APPLAUSE

Production: Paramount, 1929; Direction: Rouben Mamoulian; Screenplay: Garrett Fort, from the novel by Beth Brown; Photography: George Folsey; Cast: Helen Morgan (Kitty Darling), Joan Peers (April Darling), Fuller Mellish, Jr. (Hitch Nelson), Henry Wadsworth (Tony).

The tremendous success of Warner Brothers *The Jazz Singer* (1927), with Al Jolson singing and exclaiming, "Wait a minute! You ain't seen nothing yet!," revolutionized the motion picture industry. The major studios had resisted the development of sound, but it was suddenly apparent that the days of silent cinema were over and debate quickly focussed on the proper cinematic use of this remarkable technological innovation. Basically, the controversy concerned whether sound should be "synchronous" or "naturalistic" (so that the audience hears what it sees and sees what it hears), or whether sound should be "asynchronous" or "contrapuntal" (so that sound is used, in the words of Pudovkin, "to amplify and enrich the visual image on the screen").

In 1928, the Soviet filmmakers Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov warned that users of sound would probably "follow the path of least resistance." They correctly predicted the initial two phases of Hollywood's sound era: first, a period of commercial exploitation that attempted "simply to satisfy the public's curiosity;" and second, a "terrible" period of "attempts to have theatre invade the screen." Their great fear, of course, was that "sound would destroy the art of montage," but they also pointed out that sound would eliminate cumbersome intertitles and suggested ways to use sound creatively.

Indeed, most early sound films were curiosities, dependent on the novelty of sound for success, totally uncinematic in visual style. There were, of course, exceptions. Rene Clair praised MGM's *Broadway Melody* (1929), the first American musical, for its innovative soundtrack, especially admiring a sequence in which a door slamming and a car driving away are heard but not seen. But most American producers felt that such techniques would disorient audiences, believing that sound should of necessity be "wedded" to the image.

The sound controversy was rendered largely obsolete by the invention of "post-synchronization," or "dubbing," whereby the sound track was combined with the image track during post-production. Originally, sound was recorded live, as the image was filmed. This led to very stationary scenes, as the actors had to remain near the microphone and the (obviously immobile) camera had to be encased in a booth (to prevent the microphone from picking up the camera motor). Such were the problems so brilliantly lampooned in the great musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Post-synchronization both freed the camera to move as it had in the silent era and allowed the recording of customized soundtracks including both naturalistic and contrapuntal sounds.

Post-synchronization was first used in *Hallelujah!* (1929), the first great film of the sound era and the first sound film directed by King Vidor. Its use was a sort of serendipity. Vidor's sound truck was late getting to Memphis, so he began filming as a silent and found it so liberating that he continued the practice. The film's remarkable final sequence is a chase through a swamp, shot silent with a moving camera and with a naturalistic soundtrack added in the studio. (It should be noted that early dubbing processes were extremely difficult. Vidor's editor is said to have suffered a nervous breakdown.) Other early sound films to use post-synchronization to impressive effect include Ernst Lubitsch's *The Love Parade* (1929), Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet On the Western Front* (1930), and *The Front Page* (1931).

The second important innovation of the sound era was double-channel recording, in which two separate microphones could be used to record sounds (e.g. overlapping dialogue) that were then "mixed" during post-production. This technique was first employed by the former Broadway stage

director Rouben Mamoulian in his first film, *Applause*, one of the most extraordinary films of its period.

Applause is usually praised for its advancements in sound recording, but it also—somewhat surprisingly, considering Mamoulian's theatrical background—displays a visual sophistication that is truly remarkable. Mamoulian's most dramatic visual strategy in the film is his use of offscreen space, some examples of which are worth detailing.

Early in the film, Kitty's abusive lover Hitch lectures her on her failings. We hear him as he stands offscreen left, the giant shadow that he casts towering over the actual Kitty, a small broken woman in the lower right corner of the frame. This striking image is a brilliant technical flourish, completely narrativized because it literalizes the couple's relationship. The shadow motif will recur throughout the film, as when Hitch and April converse backstage with the shadows of Kitty's production number in the background, or when April and Tony dine with shadows of dancing couples beside them.

A second strategy that Mamoulian systematically employs is the use of a moving camera, beginning with the film's opening shot of a deserted street. The "caressing" quality of this shot—lacking the fluidity that directors like Max Ophuls would later achieve with better equipment, but similar in intent—is repeated in other shots, such as the pan of the railroad station when April returns to New York. The latter shot is intentionally dizzying, expressionistically revealing April's state of mind. Similarly, Kitty's suicide attempt begins with swish pans of her room, continues with an almost disorienting tracking shot of her going to her medicine cabinet, and concludes with a static shot of her in her room accompanied by the unnaturally loud noises of the city. Occasionally, Mamoulian's experiments fail. The tracking shot of April leaving the convent is superb, but the shot of her first scene there, in which the camera pulls back and then moves in again, seems forced.

The strategies of offscreen space and moving camera are brilliantly combined in the scene in which April and Tony meet. In a tracking shot lasting nearly two minutes, she leaves the theater, is harassed by leering men, "rescued" by a sailor, and continues on with him. Throughout all of this, we see only the lower legs of the characters (except for two brief vertical pans to reveal April's and Tony's faces); their voices and other noises—a dog barking, a car—are only heard.

Applause contains other fascinating experiments. A variety of camera angles are employed, as when Kitty gives birth to April backstage. There is an overhead shot of the burlesque troupe circling the recumbent Kitty, followed by a cut to a point-of-view shot looking up into a circle of faces that frame the screen. There is also an amazing shot in which a diagonal wipe—the only one in the film—slowly splits the screen to contrast Kitty's feelings with her lover's actions.

I have emphasized *Applause*'s technical and stylistic qualities, but the film is also quite interesting on a thematic level. One of the first backstage musicals, it successfully re-creates the sleazy atmosphere of burlesque. It attempts to investigate the idea of woman as spectacle, another way in which it anticipates the films of Max Ophuls. And it was the first film of Helen Morgan, once the rage of Broadway musicals and nightclubs, whose songs must have been for 1929 audiences the nostalgic voice of a vanished cabaret society. Morgan appeared in ten films, the last of which was *Show Boat* (1936) (she was also in the 1929 version), before dying of cirrhosis of the liver in 1941.

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