

ely
film
society

sept
2016

the
notes

FORTHCOMING IN KINGS LYNN



Films normally start at 7.30pm in The Guildhall of St George, King Street. Members and their guests can sign in from approx 7pm. EFS members bring your membership card

Thursday 13th Oct: MUSTANG
Friday 28th Oct: THE LODGER
Thursday 10th Nov: SUNSET SONG
Tuesday 22nd Nov:
PASSPORT TO PIMLICO
Wednesday 23rd Nov:
THE FINAL REEL

www.klccc.uk

Blackmail

Alfred Hitchcock, UK 1929

From the play *Blackmail* by Charles Bennett
Adapted by Alfred Hitchcock, Benn Levy (dialogue) and Michael Powell (uncredited)

Anny Ondra Alice White
Sara Allgood Mrs. White
Charles Paton Mr. White
John Longden ...

Detective Frank Webber
Donald Calthrop Tracy
Cyril Ritchard The Artist
Hannah Jones The Landlady
Harvey Braban ... The Chief Inspector
Ex-Det. Sergt. Bishop ...
The Detective Sergeant

The Jazz Singer (USA 1927) is usually regarded as the first talkie in the history of cinema, but the problem with any technology is that, no sooner does anyone quote the 'first' example of its use, someone is on hand to provide 'earlier' examples. *The Jazz Singer* was not a genuine 'talking picture' because only some sections of it provided synchronised sound – dialogue and singing. But long before Al Jolson uttered the immortal words: 'Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You ain't heard nothin' yet!' there had been



many attempts to add synchronised sound to film, the earliest being in 1900, a scene from the stage play *Cyrano de Bergerac* starring celebrated French actor Benoit-Constant Coquelin, which is also a very early example of colour film. See (and hear!):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpxlZrEnPz4>

In 1929 Alfred Hitchcock was directing a silent film *Blackmail* for British International Pictures when the company decided to grasp the nettle of the future and shoot some scenes with synchronised sound. Hitchcock, always an innovator, mischievously decided to shoot almost the whole picture with sound, but without telling the bosses. But he had a problem – his star, Anny Ondra, a Czech actress, spoke English with a very pronounced accent, as this notorious test shooting makes very clear:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGQC109RnAA>

The technology did not allow Hitchcock to dub on an English voice during post-production, so he engaged English actress, Joan Barry, to speak the dialogue as Ondra was mouthing hers, which he then recorded simultaneously onto the film's optical soundtrack. This explains why some of Ondra's 'delivery' looks and sounds rather stilted.



Apart from the novelty of sound, Hitchcock also employed other technical devices to thrill the audience, not least a spectacular chase sequence in the British Museum, created almost entirely by the use of miniatures, mirror and glass shots. This use of a famous landmark, together with a cameo appearance on the tube train and some photography



Hitchcock checking sound levels during the shooting of 'Blackmail'. Notice the headphones, the chalked warning and the huge camera housing to dampen the noise of the large camera

inspired by his exposure to German Expressionism, mark the beginning of what were to become some of his signature features.

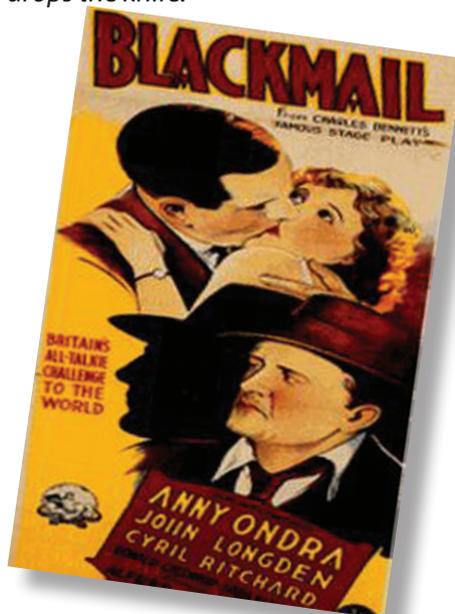
However his first use of sound is highlighted by the originality of the famous 'knife' sequence. So far from considering the talking picture as the death knell of pure cinema, Hitchcock immediately recognised the potential of the new medium and its power to create a new meaning for the audience. *You ain't heard nothin' yet!*

“ In 1929, Hitchcock directed the first full-length British 'talkie', *Blackmail*. The film was begun as a mostly silent film, for which the studio gave Hitchcock permission to shoot a few sound sequences. Ignoring this, he instead shot two versions of the film - one entirely silent (for the majority of cinemas not yet equipped for sound) and the other almost entirely with sound.

The two versions match one another scene for scene and often shot for shot (although no two shots are exactly identical, presumably since it was impossible to duplicate the film without loss of quality). Many scenes, however, differ quite markedly between the two versions. A close comparison of the two reveals the way in which Hitchcock modified his style of shooting and editing for the new medium.

[...] Hitchcock was keen to use sound in a creative way, and one scene from the film has become particularly celebrated. Alice has stabbed to death a man who tried to rape her. At home the next morning, Anny's parents tell her about the murder. As she sits down

to have breakfast, the family are joined by a local gossip, who talks endlessly about the murder. When her father asks her to cut a slice of bread, Alice becomes increasingly agitated, until finally she drops the knife.



The most striking difference between the two versions is the way in which Hitchcock distorts the dialogue to evoke Alice's tumultuous mental state, so

that ultimately only the word 'knife' is distinct. The word becomes more and more pronounced until finally it reaches a climax with Alice dropping the bread knife. It's certainly a very powerful effect. But if you watch the sound version scene with the volume turned down, followed by the silent version, you'll see that in other ways, the silent version is more interesting. Notice the way we see the shadow of Alice's hand crawl across the bread before she picks up the knife. The result is that the silent version has a very different feel - less startling, perhaps, but more creepy and unsettling.

Mark Duguid, Hitchcock's Style
BFI ScreenOnline

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
MY BRILLIANT CAREER
(Gillian Armstrong, Australia
1977)

Wednesday 19 October
(note changed weekday)

www.elyfilmsociety.com

www.meetup.com/ely-film/

