinced the major studios that conversion, previously unthinkable, was now the only avenue open for the film industry. A "mediocre film" according to the historian-critics, *The Jazz Singer* accomplished what the money and influence of Western Electric could not: it forced the majors to convert to sound, to retool an entire industry. Or so at least, this is what standard histories of film tells us. However, the process of conversion was not so simple, nor were those who figured actively in the transition from silence to sound on American movie screens.

The unusual alliance formed by Western Electric and Warner Bros. in 1925 was troubled from the start. As Gomery has shown, the problems did not arise out of the alleged industry-wide defiance of the new technology. Western Electric, as part of the AT&T complex, was involved in intense competition within the rapidly expanding electronics industry; Warner Bros. was a “little five” film company trying to survive with good quality pictures, an inefficient states rights distribution system and virtually no theaters. The diverse purposes of the two reluctant allies were the source of conflict from the beginning of their relationship.

Whatever their respective views of the future might have been, the immediate goal of the Warner Bros.-Western Electric alliance supported the economic viability of sound films. Independent and chain


4 See both Gomery citations above for a clear explanation of the delicate negotiations Western Electric entered into with the majors almost as soon as the agreement with Warner Bros. was signed.
exhibitors had to be convinced to wire their theaters for sound. To accomplish this, Warner Bros. needed commercial success: not simply one big picture, but a series of consistent money makers. The technological novelty of sound pictures would not be sufficient, as the DeForest and other experiments had shown. Believing in the maxim that you have to have something for the audience, the brothers Warner were convinced they had to make films which could draw the audience once the novelty wore off.

Regardless of the economic, technological, socio-cultural, and industrial explanations for the conversion to sound in the American cinema, a complete understanding of this process needs to consider the aesthetic dimension of the films themselves.

From Don Juan to The Jazz Singer

Don Juan was an important film for Warner Bros. The film opened on 6 August 1926 at the Warner Theatre in New York City, and starred John Barrymore, the matinee idol of the Warner lot. Mordaunt Hall, the New York Times film critic, described how the program was organized to accustom the audience to recorded sound. The feature was preceded by a number of shorts, some starring performers from the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic. Without the customary intermission, the prologue to Don Juan began: the audience was swept into the film by the flow of sound. When intermission had arrived, the lobby buzzed with excitement. The Warners had combined spectacle and sound, winning over that all important first audience.5

Don Juan was a successful film, especially in view of the competition. During the second half of 1926, the most successful films in New York City were The Big Parade, Beau Geste, Ben Hur and Don Juan, all of these heavy on spectacle and "production values." An analysis of the box office records of these four films reveals the relative equality of their box office performance. On a scale of relative theater capacity, like that used by exhibitors to describe the success of a picture, none of the pictures ran below sixty percent of the best week during the five month period from August to December, and only Beau Geste and Don Juan ran one hundred percent of relative capacity during this period. Don Juan proved its strength at the box office against the best the majors had to offer.6

Warner Bros., however, could not rely on Don Juan alone to provide the breakthrough it needed. To convince exhibitors that sound was not a passing fad, the company had to continue producing sound films. On 7 October 1926, Warner Bros. released The Better 'Ole starring Sydney Chaplin, brother of Charles. While the film itself received good notices from the critics, the Vitaphone shorts accompanying it indicated the direction which Warner Bros. was taking to convince exhibitors of the profitability of Vitaphone.

The new Vitaphone shorts differed from the first set because they featured popular stars rather than the New York classical performers. Mordaunt Hall sensed the excitement generated by the more familiar faces, especially that of Al Jolson:

This Vitaphone assuredly destroys the old silent tradition of the screen. This time it was the audience that was silent, so keen was everybody to catch every word and note of the popular entertainer, and when each number was ended it was obvious that there was not a still pair of hands in the house.7

The variety of film necessary to sustain interest in the new venture into sound was to be supplied by these shorts, which were easier, cheaper and quicker to manufacture than the Vitaphone features. At the same time, Warner Bros. continued to whet the appetite of the audience by foregoing mere accompaniment in favor of linking the sound (music, effects and some dialogue) directly to the performers on the screen.

With the appearance of The Better 'Ole and the accompanying shorts, Warner Bros. began to release new Vitaphone shorts every week. This was an ingenious answer to the problem of supply of product: continuous production of musical and dialogue shorts with the regular release of feature length films accompanied by synchronized musical scores. Not until 9 March 1927 was another Vitaphone feature ready for general release: When A Man Loves, a costume drama with musical accompaniment, starring John Barrymore.

The alternation of shorts and features was so successful that by April 1927, the State Theater, in Minneapolis, was exhibiting Vitaphone shorts with Famous Players' silent features. The live presentations, which had become a permanent fixture at successful movie theaters, could now be presented on film. Even with silent features, the presence of the Vitaphone shorts helped the State to break all its previous box office records.8

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8Variety (New York), 13 April 1927, p. 7.
During the last week of June, *Old San Francisco* opened at the Warner Theatre in New York. This was the fourth Vitaphone feature, and it followed the pattern of the first three: pre-recorded score and sound effects. The sound track highlighted the visual recreation of the San Francisco earthquake. For the next four months, new Vitaphone releases were limited to the four new shorts per week.

By June 1927, the Fox Corporation had begun serious competition with Warner Bros. in the production of sound films. Fox began offering Movietone presentations, similar to Vitaphone shorts, to accompany Fox silent features. The first program of sound shorts, opening at the Harris Theater in New York on 25 May 1927, accompanied the premiere of *Seventh Heaven*, which featured an Academy Award performance by Janet Gaynor.

Fox ventured where Warner Bros. did not: the presentation of current events via sound films. At the end of June, the Roxy Theater in New York presented Movietone films of the welcome-home ceremonies held for Charles Lindbergh in Washington, D.C. These films were the genesis of the Movietone Newsreel, which became a regular feature from Fox in December 1927.

During the week of 28 September, *Sunrise*, the first Fox sound feature film, opened at the new Fox Times Square Theater. The film was directed by F. W. Murnau and starred Janet Gaynor. Reviews of the film paid special attention to the synchronized musical sound track, which was an integral part of the film. *Sunrise* can lay claim to being the first sound film to gain critical praise partially on the basis of the integrity of the sound and picture combination.

Fox, however, would not be content with the success of *Sunrise*. On 5 October, the *Variety* headline read “Dialog in Film on Screen.” In the following article, Fox announced its plan to produce a full-length film with dialogue. As in its first sound film, Fox planned to use the best talent on the lot: Murnau to direct and George O'Brien to star. The *Variety* article concluded that full-length talkies would be the next big thing in the business.

The following day, Warner Bros.'s newest Vitaphone feature opened at the Warner Theatre in New York. This film had been in production since May 1927, but problems with the original lead, George Jessel, had caused production delays. On 6 October, *The Jazz Singer* opened to complimentary, but unenthusiastic, reviews. Even *Variety* seemed to forget the prophetic nature of the previous week's headline. There was in fact now “dialog in film on screen.”

The *Jazz Singer*

The most popular silent films of the conversion period were large films, both in scope and “production values.” War films were among the most popular: *Wings*, *The Big Parade*, and *What Price Glory? The Better 'Ole*. Warner Bros.'s second sound feature, was placed in a war setting, concentrating on comedy rather than action. Costume dramas also were popular and Warner Bros. capitalized on this trend with *Don Juan* and *When A Man Loves*. The costume drama seemed especially well-suited to the new device, with the synchronized scores for these Vitaphone productions impressive displays of the link between effective accompaniment and richly exotic visuals.

But *The Jazz Singer* came out of a different tradition, that of the ethnic story, a popular type of film at the time. The success of *Abie's Irish Rose* on the Broadway stage fostered an upsurge in ethnic entertainment which had appeal generally for a mass audience. The “Jewishness” of *The Jazz Singer* was certainly not a limitation; *The Jazz Singer* was also an intimate film, highlighting relationships among a few people; and it was a film which capitalized on the singular appeal of an entertainer whose voice had not been given feature presentation on a motion picture screen until this time. An analogy might be made to the early days of television, where intimate stories and variety shows were attempts to minimize the limitations of the medium. In much the same way television personalized the celebrities by bringing them into the living rooms of the viewers. *The Jazz Singer* capitalized on the charisma of Al Jolson. As Robert E. Sherwood noted in his review of the film:

**THE JAZZ SINGER**

*isn't much of a moving picture, as moving pictures go... But when Al Jolson starts to sing... well, bring on your super-spectacles, your million-dollar thrills, your long-shots of Calvary against a setting sun, your close-ups of a glycerine tear on Norma Talmadge's cheek—the I'll trade them all for one instant of any ham song that Al cares to put over, and the hammer it is, the better I'll like it.*

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There is no doubt that *The Jazz Singer* was intended as a showcase for Vitaphone. The background score itself was in the tradition of the silent film scores which had been meant to be played live. However, the use of synchronization to ensure proper placement allowed for a more subtle use of the music. The various musical themes and motifs had an artistic role in introducing characters, setting mood and anticipating action, thereby creating a unity of sound. The strength of the background score was in the fact that the sound was primarily generated by the visuals, rather than simply serving as accompaniment.

The techniques used to enhance the background score of *The Jazz Singer* were partially the result of the work done on the previous Warner Bros. sound films. *The Jazz Singer* was also innovative in the use of sound to reinforce the narrative structure of the film: while intercutting (as in parallel editing) had been used extensively since Griffith, *The Jazz Singer* was the first film to show the new dimension that sound would lend to this basic film technique. Such editing could allow the viewer to follow action away from the main scene, while sound (usually a song) kept the main scene firmly in the viewer's mind. The concept of "meanwhile" is greatly enhanced through this scoring device.

This technique is used throughout *The Jazz Singer*. At the beginning of the film, the audience listens to little Jakie singing in a saloon, while watching a nosy neighbor run to tell Poppa, who returns to drag his son away. Later, during Jolson's first singing sequence in Coffee Dan's Cafe (as the mature Jakie, now Jack), intercutting introduces the audience to Mary Dale, soon to become Jack's love interest. The technique of showing one scene while listening to another is most effective in Poppa Rabinowitz's death-bed scene. While Poppa is seen dying, the audience, and Poppa, hear Jack singing the *Kol Nidre*. Father and son are united one last time through the magic of sound film.

While the intercutting of sound and film is a major device in *The Jazz Singer*, it is by no means the only distinction in the film. The most fascinating, considering the technology of the time, is the cutting of the sound track at the point where the track moves from true synchronization (dialogue, singing) to background score. This technique is introduced early, when Poppa arrives to take Jakie home from the saloon: Jakie is singing, but as soon as he sees his father, the song is cut in mid-word. The background score segues quickly, and the audience can see Jakie being dragged out of the saloon. In this instance, the dramatic action is enhanced, rather than degraded, by the transition from sound film to silent.

Another technique used in the film may aptly be referred to as "call and response" editing. A question may be asked in silence and answered by sound or vice versa. At one point in the film, Momma comes to plead with Jack to sing in his father's place on Yom Kippur. Jack refuses. A few moments later, Jack is in rehearsal, and the first words of his song are "Mother, I'm sorry." The reverse happens at the end of the film when Jack is singing "Mammy," during which shots of Momma in the theater audience are intercut. This technique provides a visual or aural reference to an earlier moment, thereby lending a richer cohesion to the continuity.

A number of purely visual images in *The Jazz Singer* are as powerful as any in silent film. The first shot of Coffee Dan's Cafe shows a plate of ham and eggs, which is quickly devoured by Jack. The ham and eggs can be viewed as signs of the new lifestyle enjoyed by Jack. Another example: later, Jack goes to hear Cantor Joseph Rosenblatt in concert and as he watches, the image of Cantor Rosenblatt fades into that of Poppa and back again. Perhaps the most powerful visual image in the entire film is in the scene where Momma comes to plead with Jack, mentioned earlier. Just prior to her entrance, Jack is seen putting on his black face, once again a visualization of Jack's attempt to take on a life style in deference to his traditional roots.

Apart from such innovative and striking techniques, the structure of *The Jazz Singer* reveals an underlying Aristotelian-type logic. From a dramatic standpoint, the film begins and ends on Yom Kippur. The final "Mammy" sequence adds little to the development of narrative, but instead serves as a coda, the final celebration, perhaps an encore for Jolson. But this last jazz song actually contributes to a structural unity of the film: the film opens with a jazz song followed by the *Kol Nidre*, and ends with the *Kol Nidre* followed by a jazz song. This structure is reinforced by the placement of the major dialogue sequence in the middle of the film both in screen time and in dramatic time.

For a film which has been recognized as the first *talkie*, there is surprisingly little dialogue in *The Jazz Singer*. With the exception of Jolson's famous lines in Coffee Dan's Cafe, all the dialogue in the film is contained in the central sequence when Jack returns to his parents' New York apartment to attempt a reconciliation with his father. Many of the techniques already discussed are used in this one scene. (1) There is singing, with Jack doing two versions of "Blue Skies." (2) Momma and Jack engage in chit-chat, which comprises most of the dialogue. And (3) the sound track is cut during the second version of "Blue Skies," when Poppa enters the scene and yells, "Stop!" (which is the last dialogue heard in the film). This command is answered by silent title card ("Poppa") and an angelic close-up of Jack and Momma. In both dramatic and technological senses,
this is the central sequence of the film; the beginning of the film “built” to this scene in much the same way the Warners had utilized the Vitaphone shorts; once the scene achieved its climax, the form returns to silent dialogue (the titles) only to return to synchronized singing at the end of the film. Viewed analytically, the success of The Jazz Singer was no accident. The comparative example of Wings with The Jazz Singer weakens the argument that any sound film could significantly depress the box office of a good quality silent film. Even Variety reporters were aware of the insufficient draw of simple novelty. In February 1928, a post-Jazz Singer Vitaphone film (The First Auto) opened in San Francisco, and the Variety report was: "Another instance where indications are you've got to have something on the screen to draw 'em." The industry wide conversion to sound was a continuation of processes which were at work before the premiere of Don Juan. In past histories, the fact that The Jazz Singer opened in October 1927 and the industry was converting by the following summer has been taken as proof of the direct impact of The Jazz Singer. In fact, it has become a litany: the industry converted because of the success of The Jazz Singer. But chronology can be deceiving. Out of sixty five theaters reported in Film Daily Yearbook (1929) summaries, two thirds were wired after 15 May 1928, the date of the ERPI signings. The rate of wirings between the premiere of The Jazz Singer and the ERPI signings was not significantly higher than the rate for 1927 up to the premiere of The Jazz Singer. Such information in and of itself should cause some doubt in accepting the standard explanation.

The Impact of The Jazz Singer

However, the legend of the unsurpassed success of The Jazz Singer is not quite accurate. Although successful enough, The Jazz Singer did not do as well at the box office as Don Juan in its initial run. At the Warner Theatre in New York, the highest attendance for The Jazz Singer was a respectable 80% of best week for six weeks; in the same theater a year earlier, Don Juan had set house records playing at least eight weeks at 100% of capacity. Nor did The Jazz Singer do as well against the day-and-date competition of Wings, the first Academy Award winner, which was running as a silent film at that time. Wings ran consistently better than The Jazz Singer despite the fact that Wings had opened two months earlier. The importance of The Jazz Singer was rather in its example. A well-made “small” sound film could produce box office results at least equal to that of a big budget silent film. Yet, contrary to Ro then and Griffith, the world did not line up for months to hear two songs and five words. They lined up to see a movie.

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Although The Jazz Singer can be viewed as an important influence on the conversion to sound, it was not a fundamental cause. Nor did the conversion take place only in response to corporate maneuverings. The audience had to respond, or else there would have been no reason to convert. The early sound films, prior to the industry decision to convert in early 1928, were made with special care, each one slightly better than the others. Sound became a tool by which ordinary films could be made more appealing to an audience than they had been. The success of The Jazz Singer was dependent as much on its aesthetic qualities and values as its position as the first major film with dialogue. In this sense, The Jazz Singer was the final proof of the success of sound, not the first.

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15Variety (New York), 1 February 1928, p. 6.
16Tankel, p. 86.
17Tankel, pp. 87, 89.
18Ibid., p. 87.
19Rotha and Griffith, p. 429.

JOURNAL OF THE UNIVERSITY FILM ASSOCIATION, XXX, 1 (Winter 1978)