

HOMEWORK: "TALKIE TERROR"

Silent screen star Norma Talmadge, shown on the December 1929 cover of *Photoplay* magazine, became something less of a star after the onset of sound & the "talkies."

Norma Talmadge, a Hollywood star of the silent film era, is shown at right on the December 1929 cover of *Photoplay* magazine. *Photoplay* was founded in Chicago in 1911 and reached its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s, becoming quite influential in the early film industry. The magazine was renowned for its beautiful cover portraits of film stars by artists such as Rolf Armstrong, Earl Christy, and Charles Sheldon. By 1937, however, with the advancement of color photography, the magazine began using photographs of the stars.

Talmadge, shown here in an Earl Christy rendering, was one of a number of Hollywood stars whose careers were dramatically altered by the coming of "talking motion pictures." *Photoplay's* cover story of December 1929 dealt with the hot topic of the new technology then upsetting the status quo in Hollywood, as one of the taglines explains: "The Microphone—The Terror of The Studios." *Photoplay's* editors added another tagline on the cover's lower right hand corner: "You Can't Get Away With It In Hollywood" — meaning that the days of "image only" appeal for Hollywood's big stars were over. And for those involved in film at that time, this change was truly a terror.

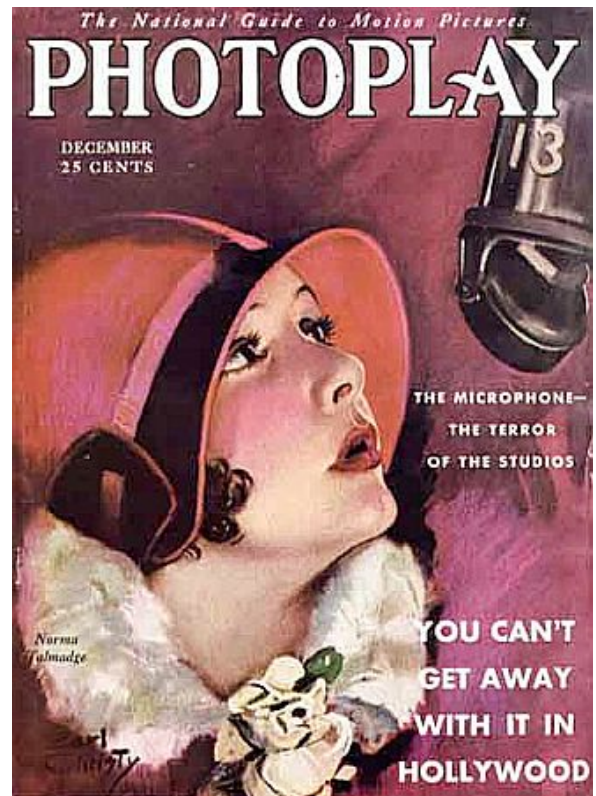


Figure 1: Young Myrna Loy, who first worked in silent films.

"It was a dreadful time, believe me," explained actress Myrna Loy to *New York Times* writer Guy Flatley in 1977, then writing a magazine piece at the 50th anniversary of sound in film. "There was panic everywhere," said Loy, "and a lot of people said, 'This is ridiculous! Who wants to hear people talk?'" Loy added that many people at the time still "loved the silent film, the great art of pantomime perfected by the comedians and by [director, D.W.] Griffith." So much of what happened with the coming of sound "was terribly unfair," Loy charged. The studios, she believed, "should have taken the time to train those people whose voices didn't match their screen images...."

And indeed, for actors and actresses like Norma Talmadge, shown on *Photoplay's* cover, the problem was the sound of their voices. Often, it seemed, the image and voice didn't match up to what audiences had already cast in their minds and expected, and that's what touched off the panic among many actors and actresses, ruining some careers. But it wasn't just the movie stars with funny voices, explains Guy Flatley in his 1977 piece:

"Everyone was affected: actors, directors, studio chiefs, cameramen. For many the sound of the talkies was the sound of doom: Lionized stars, suddenly forced to speak, found their careers screeching to a halt. Directors accustomed to shouting orders to actors at the peak of a crucial scene heard themselves being shushed by the newly all-

powerful sound technicians. Studio moguls who had reigned with supreme tyrannical confidence crumbled behind doors in solitary panic, frightened by the vast sums gambling on “talkies” required.

...Cameras could no longer move freely, since the cameraman was now cramped into a huge soundproof booth, his camera robbed of almost all action. Even the scripts were different; tea-cup dramas, literal and static translations of Broadway plays initially dominated sound films...”

“Singin’ in the Rain”

Some of the early technical difficulties in making film with sound are accurately captured in a hilarious segment from the 1952 movie, *Singing In the Rain*, a film which is in part, about movie-making in the silent-to-sound era. During the famous “sound check” scene in that film, Gene Kelly’s character and female star, Lina Lamont, played by Jean Hagen, are trying to complete a key scene that contains amorous dialogue, but have repeated difficulties with sound, not least of which is the high-pitched voice of Lina, their big star. The directors and set crew try to record the scene numerous times, with each take confronting one or more of the temperamental variables now present in the new sound regime – all to the director’s great hair- pulling frustration. Later, in the *Singing in the Rain* storyline, the resulting film preview is shown to a live audience, but proves to be a bust, revealing the new “talkie” to be an embarrassing disaster. The big fraud then undertaken in an attempt to salvage the film and the career of the “squeaky-voiced star” Lina, is the dubbing of another voice in place of her’s. The new voice belongs to Debbie Reynolds (Kathy), but the fraud is later revealed. Yet in real-life Hollywood, a number of careers, including that of Norma Talmadge, came to a untimely end with the onset of sound.



Figure 2: Gene Kelly & Jean Hagen in hilarious 'sound check' scene from the film "Singin' in the Rain."

Norma Talmadge

Norma Talmadge got her start in the movie business as a model for illustrated slides – the still images projected on movie house screens in the early days of film “singalongs.” Her first silent film role came in 1911 with Vitagraph Studios of Brooklyn, New York when she played a seamstress in *A Tale of Two Cities*. With good looks and talent, plus a mother who helped promote her, Norma Talmadge rose to become a leading-lady of the silent screen. A marriage to influential movie executive Joseph M. Schenck also helped, as Talmadge was set up in her own film company.



Figure 3: Silent film star, Norma Talmadge

Talmadge became known for her dramatic roles – the “two-hankie” weepers, as some were called. A big hit came with *Kiki* in 1926. But in 1929, after Norma ventured into her roles in talking pictures, a reversal of fortune set in. Norma Talmadge had a flat Brooklyn accent, and when this became clear with the talkies, it surprised audiences and was greatly at odds with her glamorous, big screen personality. “Norma got a coach, but as soon as she tackled sound, she realized she’d come a cropper,” recalled screenwriter Anita Loos, who knew Talmadge and had worked with D.W. Griffith and other directors. “...But Norma had made over \$5 million in silents,” noted Loos, “and was married to Joe Schenck, a multimillionaire. So it was no tragedy.”

In *Time* magazine of November 17, 1930, a reviewer of Talmadge’s sound film, *Du Barry – Woman of Passion*, wrote, in part: “...Norma Talmadge plays less pompously than might be expected, but people who liked her program pictures in the old days may hope that this will be the last attempt to establish her as a great figure in sound pictures,” offered the reviewer. “However, her

diction is improving; in her first dialog effort she talked like an elocution pupil; this time she talks like an elocution teacher.” Not long thereafter, Norma Talmadge retired from film-making. And although she divorced Joseph Schenck in 1934, she was still an extraordinarily wealthy woman for the time. But once she left the world of Hollywood, she no longer felt obliged to her fans. Approached for her autograph in her post film-making years, she would wave people off, reportedly saying: “Go away, my dears. I don’t need you anymore.”

Norma Talmadge wasn’t the only Hollywood star done in by the coming of sound. Dolores Costello, Corinne Griffith, May McAvoy, Charles Farrell, John Gilbert, and Marie Prevost, were among silent stars whose careers were ruined, shortened, or made difficult by the coming of sound. Other Hollywood hands – directors, writers, actors, etc., – had experiences, good and bad, with the silent-to-sound transition in film making. What follows below is a sampling of actors and directors offering their recollections and views on that changing era and difficult time in the film business.



Figure 4: Norma Talmadge on set of "Du Barry, Woman of Passions," 1930.

Frank Capra

Famous film director Frank Capra was right on the cusp of the silent-to-sound era. He worked as a prop man in silent films and also wrote and directed silent film comedies starring Harry Langdon and the *Our Gang* kids. Capra worked for Mack Sennett in 1924 and then moved to Columbia Pictures. He became famous for his own feature films of the 1930s and 1940s, among them: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Lost Horizon* (1937), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), *It Happened One Night* (1941), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). In 1977, Capra’s views and recollections of the coming of sound to film were recounted with Guy Flatley in the *New York Times*.



“...When film found its larynx,” Capra said, “it astonished, amazed and absolutely threw everyone into a tailspin.” There was panic all around Hollywood, he explained. The studios were being asked to spend millions of dollars to revise everything. “...Men like L. B. Mayer, powerful men who were in the habit of telling everyone in Hollywood what to do, were suddenly sitting in their offices, completely stunned. They didn’t understand what the hell was going on, and so they lost control of the studio to the engineers. Soon the soundmen were telling everyone what to do...”

But the real chaos, said Capra, was among the actors. “It was easy enough to accommodate those who had experience on stage,” he said, “but no film actor had ever learned lines before.” Working on a completely silent set was another experience most film makers and actors had never had. “In the silent days,” said Capra, “the cameraman was yelling, carpenters were hammering and a director was shouting commands on the next set. Then, all of a sudden, everything had to be as silent as a tomb. It was scary. The poor actors sweated, missed their lines, cried and broke down.”

Source: “Talkie Terror,” *Pop History Dig*, <http://www.pophistorydig.com/?p=7281>

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1. In what ways did the new technology of sound upset the status quo in Hollywood? Provide 2 specific examples to support your response.
2. The article asserts that with the rise of talkies, the days of "image only" appeal for Hollywood's big stars were over. What does this mean? How is this true?
3. How was Norma Talmadge's experience with the transition from sound to talkies typical of many silent film stars?