

The Uncanny Body of Early Sound Film

There are uses of sound that produce a desirable effect; on the other hand, there are uses that disgust people.

—“Facts about Talking Pictures and Instruments—No. 4,” *Harrison’s Reports* 8 September 1928

The first synchronized sound films were widely hailed as a forward leap in cinematic realism. Many critics and other commentators noted that everything in the films and, most strikingly, the speaking human figures in them now appeared to be more lifelike, present, and three-dimensional. Today, silent films seem to viewers who are not accustomed to watching them to be remote, bound by conventions such as intertitles that are strange and unreal. The impression that sound brought the cinema closer to reality, therefore, seems to have been one that stuck. This was not the only impression that sound films made on their first audiences, however. Sound also brought to the foreground certain uncanny qualities that had always been present in the cinematic image. It complicated the general viewing sensation of the presence of the figures speaking and moving on the screen. Sound changed the visual appearance of these figures in ways that made them look to some viewers like ghosts. This widespread, sporadic, uncontrolled, and temporary film reception phenomenon possibly influenced Hollywood film production trends in ways that long outlived the three and a half years of the sound transition period.

The Shrinking of Personality

When orchestral accompaniments and the noises of such things as steam engines, horses’ hoofs, gun-fire and the

like were synchronized with pictures, nobody became alarmed. They were an addition, that’s all. But when screen actors began to speak lines, the silent drama was attacked. Voices invaded its peculiar domain.

—“Now the Movies Go Back to Their School Days,”
James O. Spearing, *New York Times* 19 August 1928

Speaking and singing figures in the first sound films often struck viewers of the period as excitingly present. When, in a 1927 Fox Movietone short, George Bernard Shaw stepped forward and said a few words to the camera and microphone, he charmed critics everywhere, including the one from *Photoplay*, who wrote: “[I]t is the first time that Bernard Shaw ever has talked directly and face to face with the American public. What a voice and what a face! Although over seventy years old, Shaw is built like an athlete. He moves as gracefully as Jack Dempsey. And he has so much sex appeal that he leaves the gals limp.”¹ The cinematic apparatus, now made bulkier by the addition of synchronized sound technology, appears not to have interfered with this viewer’s experience of Shaw the man in the slightest way. In a general reflection on the new films, another commentator wrote: “[N]ow, when a great singer opens his mouth in song we feel the thrill of his voice and his personality.”² Critic Alexander Bakshy agreed, writing that “the popularity of the talkies is not wholly a craze for novelty. Their success is much more due to the warmth and intimacy which has been given the picture by the human voice and which is so unmistakably missing in the silent picture as this comes from Hollywood.”³ How this newfound warmth and intimacy was to find immediate application within the character-centered narrative tradition of Hollywood cinema was suggested

by the exhibitors weekly *Harrison's Reports* when it explained the success of *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927): "It was the talk that Al Jolson made here and there, and his singing of his 'Mammy' song, chiefly the singing of 'Mammy.' It was so successfully done that people were thrilled. The sight of Mr. Jolson singing to his mother, sitting in the orchestra, stirred the spectator's emotions as they were stirred by few pictures; it brought tears to the eyes of many spectators."⁴

Within this chorus of praise, however, were indications that sound simultaneously was getting in the way of the general viewing sensation and enjoyment of the presence of the figures speaking and singing in the new films. In 1929 Fitzhugh Green, in his book *The Film Finds Its Tongue*, recalled a 1926 sound film—one in the premiere program of Vitaphone shorts—in which Will Hays gave a brief speech. Green wrote that Hays "seemed to be present, and yet he did not seem to be present."⁵ In 1932 technical sound expert H. G. Knox remembered that "the early sound pictures required the exercise of considerable imagination to actually feel the actor's presence on the screen before you."⁶ Of the part-talking film *Tenderloin* (Michael Curtiz, 1928), *Variety* wrote: "[A]nother angle is whether the voice on the screen does not suggest something missing, with that missing element the physical self. This is undeniably felt."⁷ And in what was perhaps the most in-depth articulation of this potentially troubling quality of the new films, Bakshy—who, as I have noted, also championed the human warmth of the films—reflected on his dissatisfaction with recent films in which such major stars as George Arliss and John Barrymore had led the casts. In a piece titled "The Shrinking of Personality," he wrote:

As I now try to recall my main impressions I am struck by a rather puzzling fact. None of the popular actors I saw stands out before me as a personality with whom I had a direct and all but physical contact. I know that on the stage some of these actors and others of equal gifts were and are able to escape the shell of the characters they represent and to fill the entire theater with their own beings, so that one feels as if one almost touched them. More phantom-like, but no less expansive and penetrating, were the personalities of the famous stars that radiated from the silent screen . . . There can be no question of the success of the producers in establishing their screen stars not merely as favorites

with the public, but as personalities that somehow . . . transcended their screen characters and came into a direct contact with the audience. The appeal of Chaplin, Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Pola Negri, or Jannings in the old days of silent films had that quality of expansion.

The situation with the talking pictures seems to be paradoxically different. The personal magnetism of the actor has lost its force. His entire personality has shrunk to something that is only a little more than the character he represents. This does not necessarily mean that his personality is completely submerged in the character. More often than not the reverse is actually the case, and the same George Arliss, for instance, will be seen in a number of characters that differ but little from one another . . . But I doubt that his failure to loom as large from the speaking screen as he does from the stage, and as he probably would from the silent screen, is due to any lack of magnetism in his acting personality. The reason, I am inclined to think, lies rather in the curious effect that the addition of mechanical speech has had on the relationship between the screen actor and the audience.⁸

Bakshy goes on to blame the theatricality of the current films, specifically their strong reliance on stage techniques and sources, combined with the cinema's capacity to present scenes unfolding in "natural surroundings," for this effect of remoteness. While he probably has a point, I think that the more significant cause of the "shrinking of personality" ran deeper than the decision of any individual producer regarding a particular source or setting. A *Variety* reviewer of an early Vitaphone program came much closer to grasping this deeper cause: "There is something of colorless quality about the mechanical device that wears after so long a stretch, not because the reproduction is lacking in human quality, for it has extraordinary exactitude and human shading. It must be that the mere knowledge that the entertainment is a reproduction has the effect of erecting an altogether imaginary feeling of mechanical flatness such as one gets from a player piano."⁹ The major root of the problem was, as this critic intuited, the viewer's renewed awareness of the mechanical nature of the cinema. This awareness in turn stemmed from two sources: the coarsening of film style that characterized the cinema of the sound transition period and the initial sensational novelty appeal of synchronized sound film.

The Return of the Medium-sensitive Viewer

It would doubtless seem strange if upon a screen a portrait (head) of a person were projected, and this picture slowly became of an animated character, opened its mouth and began to talk, accompanied by an ever-changing countenance, including the formation by the mouth as each peculiar sound is uttered.

—Claude Friese-Greene, 1889, reprinted
in the *New York Times* 22 June 1924

The early sound film viewer was a medium-sensitive viewer. I am taking this term from Yuri Tsivian's book, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, in which, following observations made by Eileen Bowser, Tsivian describes how viewers during the early cinema period were often deeply impressed by elements in films that later viewers of the same and subsequent films would tend not to notice or else take completely for granted.¹⁰ Such elements could include the movements of objects within the frame—a bush trembling at the water's edge, waves breaking on sand and then bursting into rivulets, the faintest unsteadiness in a card player's fingers.¹¹ They might also include elements of cinematic discourse such as a close camera view, a camera moving into or out of depth, the edges of the frame, and the monochrome color of the film.¹² Tsivian's study of this phenomenon of early cinema reception is relevant to our consideration of film reception in the early sound period because the coming of sound film triggered the first major return of medium sensitivity to ordinary viewing in thirty years.

Several practical and technical realities of film production in the period imprinted themselves upon the finished films in ways that help to explain why viewers now were suddenly much more aware of Hollywood films as manufactured objects. The addition of the recorded voice alone went a long way toward producing this result. Synchronization problems, as Douglas Gomery notes, continued to occur in sound-on-disc film presentations until Warner Bros. finally phased out the technology in 1930.¹³ Until then (and afterward in theaters that continued to show sound-on-disc films), every slipup in synchronization served to remind viewers that the bodies speaking on the screen constituted whole entities only tenuously, ones that had been pieced together in a movie studio and that could come apart quite easily once inside the movie theater.¹⁴ But even

voices that were perfectly synchronized could heighten medium sensitivity. They could do this in at least two ways.

First, the voices could sound unnatural to viewers' ears. The technology was derided as “cold, rasping Noisytone inventions.”¹⁵ *Harrison's Reports* reminded its readers: “You are well aware of the fact that the voice can under no circumstances be made to sound natural through a megaphone. And the horn is a megaphone.”¹⁶ Knox remembered at the end of 1930 “how queer some of the first talking pictures sounded . . . Actors and actresses often sounded as though they were lisping and voices were quite unnatural.”¹⁷ A history of film appearing in 1931 noted, similarly, that “by 1927, talkies had lost nearly all of their early squeaks and squawks and were delivering to audiences reliable reproductions of music and of the human voice.”¹⁸ Whether the problem had been solved by 1927 or perhaps later depended as much on the acclimation of the individual viewer to synchronized sound as on the ongoing improvements in the technology itself.¹⁹ Locating a precise line of demarcation to characterize the before-and-after experience of most viewers is, at any rate, less important than is simply recognizing that the voice could strike viewers of the period as patently artificial sounding.

Synchronized speech also could seem unreal because viewers sometimes sensed that the speech was not issuing from the lips moving on the screen. Mordaunt Hall at the *New York Times* was confident that, with the arrival of the Vitaphone, this problem was now in the past: “Hitherto the efforts to couple pictures and sound have possessed weak points. In the earlier conceptions the voice appeared either to come from the top or the bottom of the screen, and although the lips of the character moved to the utterances it was not he or she who seemed to be doing the talking.”²⁰ But this problem continued to crop up after 1926. The *Variety* review of *Tenderloin* noted that “the voice, though issuing from the picture player, seems a thing apart, albeit synchronizing.”²¹ Early in 1929 *Photoplay* criticized a film for being “very crude and unreal. The characters, as usual, seem to speak from their vest pockets.”²² Journalist Alexandre Arnoux went to London the same year and reported back to his Paris readers that “right at the start the general effect is rather disconcerting. Since the loudspeaker installed behind the screen never changes its locus of sound propagation, the voice always comes from the same spot no matter which

character is speaking. The synchronization is perfect, of course, but it confuses and annoys the listener."²³ Rick Altman has noted that some technicians believed that positioning several loudspeakers behind the screen and having an on-site operator fade the sound in four directions to keep the voices close to the speaking mouths was one way to solve this problem.²⁴ No such measure would be necessary, it turned out, because this problem, which was largely a function of the newness of the technology to those who were supposed to be fooled by it, eventually solved itself. As audiences grew accustomed to the loudspeaker-screen configuration, the bodies on the screen merged with the voices. Until then, even perfectly synchronized and acceptably natural-sounding speech might strike the viewer as an obviously mechanical contrivance.

Elements other than the speech functioned to raise general awareness of the films as films. Synchronized speech in the first sound feature films came in distractingly discrete packages within the films. These were talking sequences abutted, usually on both sides, by silent sequences that had been scored with music. The transition from one type of sequence to the other could register as a sort of awkward mechanical gearshift in a film's mode of narrative presentation. Abruptly, dialogue titles became synchronized speech; figures emoting and gesturing in the familiar silent film acting style became figures keeping comparatively still in order not to make distracting sounds that could be picked up by the insufficiently discriminating microphone technology; the mobile frame of the silent film became the noticeably more restricted camera viewpoint of the early sound film; and flowing nondiegetic music became a scratchy quiet that engulfed the figures and their speech. A transition out of as well as into a talking sequence could deliver a jolt. A reviewer of *The Jazz Singer* complained about "the abrupt blankness when the singing or dialogue stopped and the ordinary screening continued."²⁵ Another commentator, writing about part-talkies generally, found that "the abrupt change of tempo when the words stop and the action resumes is a terrific strain on the credulity of the customers."²⁶ The edits that marked these transitions were more obtrusive than the edits of silent cinema. They could seem like raised seams along which disparate types of cinematic material came together. The jarring quality of these transitions, moreover, would be softened but not eliminated

as the period wore on and all-talking feature production became the norm, for all-talking films, too, often clearly announced, via a perceptible change in the quality of the surrounding quiet, when a talk-free stretch of film was ending and a dialogue exchange was about to begin.²⁷

Acting performances could add to the problem. Because of difficulties associated with editing sound film, dialogue scenes now were being assembled out of fewer total shots.²⁸ This meant that actors needed to get their lines and blocking right for longer stretches, and this, combined with the increased costs of filming retakes in the early sound period, resulted in a greater likelihood that a slightly flubbed line here or missed cue there might make it into a finished film.²⁹ Viewers witnessing an actor making a mistake had little choice but to be reminded of the artificiality of the entire package. In all, the state of narrative absorption that had been (and would be again) intrinsic to the Hollywood film-viewing experience was partially disrupted as the augmented medium began to exhibit its materiality and the unsteady practice to flaunt its techniques.

Switching the focus from the films to the viewers brings to light more reasons why general viewing in the period was shot through with uncommon medium sensitivity. For one thing, viewers at the time were familiar with a connotation of "synchronization" that the word no longer carries today. In the silent era, as James Lastra notes, the word in the context of moviegoing had referred primarily to live musical accompaniment.³⁰ "Synchronization," then, could suggest something extratextual pieced onto the whole for effect rather than something intrinsic to the profilmic world that had been drawn out of it and captured on film or disc. "Synchronized" voices are understood to accompany moving lips rather than to issue from them. This connotation helps to account for instances in which the word is applied, in the early sound period, to mean sloppy postdubbing and even foreign speech that has been dubbed over English-speaking mouths.³¹

The sense of synchronization as something more provisional than essential accorded well with a viewer's immediate impression of synchronized speech as a marvelous mechanical gimmick. The novelty of the technique guaranteed that even if there had been no discernable problems with the quality of the sound, or with the synchronization, or with the disparity between

the physical locations of the theater loudspeakers and those of the speaking mouths, viewers still would have experienced an acutely heightened awareness of the artificial nature of the cinema as a direct result of the sound. As the editor of the *Motion Picture News* noted in 1928: "There has not been, until now, any great, basic mechanical change in the motion picture. I am not speaking now from a scientific standpoint, nor am I overlooking the technical advances in picture making or projection or presentation. I am speaking only from a public viewpoint."³²

Synchronized speech registered, unambiguously, as a major change, and viewers for a time lacked the cognitive training to process this new constitutive element of cinema as routinely and transparently as they had the silent film intertitle. They might find the speech fascinating not for anything that a speaker was saying but simply because the speaker could be heard saying anything at all. To a viewer used to following a song's lyrics or a movie's plot, this sort of ravenous interest could constitute a distraction. Synchronized speech could be exhilarating, arrestingly so, and also by virtue of its newness had the power to make viewers feel uncomfortable. Alexander Walker captures the "unsophisticated" nature of the initial viewing response to the technique when he accounts for the laughter that greeted *Tenderloin* at its premiere: "It was the first example of what became a commonplace response to talkies in which the vocal characterization seemed either inadequate or in some way excessive to audiences who had come along expecting novelty, but did not yet know how to account for the film's technical or dramatic shortcomings except by laughing at them."³³

Viewers would quickly adjust their faculties to accommodate the sound. As one industry technical professional put it in April 1930: "When the novelty lessens, as a result of familiarity, the theatre patron has time and opportunity to catch up, and to analyze his reactions. Given time to reason (after wonder has subsided), the theatre patron is in the mental state necessary to resume the role of critic."³⁴ Patrons perhaps rarely adopted the cool distance that was the professional affectation of the movie critic; still, as this writer suggests, the patron's early responses to the talking film could constitute a kind of interference to his or her otherwise unimpeded reception of Hollywood film entertainment. While this interference persisted, viewers might find

synchronized speech pinning their attention directly on the speaking figure, as it did the *Photoplay* critic's on Shaw's, or it might draw their attention to the film as a visibly and audibly present object in the theater auditorium. Mordaunt Hall illustrated the latter possibility when, in 1926, he noted the "remarkable precision in timing the sound with the movements of the speaker's lips."³⁵ Another critic wrote that "so remarkable is this synchronizing machine it seemed incredible the figures on the screen were only shadows."³⁶ Again, it is the synchronizing machine that draws this viewer's notice, just as the projector (and projectionist) often had served as major attractions to viewers during the early cinema period.³⁷

Another witness, this to a 1922 Phonofilm demonstration, remarked that "each word was clearly audible as articulated by the moving lips of the moving picture."³⁸ In this case, the viewer's attention appears not to go "through" the screen to the speaking person but to stop on the screen itself; the screen is the surface whereupon the lips of the moving picture move. The comment hints at a measure of increased screen awareness during the period. So does this description by Hall of a premier Vitaphone short in which Giovanni Martinelli sang an opera selection: "The singer's tones appeared to echo in the body of the theatre as they tore from a shadow on the screen."³⁹ If the screen reasserted its physical presence during the sound transition, then this perceptual shift suggests another parallel to general viewing in the early cinema period, when, as Tsivian notes, many filmgoers regarded the screen as an object of fascination.⁴⁰ Donald Crafton's characterization of critical debates surrounding the voice at the beginning of the sound transition is relevant: "It is as though the 'quality voice' was not part of the actor but part of the medium itself. The actor's job was to adjust his or her physiology to that mechanical paragon."⁴¹

Synchronized sound film, then, could strike audiences as a dazzling reproduction of a preexisting unity or it could entertain them as a thrilling approximation and reassembly of that unity. It could take viewers straight to the speaking person or, afresh, to the cinema as a technological medium. The cinema was, according to the latter sense, less a window that had always been clear (and now had been opened to let the sounds through) than it was a noisy attraction busily cranking out sensory delights before a house of astonished patrons. This



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is our starting point for understanding the shrinking personality effect and, beyond that, the uncanny body of early sound film.

The Complexion of the Thing

In the key-cities, it would have "starved to death." But the novelty of having the screen shadows talk naturally changes the complexion of the thing.

—"Motion and Sound," *Harrison's Reports* 14 July 1928, referring to *Lights of New York* (Bryan Foy, 1928)

Like the smallest movements that could rivet viewer interest when pictures first began to move, so the smallest sounds now could startle and excite viewers as moving pictures first began to make sounds. Fitzhugh Green recalled that Hays "advanced to the foreground and there was a little sound. It penetrated through people's minds

that they had 'heard' him clear his throat."⁴² The *Chicago Tribune* review of the same program noted that "when Mischa Elman played there was not only the delicate pizzacatti [*sic*] as the violinist plucked the strings, but the brush-sound of his bow as it moved legato over them."⁴³ The *New York Times* saw fit to mention that when Shaw walks forward "you hear his footsteps—scrunch, scrunch—on the path."⁴⁴ And, reportedly, Sam Warner was thunderstruck when he found that he could actually hear the pianist in a Vitaphone demonstration film unbuttoning his gloves.⁴⁵

There also were indications that sound resensitized viewers to the visual image. A sound technician wrote in August 1928 that "a review of the present talkies suggests an exaggeration of lip gymnastics. This is unnecessary, because of the intimate detail characteristic of motion picture photography, as compared to the legitimate stage declamation."⁴⁶ But were actors now

really exercising their lips to a greater degree, or were viewers now just more sensitive to such movements? Another commentator wrote the same month that “an actor whose face is slightly disfigured or disproportioned, so slightly that no abnormality is noticed in real life, becomes a marked man in a large, high-lighted close-up.”⁴⁷ Again, no mention is made of sound, but we can ask, Did sound play an uncredited role in the timing of these and similar observations from the period? One commentator did explicitly link sound to his sense of the current enhanced potential of faces, especially ones viewed in close-up, to appear grotesque. He explained why acting expressivity must now be toned down:

How can a dramatic episode be under-acted? This would surely not do for the legitimate stage, so how could it suffice for the talking picture?

The answer to the question lies in the size of the screen. Even if we sit in the orchestra stalls of an ordinary theatre we can rarely detect whether the leading lady has a dimple. On the screen, however, we sometimes get a close-up of a star, where not only her dimple, if she has one, is visible, but the very pores of her skin. In fact, there are very few things that one could avoid seeing when the features are magnified to 10 ft.

Add to this huge physiognomy sobs which are only too often stentorian, and is it a wonder that the exhibition becomes so grotesque that the audience can remain polite no longer, but burst into laughter? These super-close-ups should never be used for sound pictures, especially if any strong emotion is being portrayed.⁴⁸

This comment, which resembles ones that Tsivian finds being made in response to close views of faces in early films (expressions of shock and disgust at the graphic ugliness and gigantism of the faces), suggests that visual elements in the diegetic world could appear strangely energized as a result of the addition of synchronized sound.⁴⁹

This change in the way objects in profilmic space could appear was compounded by another by-product of medium-sensitive viewing. Audiences also now—and just as Tsivian finds them doing in the early cinema period—were exhibiting a tendency to project elements of the cinematic discourse onto the diegetic world.⁵⁰ We see this happening in mild form above, where a close camera view presents a “huge physiognomy.” Tsivian’s examples of this act of projection in early film viewing

include interpreting a shot in which the camera is moving toward a human figure’s head as a shot in which the head is moving toward the viewer (or possibly growing larger in size) and perceiving the edges of the frame as bounding a mysterious, unseen zone with the power to suck persons, objects, and even physical space into itself.⁵¹ Tsivian is careful to stress that, very quickly, viewers learned to cognitively distinguish discursive elements from diegetic ones. Still, he maintains, throughout the early period (until about 1910), the cinematic image could provoke physical sensations of motion and transformation, even for viewers who knew better, and these sensations could turn watching the most mundane (to our eyes) film into a strange and even vertiginous experience.⁵² This act of projection was the crucial tendency in early sound film viewing in the making of the shrinking personality and ghostliness effects.

Before returning to the early sound period, we need to consider a subcategory of this act of projection in the early film period. Sometimes early film viewers projected onto the diegetic world elements that they perceived to be *missing* from the cinematic discourse. So, for example, a crowd filmed with a silent camera became a crowd bustling with activity but making no sounds at all. The central text in Tsivian’s examination of this viewing tendency is Maxim Gorky’s famous review of the first Lumière program when it came to Russia.⁵³ For Gorky, the views these films presented of domestic life and other everyday scenes were far from ordinary seeming. They offered glimpses of a world that was strangely lacking in sound and color, a “kingdom of shadows.”⁵⁴ Gorky knew that photography was a black and white medium and that what the Lumières were screening was moving photography; still, his senses were aroused in a manner that defied the simple and known facts of the presentation.

Contemporary discourses on early sound films suggest that viewers were again making the same sorts of projections, although probably to a lesser degree than viewers in the earlier period had. Hall articulated his dissatisfaction with the abrupt transitions of part-talking films in this way: “This sudden gift of voice to characters is frequently startling, for one may see a detective who has been silent suddenly boom forth in a terrifying fashion and thereafter figuratively have his tongue cut out.”⁵⁵ *Harrison’s Reports* noted of *The Jazz Singer* that “Mr. Jolson sings with the Vitaphone several times. In

one instance, after the song stops, one feels as if the characters were deaf and dumb.”⁵⁶ For another commentator, the need for actors to stay close to hidden microphones, keep still, and enunciate clearly “made the players resemble figures in a wax museum.”⁵⁷ Another example comes from a review of a 1923 Phonofilm demonstration in which the reviewer, considering a film of a man and woman dancing to musical accompaniment, wrote that “it seemed surprising that, while one could hear the instruments being played for the dancers, one could not hear the slightest sound of a footfall. Hence it seemed as if the dancers were performing in rubber shoes.”⁵⁸

These are examples of the positive manifestations that such projections could take in the case of early sound films. They show how something *absent* at the level of the discourse could become something *altered* at the level of the diegesis. Moreover, the instant centrality of *speech* in a viewer’s initial response to synchronized sound, combined with the longstanding centrality of the human figure within Hollywood films, made the human figure consistently the main target of this act of projection. What, then, was projected onto this figure? The grayness of the medium and the imperfect sound technology that many believed was never more imperfect than when it was reproducing the human voice. The result could be a viewing sensation with the power to rival the uncanny realism of the first sound films.

The sight of figures moving their lips in time to the sounds of their voices was exciting to viewers. It imparted to the image, through the force of its novelty, a tremendous power, enough to make the singing Martinelli seem to Hall “so excellent, so real, that one felt as though Martinelli would eventually burst through the screen, as if it were made of paper.”⁵⁹ And yet Martinelli also looked to Hall like a mere shadow on the screen. Figures now could appear anemic compared to the full-blooded characters and stars of the silent cinema, and their voices could sound attenuated to match their wan countenances. Something vital had been added as a result of the sound, but something vital had been leached away as well.⁶⁰ Figures seemed more vivid, more animated, and yet, paradoxically, they did not necessarily seem more alive. In fact, with luminously pale skin and with voices that could be reedy and hollow sounding, figures now could strike the viewer as distinctly *less* alive than before. One option for figuratively describing such an impression was to cite the “shrink-

ing of personality.” Another was to invoke a critical reception trope of the period, one so ubiquitous in the contemporary discourses that we tend to pay it no mind, which is to call the films and the figures in them “talking shadows.”⁶¹ A third possibility was to call the figures ghostly.

Soundless feet could appear to wear rubber shoes or, as for a 1915 viewer of Edison’s Kinetophone, they could effect a more total, ground-up transformation: “A dog runs about noiselessly like a disembodied ghost, but his barking is far too loud.”⁶² Another exclaimed in 1931: “The thing is well nigh uncanny! Through the amazing ability and ingenuity of the modern engineers, we have made the shadow ghosts of men, women and children to talk.”⁶³ Early in 1929 a commentator described a film with “but two oral sequences in which the characters roared like monstrous ghosts.”⁶⁴ The same year, Luigi Pirandello attributed the inherently absurd nature of the sound film to the fact that “images do not talk, they can only be seen; if they talk their living voice is in striking contrast with their quality of ghosts.”⁶⁵ Also in 1929 Bakshy wrote that “for reasons which it is difficult to discern, the total effect of the talking picture is generally thin, lacking in substance. Strange as it may appear, a silent picture seems to be freighted with sensory appeal. A picture like *The Last Laugh* is a veritable ‘eye-full.’ In the talkies, much as you may be moved by the drama, you feel it is a drama in a world of ghosts.”⁶⁶ And in 1990 a general viewer recollected a 1928 film in which “the star was Conrad Nagel, and the ‘talking’ was of only partial duration—not for the whole picture. Spooky—hollow sounding voices—larger than life and ghostly. But fascinating.”⁶⁷

These comments suggest that viewers were responding to a cinema that, as it took what was widely perceived to be a major step toward a fuller representation of reality, simultaneously became more unreal. The addition of synchronized sound triggered perceptions of ghostly figures in a shadowy world, just as the addition of movement had when, at the first Lumière screenings, the projected still photograph that opened the show was cranked suddenly to life.⁶⁸ At both times, the discursive element that was new raised awareness of the remaining silences and blank spots in the total sensory package, and the perceptions that could result had the power to infiltrate and counteract viewers’ sense of the general advancement of the medium toward greater realism.

Tsivian and Tom Gunning have described this dynamic of ambivalence running through the first viewing responses to the cinema.⁶⁹ They help us to discern strong similarities between certain broad-scale patterns of film reception at two points in cinema history. While of course the two periods were really more different than they were similar, we can nevertheless say that at both times, conflicting perceptual cues clashed in the minds of viewers, who were trying to make sense of a new representational technology. At both times, a possible outcome of their effort was to find the filmic world altered in a way that made it appear uncanny. And at the dawn of the sound era, both the immediate and the ingrained centrality of the human figure within the viewing experience guaranteed that the foremost manifestation within the freshly resurrected ghost world of the cinema would be an uncanny body.

Comments made in response to early sound films indicate that the figures in the films could appear ghostly. Ghostliness suggests a lack of physical substance, the semi-transparent wispieness of an apparition. Possibly, such an impression was helped along by viewers' increased screen awareness, which would have made the figures seem as flat as shadows. Also, however, the incredible *vividness* that synchronized speech could impart to figures—enough to make Hall write that Martinelli seemed ready to burst through the screen and to make Green write that watching Hays “was like watching a man flying without wings”—suggests that the impressions of bloodlessness might have been experienced *in combination with* sensations of the enhanced three-dimensionality of the vocalizing figures.⁷⁰ This would help to explain why the figures in silent films seemed, to Bakshy, “more phantom-like, but no less expansive and penetrating” than the figures in sound films. A possible composite sensation, then, one built out of both the ghostliness and the third-dimension effects of the sound, might have been that the filmed human figure now bore a resemblance to a living human corpse.⁷¹

The word “uncanny” has meanings that range from simply “incredible” to Tzvetan Todorov's quite narrow and precise use of the term to classify, in fiction, an apparently supernatural phenomenon that turns out to have a rational explanation.⁷² The most useful sense of the term from the standpoint of the phenomenon that we have been observing is Freud's, although much that

intrigues him about this category of feeling is not relevant here. Mainly, we can borrow two points he makes. First, in his catalog of possible triggers of uncanny sensations, Freud includes two he takes from a 1906 essay by Ernst Jentsch. These are inanimate objects that momentarily appear to be alive and, conversely, animate ones that momentarily appear not to be alive.⁷³ The latter impression corresponds roughly to what I am calling the uncanny body effect of early sound film. A second idea of Freud's that sheds light on the phenomenon is one he takes from Schelling, which is that the “*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light.”⁷⁴ If the uncanny of early sound film marked a “return of the repressed,” then what returned was the uncanny of early film.⁷⁵ The mechanical marvel that Gorky and many of his contemporaries found disturbing became disturbing again, and it remained so until Hollywood and its audiences learned to adjust to synchronized sound.

Two things that sound disturbed were the internal formal balance and the viewing habits that together help to determine what is salient in typical Hollywood films. In so doing, sound encroached upon what Jean-Louis Comolli and others have termed the “ideology of the visible.” According to Comolli, what is visible in classical films is ideologically potent in part because it effectively suppresses what is “invisible” in the films, among which Comolli includes such normally unobtrusive discursive elements as the edges of the frame.⁷⁶ Significantly, many such elements, which were not unobtrusive in the early cinema period, returned to the forefront of general viewing in the early sound period. This is precisely the danger that Mary Ann Doane finds film sound embodying. However, for her it is *off*-screen sound that harbors the potential to expose the disunified and inorganic nature of the cinema.⁷⁷ Synchronized sound, on the other hand, “binds the voice to a body in a unity whose immediacy can only be perceived as a given.”⁷⁸ It is just this effect of synchronization that filmmakers could not take for granted during the sound transition, when the technique could function to expose the flatness, the lack of color, and the lifelessness of the filmic world and its inhabitants.

During the sound transition, traditionally neutral elements of cinema could constitute a kind of interference that, briefly, had the power not only to impede film reception but to transform it. In this way, the coming of

sound provoked effects that call to mind certain uncanny sensations that, Jeffrey Sconce finds, electronic media from telegraphy to the Internet have historically provoked. He charts the shifting conceptions of “presence” that have been associated with these media at various times, including perennial fears and fantasies that these media can harbor, transport, and give form to *unearthly* presences. While he mainly deals with notions of “presence” that are specific to *electronic* media (revolving around, for example, ideas about simultaneity and about signal transmissions across vast distances), Sconce nevertheless raises issues that suggest an affinity between the “haunted media” that are his focus and the cinema of the sound transition.

For example, some wireless radio enthusiasts claimed that by tuning between stations it was possible to pick up communications from the dead. (One book on the subject was titled *The Inaudible Made Audible*.)⁷⁹ What sounded to skeptics like hissing static sounded to believers like messages from the beyond. Another phenomenon Sconce describes is “television ghosts,” signal interference that resulted in phantom doubles shadowing the “live” figures on the small screen.⁸⁰ The “dirt” in these media, everything about them that was supposed to be invisible and marginal, coalesced in these instances to form some of the more compelling manifestations that these media were capable of producing. So it was with film in the early years of its history before the novelty of the medium wore off and the cinema of narrative integration began channeling the viewing experience along increasingly regulated and earthly pathways. With the advent of sound, some of these counterproductive (from the standpoint of Hollywood’s primary interests) viewing energies resurfaced and experienced a brief, comparatively free rein.

Conclusion

Lock yourself in a windowless room alone, turn out the light, and put your radio on in such a way that all you get is screams and moans and unearthly noises produced by static. Unless you are the rare exception, you will very hastily switch on the light, fully expecting to see some terrifying intruder in the empty room with you.

—“Director of ‘The Bride of Frankenstein’ Tells All,”
pressbook for *The Bride of Frankenstein*
(James Whale, 1935)⁸¹

These viewing energies were not counterproductive from the standpoint of *every* Hollywood interest, however. Early in 1931, Universal Pictures took a gamble and brought to the screen an adaptation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (Tod Browning). In this film, which appeared, according to Crafton’s periodization, three months before the close of the sound transition, Bela Lugosi intones his lines in the thickly accented and gloriously offbeat manner that has since endeared him to many fans.⁸² Surely he sounded even stranger to viewers who were watching and listening to him at a time when synchronized speech of *any* kind could still produce creepy sensations of otherworldliness. Later the same year, the studio brought out an adaptation of *Frankenstein* (James Whale), which introduced the monster to viewers in a series of atypical axial cut-ins that thrust his grotesque head forward all the way into an extreme close-up. Were these films reactivating and codifying viewers’ fast-receding emotional memory of the uncanny bodies of the transition cinema? What about the zombies and the mummy that were soon to follow? All I have the space to do here is to raise these few questions and possibilities for exploring the formative influence of the coming of sound on the development of the horror film as a full-blown genre in American cinema.⁸³ The pioneers at Universal were filmmakers, but they were also film viewers. Their experiences as such might have influenced the choices they made as they brought to semilife those first undead creatures of the sound era.

NOTES

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1. “George Bernard Shaw—Fox Movietone,” *Photoplay* September 1928: 57. Similarly, Mordaunt Hall wrote that the film “does give one Mr. Shaw’s true personality by an unimportant little chat” (“The Reaction of the Public to Motion Pictures with Sound,” *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 12.35 [meeting of 24–28 September 1928]: 608).

2. Hal Hall, “Some Talkie Observations” (interview of William A. Seiter), *American Cinematographer* 11.2 (June 1930): 19.

3. Alexander Bakshy, “The Movie Scene: Notes on Sound and Silence,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* February 1929: 102.

4. “Facts about Talking Pictures and Instruments—No. 4,” *Harrison’s Reports* 8 September 1928: 144.

5. Fitzhugh Green, *The Film Finds Its Tongue* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1929; reprint, 1971) 12.

6. H. G. Knox, "Wide Range Sound: What It Is and What It Means to the Theatre," *Motion Picture Herald* 27 August 1932: Better Theatres sec., 15.
7. "Tenderloin," *Variety* 21 March 1928: 18.
8. Alexander Bakshy, "The Shrinking of Personality," *Nation* 27 May 1931: 590.
9. Rush, "Vitaphone Reviews," *Variety* 23 March 1927: 15.
10. Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, trans. Alan Bodger (London: Routledge, 1994) 216–17. See also Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915*, vol. 2, *History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 93–95.
11. The bush reference is from Rémy de Gourmont, "Epilogues: Cinematograph" (1907), quoted in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology*, vol. 1, 1907–29 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988) 47. (For a different translation of the same passage, see Tsivian 109.) The wave reference is from the *New York Dramatic Mirror* 2 May 1896, quoted in George C. Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1966) 16. The fingers reference is from Maxim Gorky, review of the Lumière program at the Nizhni-Novgorod Fair (1896), reprinted in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960) 408.
12. See Tsivian 135–61, 177–215 for his chapters on "The Reception of the Moving Image" and "The Reception of Narrative Devices," respectively.
13. J. Douglas Gomery, "The Coming of Sound to the American Cinema: A History of the Transformation of an Industry," diss., U of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975, 285.
14. According to Gomery, at the beginning of 1931 there were approximately fifteen hundred disc-only theaters in the United States (285).
15. David Barrist, "The Flop of the Talking Movie," *Harrison's Reports* 24 September 1927: 153.
16. "Facts about Talking Pictures and Instruments—No. 10," *Harrison's Reports* 22 December 1928: 201.
17. H. G. Knox, "Bewildering Problems of Sound," *New York Times* 21 December 1930: sec. 8, 6. A film historian in 1931 remembered the first Vitaphone films as "a squeaky, squawky assemblage of crude noises" (Benjamin B. Hampton, *A History of the Movies* [New York: Vici Friede Publishers, 1931] 378).
18. Hampton 385.
19. If Hampton could find improvements in the quality of the recorded voice estimable by 1927, the *Nation* could still find in early 1930 that "voices sound far more human than they did six months ago" ("The Talkies' Future," *Nation* 15 January 1930: 61).
20. Mordaunt Hall, "Amazing Invention Coupling Sound with Screen Images Stirs Audiences," *New York Times* 15 August 1926: sec. 7, 2.
21. "Tenderloin" 18.
22. "Napoleon's Barber," *Photoplay* January 1929: 93.
23. Quoted in René Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1972) 128.
24. Rick Altman, "Sound Space," *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992) 48.
25. Myrtle Gebhart, "Voices Are Tested," *Picture Play* July 1928: 104. Similar complaints about the 1928 film *Warming Up* (Fred Newmeyer) are noted in Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931*, vol. 4, *History of the American Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997) 284. Crafton also considers a film from the same year in which the "camera flits giddily through the silent scenes in Coney Island but freezes rock-steady in the talking ones, causing an abrupt change in visual style" (308).
26. Chapin Hall, "Talking Films Try Movie Men's Souls," *New York Times* 8 July 1928: sec. 3, 2.
27. *Exhibitors Herald-World* noted in late 1930 that "motion picture audiences are well aware of the hissing or scratching sound which becomes audible as soon as the sound apparatus is switched on. In other words, during the silent introductory title of a picture, everything is quiet. Just before the recorded portions of the film start, listeners are warned of the coming sound by the scraping ground noise coming from the screen" ("Hissing and Scratching Ended by New Process, Asserts Erpi," *Exhibitors Herald-World* 6 December 1930: 17). Examples of such noises can be heard in *Madame X* (Lionel Barrymore, 1929) and *Anna Christie* (Clarence Brown, 1930).
28. Problems included the impossibility of editing synchronized sound-on-disc film sequences and the jumps in sound levels and ground noise that could result from editing sound-on-film sequences. Some of these problems are discussed in J. Garrick Eisenberg, "Mechanics of the Talking Movies," *Projection Engineering* 1.3 (November 1929): 22, 23. In the case of sound-on-film editing, the difficulties would be substantially alleviated by the introduction of Western Electric Noiseless Recording in 1930.
29. On the increased costs of production during the period and how the studios dealt with them, see Alexander Walker, *The Shattered Silents* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1979) 93–97. Walker notes that Paramount's response to the cost increases included setting the maximum number of filmed takes that a director could order printed to two (93).
30. See James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000) 111.
31. Sloppy postdubbing: "Warming Up," *Harrison's Reports* 21 July 1928: 114. Dubbed-in foreign speech: Heinrich Fraenkel, "Can Industry Stay International? The Multilingual Problem and What to Do about It," *Motion Picture Herald* 31 January 1931: 58. Crafton describes 1928 feature films that "were perceived as properly using speech as a special effect, not as an integral part of the mise-en-scène" (115). He also notes that, in the initial phase of critical consideration of the voice in relation to the image, the voice was regarded as separate from the actor's body, something with merely a surplus value (see 298, 447, 455–56, 460, 478, 511). Finally, Lastra considers various ways in which "synchronization" has been regarded as a kind of *performance* during both the silent and sound eras (120).
32. William A. Johnston, "The Public and Sound Pictures," *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 12.35 (meeting of 24–28 September 1928): 615.
33. Walker 48.
34. "The Psychology of Sounds in Screen Presentations," *Projection Engineering* 2.4 (April 1930): 21.
35. Hall, "Amazing Invention" 2.
36. Eileen Creelman, *N.Y. American*, quoted in the advertisement "Warner Bros. Present Vitaphone," *Film Daily* 17 August 1926: 6.
37. See Tsivian 49–52, 116–21.

38. Cyril Brown, "Speech to Movies by the Phonofilm," *New York Times* 17 August 1922: 6.
39. Mordaunt Hall, "Vitaphone Stirs as Talking Movie," *New York Times* 7 August 1926: 6.
40. Tsivian 153–56.
41. Crafton 490.
42. Green 11.
43. Ruth Russell, "Voice Is Given to Shadows of Silver Screen," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 16 September 1926: 31.
44. "George Bernard Shaw—Fox Movietone" 57.
45. This anecdote is related in Walker 23.
46. Lewis W. Physioc, "Technique of the Talkies," *American Cinematographer* 9.5 (August 1928): 24.
47. James O. Spearing, "Now the Movies Go Back to Their School Days," *New York Times* 19 August 1928: 12.
48. Bernard Brown, *Talking Pictures* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1931) 289.
49. For example, Tsivian quotes a critic writing in 1913: "Imagine what it is like to see a huge nose, a vast mouth, monstrous whites of eyes, unnaturally protruding lips, all leering down at you. And when all these bits of a face belonging to a visitor from outer space begin to move, to express profound emotion—well, the sadder the scene is meant to be, the more grotesque and totally ridiculous is the effect" (131). He also quotes a critic writing in 1911: "A gigantic head suddenly filled the whole scene, with the slightest movement of the blood-vessels, the tiniest flickering of the eyes, the twitching of the lips, all startlingly clear" (198).
50. Tsivian 198–99.
51. On the forward-moving camera, see Tsivian 205–06. On the perception of the dangerous and mysterious nature of the frame's edges, see Tsivian 146–47 and Gorky 407, 408.
52. See, for example, Tsivian 155–56, 206.
53. One might doubt that very many *general* viewing responses to early films can be found reflected in the densely imaginative prose of this Russian Symbolist writer. Tsivian argues that Gorky's review, like other written statements on the cinema dating from the period, does in fact tell us about universal tendencies of early film viewing, including one to project elements of cinematic discourse onto the diegetic world (149, 155–56). Tom Gunning also believes that Gorky's response can be so generalized. He writes that "Gorky's unease before motion pictures may be of a peculiarly sophisticated sort, but it expresses an ambivalent experience of animated pictures that was shared by many early viewers" (Tom Gunning, "'Animated Pictures': Tales of Cinema's Forgotten Future after 100 Years of Films," *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams [London: Arnold, 2000] 326).
54. Gorky 407.
55. Hall, "The Reaction of the Public" 605–06.
56. "The Jazz Singer," *Harrison's Reports* 22 October 1927: 171.
57. "Sounds in a Studio," *New York Times* 29 June 1930: sec. 8, 3.
58. "Phonofilm Shown in Rivoli Theatre," *New York Times* 16 April 1923: 20.
59. Hall, "The Reaction of the Public" 607. As Steven Connor writes, "[T]he moving image provided with a voice . . . is suddenly given life, dimension, actuality, colour: in short, it is animated" (*Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000] 11).
60. The same was observed when movement was added to still photography. Of some figures in a Lumière film, Gorky wrote that "their smiles are lifeless, even though their movements are full of living energy and are so swift as to be almost imperceptible" (407). Also, Jeffrey Sconce, writing about developments in electronic media beginning with television, describes "the first beings to populate the strange, ambiguous electrical space of these visual media, manifestly present yet strangely absent, apparently 'living' and yet something less than 'alive'" (*Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* [Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000] 127).
61. Hall wrote that "so far the shadow with a voice is a novelty, just as the silent picture was a novelty in the old days. It remains for the producers to consider seriously the new device and bend their efforts to making productions that will cause the audiences, in the interest in the story, to forget that they are gazing upon talking shadows" ("The Reaction of the Public" 604). A journalist writing in the *Nation* wrote that "the irrepressible technician has at last succeeded in teaching shadows to talk" ("Hollywood Speaks," *Nation* 26 September 1928: 285). The *Chicago Tribune* titled its review of the first Vitaphone program "Voice Is Given to Shadows of Silver Screen" (Russell 31). In 1947 Theodor Adorno and Hans Eisler, in *Composing for the Films*, speculated that music was added to the silent film to alleviate its ghostly qualities; they added that "the sound pictures have changed this original function of music less than might be imagined. *For the talking picture, too, is mute.* The characters in it are not speaking people but speaking effigies, endowed with all the features of the pictorial, the photographic two-dimensionality, the lack of spatial depth. Their bodiless mouths utter words in a way that must seem disquieting to anyone uninformed" (*Composing for the Films* [Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1947; reprint, 1971] 76).
62. Quoted in Tsivian 102. The next quoted sentence reads: "People sing and dance; the singing is loud, but you can't hear the shuffling sound of the dancing."
63. F. H. Richardson, "New Sound System," *Motion Picture Herald* 17 January 1931: 65.
64. Rob Wagner, "Photo-Static," *Collier's* 23 February 1929: 26.
65. Luigi Pirandello, "Pirandello Views the 'Talkies,'" *New York Times* 28 July 1929: sec. 5, 12–13.
66. Alexander Bakshy, "A Year of Talkies," *Nation* 26 June 1929: 773.
67. From an e-mail to the author by Karan Sheldon of Northeast Historic Film. She is quoting an unpublished 1990–91 survey on Maine cinema-going. The comment can also be found in Crafton 6. Green was another who described a "'hollowness' of recording" and the sometimes muffled quality of the voice (169–70).
68. Again, Gorky provides the key text: "If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour. Everything there—the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air—is dipped in monotonous grey. Grey rays of the sun across the grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces, and the leaves of the trees are ashen grey. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre" (407).
69. See, for example, Gunning 316–31, especially 326, on how the addition of movement to still photographs made what was perceived to be still lacking stand out. Also see Tsivian 6–9, 82–83, 111; Gunning's foreword to Tsivian's book, xxi.
70. Green 12.

71. This is precisely the metaphor that Tom Gunning has recently invoked to nuance earlier comments he has made about ambivalent viewing responses to the cinematic image during the early film period (“The Ghost in the Machine: Animated Pictures at the Haunted Hotel of Early Cinema,” *Living Pictures* 1.1 [2001]: 14–16).

72. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (1970; reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975) 41.

73. Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955) 226. See also Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” (1906), trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2.1 (1995): 7–16, 11.

74. Freud 224.

75. Rick Altman makes a similar claim when he writes that “*the coming of sound represents the return of the silent cinema’s repressed*,” by which he means a “return to the theatrical model” (“The Evolution of Sound Technology,” *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton [New York: Columbia UP, 1985] 51; originally published in 1980).

76. Jean-Louis Comolli, “Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field,” pt. 1, *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols, vol. 2 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 45; originally published in 1971.

77. Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth

Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 167; originally published in 1980.

78. Doane 172.

79. Sconce 85.

80. Sconce 124–25.

81. Reproduced in Philip J. Riley, ed., *The Bride of Frankenstein*, vol. 2, Universal Filmstrips Series, Classic Horror Films (Absecon, NJ: MagicImage Filmbooks, 1989).

82. According to Crafton, the end of the transition coincided with the end of the 1930–31 release season (release seasons ran from summer to spring) (267).

83. Such an approach to historicizing the origins of the genre would emphasize the status of the horror film as, specifically, a work of the cinema. It would ask how this status shaped the genre’s initial formulation and subsequent development and in what ways it makes horror films different from, say, works of gothic literary fiction. A call for just this approach to film genres, and to horror films in particular, is made in Tom Gunning, “‘Those Drawn with a Very Fine Camel’s Hair Brush’: The Origins of Film Genres,” *Iris* 20 (fall 1995): 49–60. My ideas here are indebted to this important essay. Also, attempts to relate specific 1930s horror films to the sound transition would benefit from a close consideration of Sconce’s thought-provoking book, for example, where, under the heading “Monsters in the Static,” he describes a fascinating subgenre of television and print science-fiction texts (139–47).