

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 274

“Start Talking and Stop Moving”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“American capitalism finds its sharpest and most expressive reflection in the American cinema.”

Sergei Eisenstein.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 274. Start Talking and Stop Moving.

We’ve discussed motion pictures several times in this podcast, most recently in episode 242. And through these discussions, I’ve kept reminding you that films of this era were silent films. You may well have wondered why silent films persisted as long as they did. The technology of sound recording emerged in the late 19th century, at the same time as the technology of moving pictures. Yet it would take more than thirty years before these two technologies would combine to create talking pictures.

There were three technical problems that needed to be overcome to make talking pictures a reality. First, there was the problem of reproducing sound at a sufficient volume. Early phonographs were mechanical devices. They weren’t very loud. Only one or two people at a time could really listen to them. This was okay for Thomas Edison’s Kinetoscope, which was a motion picture machine in a cabinet meant to be viewed by just one person at a time, and Edison did indeed experiment with adding sound to it, creating what he called a Kinetophone.

But the future of motion pictures was in projecting them onto a screen to be viewed by dozens of people at a time, and later hundreds, and later still, thousands. Playback of recorded sound just wasn’t loud enough to fill those kinds of spaces. This began to change with the advent of vacuum tube amplification. By the 1920s, it was indeed possible to produce electronic sound loud enough to be heard in a packed theatre. You may recall episode 237, when I described how people sat in theatres to listen to the 1921 world heavyweight championship match between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier, brought to them over the radio by RCA.

The second problem was the quality of the sound recordings. Motion picture images were pretty sharp and clear by 1900, but sound recordings were much poorer in quality. Mechanical recording offered only a limited frequency response, which is what gives them that tinny quality we all recognize from old recordings. By the 1920s, though, this problem had also been solved, and sound recordings from that point forward would have far better fidelity.

It is the third problem that represented the real technical hurdle: synchronization. If you intend to film moving images and record sound at the same time, then you need to keep them in sync when you play them back. Synchronization of sound and images is a problem that bedevils us even today, as anyone who has ever edited digital video or tried to run the output of a blu-ray player through a separate amplifier can attest. The human eye and ear and brain are surprisingly sensitive to even small synchronization errors in say, watching an object fall to the floor and hearing the crash, or in seeing a person's lips move and listening to their voice. A discrepancy of only one or two motion picture frames will make a noticeable difference and will spoil the illusion the film is meant to create.

The earliest attempts to solve this problem involved motion picture projectors and phonographs rigged with an ingenious system of gears or pulleys that locked them together at the same speed, preserving the synchronization. Later came an entirely different technology based on recording the sound on the film. The sound being recorded could be used to control the brightness of a light; the light becomes bright when the sound is loud and dims to nothing when the sound goes quiet. This fluctuating light could then be recorded on motion picture film as a separate track, called a soundtrack, which could be played back along with the moving pictures to reverse the process. The light shining through the film could drive an amplifier that would reproduce the sounds. Synchronization happens automatically, because the pictures and the sound are kept together on the same strip of film.

The earliest experiments with this process began around 1900 in Europe, but the person who first brought it to the public was American inventor Lee de Forest, whom we met back in episode 52. De Forest invented the triode vacuum tube, which made possible electronic amplification, long distance telephone, and commercial radio. By 1919, the prickly de Forest, who seemed to have a lot of trouble working with other people and had already made and lost two or three fortunes, abandoned his earlier work in telephone and radio to concentrate on perfecting the process of recording sound on film. That year he patented a process he called Phonofilm, and in April 1923 he presented an exhibition of short films that included sound. In 1924, de Forest made a film of President Coolidge speaking on the White House lawn. Coolidge gave an incredibly dull little talk on the importance of cutting government spending, because of course he did. This is Calvin Coolidge we're talking about. I'll post the film on the website, if you can bear to watch it.

De Forest took his sound films on a tour of the United States to introduce the public to the idea of talking pictures. In doing this, he was also greatly annoying the physicist Theodore Case, who had done most of the actual work of developing Phonofilm. Case attended de Forest's

presentation in 1923 and was irked that his own name and contributions were never mentioned, which led to a falling out between the two. Case had the better of the argument, since he held most of the patents. De Forest went bankrupt once again, and now it was Case pushing the Phonofilm technology.

This is where Lee de Forest exits our narrative, although de Forest himself has many years still ahead of him. He died in 1961 at the age of 87. As a side note, since I've already outed myself as a Trekkie in this podcast, I will address the question that is no doubt on the mind of every Trekkie listening: The answer is yes. In 1920, the Reverend Ernest David Kelley and his wife Clara, of Toccoa, Georgia, became parents of a baby boy. They named him Jackson DeForest Kelley, in honor of Lee de Forest. After serving in the US Army Air Force during the Second World War, the young man made a career for himself in film and television as DeForest Kelley. He mostly played bad guys until he was cast against type in 1966 in the role for which he is now best remembered: the gruff but kindly Dr. Leonard McCoy on *Star Trek*.

Anyway, in 1926, Theodore Case sold the Phonofilm business and the underlying patents to William Fox of Fox Film, where it was rebranded as Movietone. The Fox studio had begun producing newsreels in 1919; these were short films about newsworthy current events that were shown in theaters along with feature films and branded as Fox News. After acquiring Movietone, Fox's newsreels began incorporating sound; these newer talking newsreels were branded Fox Movietone News. In 1927, Fox Movietone News scored an early coup by producing a sound newsreel of Charles Lindbergh's takeoff from Roosevelt Field on Long Island, the beginning of his celebrated flight to Paris, and showing it at the Roxy Theater in New York City later that very same day. Soon after came Fox Movietone newsreels of Lindbergh's triumphant return to the United States following the completion of his flight.

The Lindbergh newsreels were received almost as enthusiastically as Lindbergh himself, and this helped to put sound films on the map. The Movietone technology was particularly well-suited to newsreels, because it needed only a relatively simple and portable film camera. It could easily be taken out into the real world to film and record in the field.

With motion pictures plus sound becoming technically feasible by the mid 1920s, you might expect these "talking pictures" to revolutionize Hollywood feature films. But the major film studios were cool to the new technology. Why? Because the studios owned most of the theaters their films were shown in. There were over 20,000 movie theaters in the United States at the time, many of them small venues in small towns and rural locations, and it would have cost fifteen hundred dollars per theater to upgrade them to show films with sound. That represented a huge new investment in motion pictures at a time when the industry was already making money hand over fist with silent films. Where was the incentive? Also, if you're going to invest in upgrading your theaters for sound, you have to decide which technology to use, and the choice wasn't obvious.

There were also artistic arguments against the new technology. Silent film was a medium that had developed into its own unique art form, with its own tropes, its own vocabulary, its own style. Adding sound would take away much of what made cinema unique and reduce motion pictures into flat stage shows. Some called the idea vulgar and degenerate. A Russian film critic of the time declared that “Talking film is as little needed as a singing book.” I can’t help but take notice of the peculiar character of the motion picture industry, especially Hollywood, which prides itself on setting trends, of constantly offering newer and better entertainments, the industry that turned the introductory clause “Never before in the history of motion pictures...” into a routine cliché, is in fact pretty conservative, when you get down to the fundamentals of filmmaking.

When a Hollywood studio finally did release the first feature film with sound, it did not come from any of the major studios, such as Paramount or MGM or Universal, but from the struggling, second-tier film studio Warner Brothers. One of the four Warner brothers, Sam, the second-youngest, had entered into a partnership with Western Electric, AT&T’s electronics subsidiary, to form a company called Vitaphone, to make talking pictures. Vitaphone, unlike Movietone, was based on the synchronized phonograph technology. You might wonder why anyone was still bothering with synchronized records by this time, when self-synchronizing soundtracks were available and easier to use, but these early film soundtrack systems did not have the same fidelity as a phonograph. Records still offered superior sound, which was especially important if you wanted music in your picture.

Sam Warner’s older brother Harry, who ran the studio, was lukewarm on the Vitaphone project. He saw it primarily as a way to add background music to short films. In August 1926, Warner Brothers released the first feature film with sound, *Don Juan*, starring John Barrymore. The sound was a musical score, performed by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, along with a few sound effects, which were added into what was otherwise a typical silent film. The advantage in using sound in this way was that if necessary, you could omit the music and effects and the picture could still be shown in any of the vast majority of American theaters that *weren’t* wired for sound...as an ordinary silent film.

Don Juan grossed about \$1.5 million, making it Warner Brothers’ most successful film, but it had been expensive to make and had failed to impress the critics. It had also failed to impress Harry Warner, who remained unconvinced by the new technology. It was only after little brother Sam flirted with a deal with Adolph Zukor, under which Sam Warner and Vitaphone would jump ship and join Zukor’s Paramount Studios, that Harry and the studio agreed to back a new and more ambitious sound film, based on a project already in development at Warner Brothers: *The Jazz Singer*.

[music: Kahn, Erdman, and Russo, “Toot Toot, Tootsie, Goo’bye”]

The name Al Jolson has already come up in the podcast a few times, in episodes 227 and 244, most recently, but I haven't introduced him to you formally yet. He was born Asa Yoelson in 1885 in a Jewish village called Srednik in the Russian Empire, in what is today Lithuania. His father, Moses Yoelson was a rabbi and a cantor, that is, a singer who leads Jewish congregations in sung prayers. In 1891, Moses emigrated to the United States and later sent for his family after he secured steady work as a cantor for a synagogue in Washington, DC.

Asa Yoelson anglicized his name to Al Jolson and began his career as an entertainer in the circus when he was still a teenager. He moved into vaudeville, where he made a name for himself performing as a minstrel singer in blackface. He was a hit and went on to musical theatre on Broadway, where he would be the biggest name in show business for the next fifteen years, almost always in blackface, appearing in shows built around him and his particular singing talents, such as 1916's *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.*, in which he played Friday, in blackface, and 1918's *Sinbad*, a show based on the tales of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which he played a character transported into various exotic settings, in blackface. It was this show that featured Jolson singing "Swanee," music by George Gershwin, which became Gershwin's first big hit, as you already know.

Jolson performed in *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.* on a national tour in 1917, which included a performance in Champaign, Illinois. In the audience that night was a senior at the University of Illinois, a New York native named Samson Raphaelson. Raphaelson later recalled how he was taken aback by the powerful expression of emotion in Jolson's singing and how it reminded him of synagogue cantors. A few years later, Raphaelson wrote a short story, titled "The Day of Atonement," inspired by Al Jolson's real life story. "The Day of Atonement" is about a young Jewish man named Jakie Rabinowitz who is torn between following in his father's footsteps as a cantor and a career as a jazz singer.

The story was published in 1922. Afterward, Raphaelson rewrote the story into a stage play, *The Jazz Singer*, which opened on Broadway in 1925, starring an up-and-coming Jewish-American actor and singer named George Jessel. Warner Brothers had optioned the film rights to *The Jazz Singer*. It was originally intended to be a silent film with a modest budget, with Jessel to reprise the title role for a modest salary. There is no singing in the play, and of course no singing was originally contemplated for the film.

When Warners revised their plans and decided to make *The Jazz Singer* into a talking picture, Jessel became unhappy with the project, first, because he was now expected to sing as well as act, and for no additional money, and second, because the studio softened the ending of the play. The title character in the play becomes estranged from his father, but they reconcile when the father is on his deathbed and his son walks away from his Broadway debut, ending his stage career, so he can go to the synagogue on Yom Kippur and sing "Kol Nidre" in his father's stead.

For the film version, the studio added a scene where his mother attends one of the title character's performances and decides that this is where God meant for her son to be—singing in blackface, sure—and the son gets to keep his singing career, although he still gets a deathbed reconciliation with his father. And so, Warners let Jessel out of his contract. Jessel would go on to have a reasonably successful career acting, singing, and doing comedy in film, on stage and radio and later television, often as “Georgie” Jessel. He died in 1981. Warners likely drove him away deliberately, because for their big project, the world's first musical feature film with sound, they wanted a bigger name, so they went full circle and signed Al Jolson for the title role, the man upon whose life story the film is based.

The Warner brothers essentially bet the studio on the film. It cost almost half a million dollars to produce, at a time when they were losing out in the competition with the bigger studios. A number of popular songs were incorporated into the film, including “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee,” “Toot, Toot, Tootsie, Goo’Bye,” “Blue Skies,” by Irving Berlin, and most famously, “My Mammy,” as well as traditional Jewish liturgical songs and chants such as “Kol Nidre” and “Kaddish.”

The Jazz Singer premiered on October 6, 1927, which was Yom Kippur Eve, at the Warner Theatre in New York City, the studio's flagship theater. Sadly, none of the Warner Brothers themselves attended the premiere, as Sam Warner, whose dedication to the Vitaphone project had made the film possible, passed away the day before from complications of a sinus infection. He was 40 years old. His long hours of work on *The Jazz Singer* probably contributed to his untimely death.

The picture was a big success. It grossed about \$2.5 million worldwide, which was a lot of money at the time, especially for a smaller studio like Warners. It earned Warners a substantial profit and helped build it into a major studio. Critics were lukewarm to the film, though they all praised Al Jolson's singing, if not always his acting. The Jewish- and African-American presses mostly praised the film. Audiences loved it. Singing and spoken dialog added a whole new dimension to the motion picture experience, making it feel more real than ever before, as if we were eavesdropping on the private lives of the characters.

Life magazine's film critic said after seeing *The Jazz Singer* that “the end of silent drama is in sight.” Not everyone agreed, and although the film created a huge demand for talking feature films, it would take some five years for the industry to fully transition. Talking pictures were more expensive. The technology was new and needed work. And most important, it would take time and a lot of money to convert all those theaters for sound. In the interim, a lot of pictures got made like *Don Juan*, with sound available, but also viewable without sound for theaters that lacked the equipment.

I've talked many times on this podcast about the pervasive racism in America at this time, including the role of blackface in the entertainments of the period, from *Birth of a Nation* to

Amos n Andy, which premiered just a few months after *The Jazz Singer*. Like *Birth of a Nation* and like *Amos n Andy*, *The Jazz Singer* was yet another milestone in American popular culture marred by racism.

But *The Jazz Singer* is different. Here blackface is not just an incidental, a taken-for-granted feature. It is itself an element of the story. For this is a story of a young immigrant torn between the ways of his ancestors and his desire to become successful in the larger American culture, a tale often told in this country, in some form or another. In this case, blackface serves as a metaphor for the protagonist setting aside the identity he was born with and “putting on an American face,” so to speak. In the film, the moment when the title character begins to put on his makeup plays as the emotional climax of the story.

Another, less generous, way of thinking about this film is that it symbolically represents a Jewish immigrant adopting a white American identity by doing the whitest thing imaginable: putting on blackface.

Whether you want to be generous with this film or not is up to you, but the way *The Jazz Singer* explores the intersection between white and Black America and the role of a new immigrant navigating America’s complex and fraught racial lines provides enough material for a thousand master’s theses.

Apart from the racial dimension, *The Jazz Singer* was and is a tremendous influence on Hollywood films, particularly the genre known in the industry as a biopic, that is, a fictionalized biography of a real person, and I speak especially of biographies of entertainers. The trope of the famous entertainer who in the early days of their career had a particular vision for a particular new style of entertainment and doggedly pursues that vision despite family and friends who think it wrongheaded and try to talk them out of it, and is dramatically vindicated in the end when they become a huge success. Every biopic that ever told this often-told story owes something to the film that told it first: *The Jazz Singer*.

[music: DeSylva, Meyer, and Jolson, “California, Here I Come”]

Talking pictures also posed serious technological challenges inside the studios. The motion picture cameras of the time were noisy machines. That hadn’t mattered in silent films, but now the cameras had to be boxed up inside soundproofing material and pulled as far away from the actors as possible during filming.

The microphones of the age were big, clunky, and not especially sensitive. They required thick cables to connect them with the recording equipment. These microphones had to be installed on the motion picture set, as close to the actors as possible, but out of view of the camera. Set designers hid them in the furniture or scenery; costume designers looked for ways to sew them into clothing. You had to hide the cables, too. And once suitable hiding places had been found for the microphones, where they were out of sight but still able to pick up the actors’ voices, then

the actors had to be coached to speak in the direction of the concealed microphone and not to move around too much.

Which is why it is said of this moment that when pictures began talking, they stopped moving. One of the hallmarks of silent films was motion. Frenetic motion. Silent films are full of action: car chases, pursuits, fights, and endless crazy slapstick stunts. The first talking pictures, with stationary actors filmed by a static camera at some distance, did not benefit from the comparison.

Talking pictures demanded a different style of performance, and many silent film actors and directors were unable to make the transition successfully. Directors were stymied by their inability to give spoken instructions to the actors as they were being filmed. Some actors had trouble memorizing lines, or had unpleasant voices, or heavy accents. Many of these actors couldn't make it in the new industry, or retired rather than try. They were replaced with an influx of stage actors who already had mastered the skills necessary to succeed in the new medium.

Although *The Jazz Singer* achieved its success through Vitaphone, which used phonograph technology, the quality of soundtracks recorded on film got better over time until they displaced the more complex and delicate Vitaphone system. Soon most studios were using the Movietone system, licensed from AT&T's Western Electric subsidiary. This did not sit well with AT&T's partner and archrival, RCA, which had developed its own sound-on-film system, called Photophone. In order to challenge Western Electric's monopoly, RCA did a deal with Boston businessman and investor Joseph Kennedy. Kennedy had taken an interest in the motion picture business in the late Twenties. He bought a struggling chain of vaudeville theaters and a couple of smaller Hollywood studios, intent on piecing together a new film company capable of competing with the established studios. In 1927, following the success of *The Jazz Singer*, RCA general manager David Sarnoff approached Kennedy and they worked out a deal under which RCA would put a substantial investment into Kennedy's studio in exchange for the new studio committing to RCA's Photophone technology for all of its pictures.

The final outcome of this series of mergers and acquisitions was RKO Radio Pictures, which opened for business in 1928. Over the following two decades, RKO would rise to compete on the level of Hollywood's biggest and most important studios. It also made Joseph Kennedy a rich man, or perhaps I should say a richer man. It paid off for RCA too. Its Photophone technology would eventually displace its rivals and become the industry standard.

The standardization of sound technology also forced a standardization of frame rate. Silent films were mostly, but not exclusively, shot at 16 frames per second. This was as fast as the earliest cameras could operate and about the bare minimum you can get away with and still maintain the illusion of motion on the screen. Sound films would settle on the improved rate of 24 frames per second. This would remain the standard for motion pictures into the early 21st century, when films went digital.

And by the mid 1930s, the technical problems around producing sound films would mostly be resolved. A new generation of quieter film cameras with built-in soundproofing allowed for more variety in camera placement and movement. Directional microphones were developed, which could be aimed at the actor whose voice you wanted to record and not pick up so many extraneous sounds. The development of the microphone boom allowed for a microphone to be suspended over the actor's head, just out of the shot. A crew member could even move the boom back and forth between actors to pick up every line of a conversation or follow the actors as they moved around the set.

But the biggest breakthrough was dubbing, or postsynchronization. This is the technique of removing from the soundtrack actors' lines that don't come through clearly enough and replacing them with new recordings of the same line made by the same actor after the fact. It also allowed for removing noises that got into the film by mistake or adding sound effects.

The conversion of movie theaters to sound was very bad news for the musicians who used to provide in-house music for silent film theaters. An estimated 20,000 American musicians lost their jobs to talking pictures, and during the Great Depression, too.

The addition of sound also radically changed the kind of films Hollywood was producing. Anyone who's watched a movie made in the first decade or two after the introduction of sound has surely noticed how fast everyone talks in those pictures. It's as if Hollywood was trying to make up for all those years of silent films by producing an equal number of talking pictures with double the dialog.

Moving pictures plus sound created a sense of realism, which encouraged the production of gritty dramatizations of real life events and current social issues. You got the gangster films, like *Scarface* and *Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar*, which I mentioned in episode 232. You got prison films like 1930's *The Big House* and 1932's *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. You got pictures about newspaper reporters like Lewis Milestone's 1931 *The Front Page*, starring Adolphe Menjou and Frank Capra's 1932 *Platinum Blonde*, starring Loretta Young and Jean Harlow. Films like these relied heavily on slang and vernacular in the dialog to add to the sense of realism.

There were silent horror films, such as 1920's *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* from Germany and Universal Studios' 1925 *Phantom of the Opera*, but the genre really came into its own after the introduction of sound, which made possible eerie music and spooky noises that added a whole new level of creepiness, and Universal made a specialty out of horror films like 1931's *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* and 1932's *The Mummy*, as well as 1933's *The Invisible Man*, 1935's *Bride of Frankenstein*, 1941's *The Wolf Man* and so on. Also take note of 1933's *King Kong*, which was RKO Radio Pictures' first big hit.

The genre most dramatically changed by the introduction of sound was comedy. Silent comedy relied heavily on the visual humor of slapstick. When sound came in, slapstick became passé and

verbal comedy ruled the screens: rapid-fire puns and wisecracks and sassy comebacks. Charles Chaplin continued to make films into the sound era; they now had music and sound effects and even dialog for the other characters, although Chaplin's Little Tramp would remain mute and continue to express himself in slapstick. Slapstick would otherwise disappear from live action films and would henceforth find its niche in animation, which is a topic I am looking forward to discussing, someday.

Laurel and Hardy and W.C. Fields managed the transition into sound comedy reasonably well, and I have to give a nod to Howard Hawks, who directed the 1932 gangster film *Scarface*. Later in the Thirties, he became the undisputed master of the screwball comedy with 1938's *Bringing Up Baby*, starring Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant and 1940's *His Girl Friday*, starring Grant and Rosalind Russell, two films with more witty repartee than you can shake a stick at.

But the kings of motion picture comedy in the first decade after the introduction of sound have to be the Marx Brothers, whom I mentioned before in episode 243. They honed their mixture of song, music, and wisecracking skits in vaudeville, perfected it on Broadway, and now it was just what the film industry was looking for, a feature-length package of entertainments that couldn't have been done in a silent film.

Which brings me to musicals, a genre of film that didn't exist before the advent of sound. *The Jazz Singer* was itself a musical, and afterward Hollywood went all in on musicals like the string of hits director and choreographer Busby Berkeley made for Warner Brothers: *42nd Street*, *Footlight Parade*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Dames*, and *Fashions of 1934*.

But the biggest name in musicals in the Thirties was a dancer: Fred Astaire. He did a legendarily bad screen test for RKO Radio Pictures; the report supposedly summed him up like this: "Can't sing. Can't act. Balding. Can dance a little." Despite this inauspicious start, Astaire would become one of the biggest stars of the era after he teamed up with Ginger Rogers. Together they made nine hugely successful films for RKO in the space of five years, including *The Gay Divorcee*, *Top Hat*, *Shall We Dance*, and *Carefree*. Astaire directed his own dance routines, insisting on a signature style in which the camera moves along with the dancers in long shots, keeping the dancers' full bodies in the frame, and with as few cuts as possible. In contrast with Berkeley, whose dance routines relied on numbers and spectacle, Astaire's routines were intimate; he either danced alone or with Rogers.

The US motion picture industry was by far the dominant force in the form. This was a particular challenge for the industry in the United Kingdom, since US pictures were easily imported. UK law imposed quotas on its cinemas, requiring them to show a certain minimum number of British films, which led to the production of fast and cheap low-quality films known as "quota quickies." But the UK film industry began to show signs of life after the introduction of sound, beginning with its first domestic sound film: 1929's *Blackmail*, a thriller directed by Alfred Hitchcock, who gave himself a cameo in the film and would of course go on to a long and

successful career making more thrillers in the UK, such as 1934's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1935's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and 1936's *Sabotage* before being lured to Hollywood. Honorable mention too to Alexander Korda's 1933 film *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, starring Charles Laughton. This was the first British film to make a splash in the US market, where it was one of the highest-grossing films of the year.

The nation with the largest film industry after the United States was Germany. I talked about German film at some length in episode 241, where I told you that the first sound film made in Germany was *The Blue Angel* in 1930, which made an international sensation out of Marlene Dietrich. The year 1931 saw sound adaptations of the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and the musical stage play *Der Dreigroschenoper*, as well as Fritz Lang's thriller *M*, which made a star out of Jewish-Hungarian actor Peter Lorre.

During and after the rise of the Nazi Party to power, the best and brightest of German cinema would emigrate and build new lives and new careers in Hollywood, including Fritz Lang and Marlene Dietrich and Peter Lorre, among many others. For the rest of the Thirties, German cinema would mostly be light entertainment, though carefully vetted to make sure no one was sneaking in any antifascist messages. The most influential German filmmaker of this period was the documentarian Leni Riefenstahl, maker of 1935's *Triumph of the Will* and 1938's *Olympia*, about the Berlin Olympics. I'll have more to say about Riefenstahl and her films in a future episode; like *Birth of a Nation*, these are films deplorable for their content but nevertheless influential in their style.

The Soviet Union had its own film industry; I've already talked about Sergei Eisenstein's groundbreaking silent films *Battleship Potemkin*, and *October*, which offered a dramatic reenactment of the October Revolution, which was far less dramatic than the film made it out to be. Soviet filmmakers consciously studied epic American films like *Birth of a Nation* and adapted the style to enlighten the masses about the glories of revolutionary socialism.

Eisenstein spent nearly two years in the United States in 1930 and 1931, where he had been invited to make a film in Hollywood. That didn't pan out and he was regarded with suspicion in the USSR afterward, although his 1938 historical drama *Alexander Nevsky* was well received. The Soviet government resisted licensing Western sound technology and spearheaded the development of a domestic version, and the importation of Western films was banned altogether in 1931, out of fears they exposed the Soviet people to capitalist propaganda.

For the rest of the Thirties, Soviet cinema would embrace Socialist Realism in historical films like *Alexander Nevsky*, biopics of Lenin and other heroes of the Revolution, and in documentaries about heavy industry. Many of these films manage the trick of being engaging and entertaining even as they lay out their socialist message, such as the 1940 musical comedy *Tanya*, a modern retelling of the Cinderella story that also illustrates the importance of improving production in the textile industry.

Socialist themes were also common in Chinese film of this period. In Japan, the film industry was slow to embrace sound films. Japan has a rich tradition of silent theatre, such as kabuki. Japanese silent films were often accompanied by musicians and a *benshi*, a storyteller who would narrate the film, sometimes speak dialog out loud, and improvise sound effects. The most talented *benshi* were celebrities in their own right.

Quite the opposite was true in India. India already had a rich tradition of music in theatre. It had a very small film industry in the early 1930s, when sound was first introduced, but the new technology allowed for song and dance in Indian films and set the stage for India's tradition of films that are a little bit romance, a little bit comedy, a little bit drama, and a whole lot of song and dance.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Karlis and James and Leonid for their kind donations, and thank you to Nicklas for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Karlis and James and Leonid and Nicklas help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at life in the Soviet Union. I touched on Soviet film today, so we'll continue that thread and look at the nation that defies the Great Depression with an economy that keeps on going. Stalin Is the Lenin of Today, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I would be deeply remiss if I ended this episode without mentioning the 1952 American musical romantic comedy film *Singin' in the Rain*, directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, starring Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, and Debbie Reynolds. The film is set in the Hollywood film industry during the transition from silents to talking pictures. Its story line explicitly includes the release of *The Jazz Singer* by Warner Brothers and offers a comedic but fairly accurate take on the challenges facing filmmakers struggling to master the production of this new kind of film, problems as microphone placement, dubbing, and most famously, Lina Lamont, the fictional silent film star with the face of an angel and the voice of a banshee.

Singin' in the Rain not only covers much of the same material as this episode in an entertaining and amusing way, it is often named as one of the greatest American films of all time, if not *the* greatest American musical film. The film's rather cynical take on the entertainment industry holds up pretty well, even seventy years later. So if you haven't seen it, do yourself a favor and check it out.

[music: Closing Theme]

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