

A BRITISH JAB AT OUR "TALKIES"

THE AMERICAN MOVIES have stood a good deal of condemnation in foreign lands; the talkies seem to be in for more. One ingenuous Britisher condemns the whole new invention as a subtle form of propaganda designed to Americanize the world. Had he read the correspondence of a writer for the *Manchester Guardian*, he would, assuming the soundness of this writer's views, "scarcely pay himself and his country such a oblique compliment." "The movies in America," says this writer, "continues to be obsessed by the twelve-year-old mind, and, for various reasons, the results of this policy are more painful on the vocal films than on those which we may some day learn to call 'the dumbies.'" This quality of the speaking film may cause its earlier damnation, because it makes a double assault on the nerves of such hypersensitives in whose behalf the writer now protests:

"The twelve-year-old is responsible for the irritating slowness of speech, for the avoidance of any word with more than two syllables, for the elimination of all subtlety of motive or action. But there are other difficulties which seem likely to keep the talking pictures of negligible artistic importance for some time to come. Chief of these is the inability of writers, directors, and actors to adjust themselves to the new technique. Their first response has been to reproduce stage drama word for word and gesture for gesture. It ought to be obvious that this is not the final function of the talking screen. The stage is what it is because it has limitations which it can not transcend. Of the old Greek unities of time, place, and theme, the first two are honored because there is no help for it; by the time the scenery has been changed a dozen times in an evening, the stage-hands are exhausted, and there are certain natural conditions and phenomena—a storm at sea, a forest fire, and others much less violent—which, no matter how well imitated, remain slightly ridiculous in the theater. For the dialog film to discard all the natural advantages in technique which the cinema has acquired in a quarter of a century would be absurd.

"Even within their own present self-determined limits, the producers of talking movies are doing a painfully bad job, and one for which they can not quite be forgiven. Their imitation of the stage is an awkward and embarrassed one, as is perhaps not surprising in view of the antecedents of most of their chief officials. Few of the producers, directors, or actors have had any extended experience in drama. Much has been said recently about the talkies stealing all the stars from Broadway, but this has not happened, and will not. It has been discovered that most stage actors do not photograph well, and that many a voice admired by theatergoers comes through the microphones weirdly distorted. The combination of the right voice and the right features is rare, and is not much more likely to occur among professional actors than any other group. Their training and experience are of some value, but of less than might be supposed; they have a tendency to overact before the camera, and to shout into the microphone in a painful way."

The one exception to this general rule of ignorance is perhaps the playwright, we are told; and here again is repeated the tale of the expectant procession going to Hollywood passing the disgruntled procession coming back:

"Most of the better-known dramatists have lately tried their hands at writing for the talkies. They go to Hollywood for a few weeks, or months, at a fabulously high salary, and at the end of that time they usually come back to Broadway vowing that never again will they have anything to do with the movies in any form. The entrepreneurs of film-land are notoriously incapable of putting to use the brains they hire so lavishly. They distrust 'experts,' and listen impatiently or not at all to men whom they are paying 200 pounds a week precisely because they are worth hearing. This is, of course, a familiar story, but the advent of audibility has made it even worse.

"In view of these facts it is hardly surprising that the developments of the past year have been few and almost all of a purely technical character. Sound is being reproduced more efficiently; the early lisp has been eliminated, and the technicians have learned not to imitate the noise of horses galloping through snow by clapping together the halves of a coconut shell. Voices now 'fade in' and 'fade out' at the beginning and end of a scene. The producers have lately learned an interesting sort of vocal 'expressionism,' letting the audience hear a confused mass of sounds, persons speaking disjointed words, in the mood of the forthcoming scene, or suggesting developments in the story which are not to be shown on the screen. This is, however, the end of the catalog, and, generally speaking, the twelve-year-old continues to reign."

The correspondent ventures on a prophecy, tho he admits its "foolhardiness" in respect to the "ever-changing movies":

"The majority of films in the future will use dialog, and all will carry their own musical accompaniment.

"The majority of films will be made stupidly for stupid people, just as has been the case with the silent movies for twenty years.

"It is possible that a few talking pictures of an interesting, experimental sort will be made to be shown before superior audiences in the small and special cinemas which are beginning to be built in the larger American cities.

"Hollywood talking films will be made in the American language for the American market. The English-speaking world will be a secondary outlet, which the producers will retain if they can, but will surrender if they must, rather than alter the accent of their players and risk impairing the value of their films to the 20,000 cinema theaters at home."