Charlie Chaplin: Effect Of The Transition To Sound In Hollywood On The Stars Of The Silent Era

The transition from the silent films to the talking picture is arguably one of the most impactful and monumental progressions in cinematic history, that affected many people in the industry during the late 1920's to early 1930's; from writers, to directors, to accompanists. Despite what the films Singin' in the Rain (1952) and The Artist (2011) touch upon in their version of Hollywood in the transition period, the reasons mainstream actors and actresses fell behind during the introduction of the talkies is a lot less linear than might be perceived initially in these films. The speed at which sound progressed in Hollywood has been linked to the rise and fall of many silent film stars such as (Vilma Banky, Ronald Colman, and Mary Pickford) and their careers, as Alexander Walker touched upon in his book:

"There has been no revolution like it. It passed with such breakneck speed, at such inflationary cost, with such ruthless self-interest, that a whole art from was sundered and consigned to history almost before anyone could count the cost in economic terms or guess the consequences in human ones – and certainly before anyone could keep an adequate record of it. There has never been such a lightning retooling of an entire industry – even wartime emergencies were slower – nor such a wholesale transformation in the shape and acceptance of new forms of mass entertainment […] The shape and especially the sound of cinema movies today was decided during those few years. Not in any cool-headed, rational fashion: but amidst unbelievable confusion, stupidity, accident, ambition and greed" (Alexander Walker, 1979)

It is still argued to this day how and why some stars of the silent era made it through the transition successfully and why others did not, some stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Clara Bow showed reluctance towards the introduction of sound in cinema, whereas other stars faced challenges due their accents and voices, such as Reginald Denny and Greta Garbo, and others stars such as Mary Pickford, took the new art form into their stride and found success in the new age of talking pictures. This paper aims to show the extent of which the silent stars were affected by the coming of sound into Hollywood, and the challenges they faced whilst attempting to keep up with the ever-changing times.

Initially, as sound was introduced, a frenzy set in over Hollywood. Production companies had to adapt, and they had to adapt quickly if they wanted to get ahead of the other studios. As directors were used to shouting directions at actors whilst filming during a silent film, they had to adapt which therefore altered the dynamics once sound became part of the equation. As a result, many production companies turned to stars and directors of the stage, who had experience directing with voices and sound. For example, as explored by James Bawden and Ron Miller (2016, p.264) silent actor Bill Powell, soon became one of Paramount's talking sensations due to his previous training on Broadway.

However, one of the wonders of silent films – unlike talkies – back in the late 1920's was their ability to surpass the language, cultural and political barriers, as title cards could be translated, creating a personal and collaborative relationship between the film stars and the audience. (Jeanine Basinger, 2000, p.7) This allowed for the cinema to be inclusive and available for anyone to watch. However, this all changed as sound was introduced, many actors with foreign

accents were affected by the change in cinema and found that they no longer suited the parts they played. One of the most famous silent stars who was left behind in the silent era due to her foreign accent was Vilma Banky.

Figure 1: Vilma Banky in The Eagle (1925)

Before sound Vilma Banky was the star of films such as The Son of Sheik (1926) and The Eagle (1925), and she was a star people went back to see over and over again in the cinemas. Although as talking pictures came into play her stardom slowly began to decline, arguably due to her thick Hungarian accent as discussed by Robert B. Altman (1992, p.134) consequently making her lines difficult for audiences to comprehend. Sound added a new dimension to the viewing of films and both audiences and film companies alike found that some actors of the silent era didn't quite make the cut, with some studios using the transition to bring in new stars to replace old ones that could be paid far less; for example the silent star John Gilbert being paid $250,000 a picture, to being replaced by leading talkie star Clark Gable at $7,500 a week (Scott Eyman, 2015, p.264).

The extent at which Banky's career declined due to sound was unbelievably quick. In an attempt to introduce audiences to Banky's voice, (as well as other actors such as Ronald Colman) Arthur Hornblow Jr. believed it would be beneficial to introduce actors' accents through roles that would "display their distinctiveness" (A. Scott Berg, 1989). In Banky's case a role was written for her, in which she would portray a young immigrant who learns to adapt to life in New York, in the 1929 film This Is Heaven, in which she would portray a young immigrant who learns to adapt to life in New York, in the 1929 film This Is Heaven.

Figure 2: Banky's voice heard for the first time in 'This is Heaven'

In May of 1929, This is Heaven, Banky's first talkie film was released nationally to the public, with her accent on display for the world to hear. Although her accent, thick but still understandable fitted the character perfectly, reviews poured in about her heavy accent. Another factor that ultimately led to the collapse of her film was that it was compared to Bulldog Drummond (starring Ronald Colman who has previously worked with Banky several times in the past). Unfortunately, This is Heaven, and its part-talkie style was not a hit with audiences, and led to the film losing $200,000, a massive loss compared to the $750,000 profit that Bulldog Drummond brought in, and thus symbolising the rapid decline of Banky's career. (Donald Crafton, 1999, p.462)

Vilma Banky's thick accent is very frequently associated with her failure to transition successfully into the new age of talking pictures, but arguably many other silent stars with foreign accents made the transition; one being Ronald Colman whose accent no longer suited his typical role of a passionate Latin lover in films such as The Winning of Barbra Worth (1926). It can be argued that Colman's accent was not as difficult to understand as Banky's and therefore not a worthy comparison. However, many other foreign accented actors with thicker accents than Banky successfully transitioned such as Boyer and Dietrich. Therefore, as Scott Eyman (2015, p.226) explores is the key to successfully transitioning for silent film stars lay in the connection between voice and personalities – Laurel and Hardy, Colman, and Victor McLagan – whereas if there was a juxtaposition between one and the other it led an unsuccessful transition into the talking era.

One of the most successful foreign film stars to transition successfully into talking pictures was Greta Garbo. In the silent era Greta Garbo was one of the biggest stars, drawing in audiences over and over again to see her pictures. Garbo's first film was the Swedish film The Saga of Gösta Berling in 1926, in which she played a supporting role. From this she launched her acting career and went on to star in films such as Flesh and the Devil in 1926 and The Temptress in 1926 and was loved by audiences of all ages and cultural backgrounds.

Figure 3: Greta Garbo in The Kiss (1929)

As sound began to hit Hollywood and the film industry, MGM thought when the audiences heard Garbo's voice it would be the end of Garbo's career, with her thick Swedish accent causing a clash between what the audiences saw and what they heard. However, this could not have been further from the case. Garbo's husky accent seemed to match the mysterious personality she portrayed in her first talking picture Anna Christie, in 1930 which was famously advertised with "Garbo Talks!" to draw in audiences. (Kevin Redding, 2016) Perhaps, Garbo's success lay in the fact that her and MGM did not rush into making her a star of a talking picture too soon. In fact, for a couple of years she remained making silent films, allowing for the perfect opportunity and role to showcase her accent. We see Garbo's career into the talkies skyrocket, as she became one of MGM's highest payed actresses at the time (Brenda Loew, 2010, p.85) and that the addition of sound into Garbo's film increased the audiences love and fascination for her. It is therefore, obvious that Garbo's succeeded in transitioning through the silent era and gained more acclaim in her talkie career, in which she earned several Oscar nominations for films such as Ninotchka, 1939, one of her most 'enduringly popular' feature length films. (Adam Augustyn,1998)

It is clear that the transition into sound affected many silent stars with foreign accents both positively and negatively. From the comparing Banky and Garbo, having an accent was not necessarily a burden as long as it wasn't a shock to audiences, and if the stars adapted to roles that complimented their voices rather than clashed with them. This was perhaps one of the main reason Charlie Chaplin was so reluctant to introduce sound into his own films. In the 1920's, Charlie Chaplin was one of the most famous comedic film stars of the silent era, and arguably still is to this day. He starred in many popular films such as The Tramp in 1915 and The Gold Rush in 1925.

Figure 4: Charles Chaplin, Kitty Bradbury, and Edna Purviance in The Immigrant (1917)

When sound struck Hollywood, Charlie Chaplin revealed his unwillingness to move with the times as his comedy was that of physicality and slapstick rather than verbally, fearing that his characters would not be understood by audiences. (Alex Bauer, 2017) Whilst the rest of Hollywood were trying to bring sound into their newest pictures, Chaplin had other ideas for his latest project:

"I was determined to continue making silent films, for I believed there was room for all types of entertainment. Besides, I was a pantomimist and in that medium I was unique and, without false modesty, a master. So I continued with the production of another silent picture, City Lights" (Charles Chaplin, 1964)

Although, Chaplin's romantic comedy City Lights was a silent film in the age of talkies, the film stood out as being a success. Still, almost 10 years after the first words were uttered in the

1927 hit The Jazz Singer, Chaplin produced Modern Times in 1936.

Figure 5: Charlie Chaplin in Modern Times (1936)

The film is a comment on modern society and the progression of technology and is therefore very significant for the film to be one of the last silent in a new era of talking films. As Jeff Saporito (2015, find how to cite article) explored in his article, one of Chaplin's main reasoning behind keeping the film silent was due to the 'Tramp' character most often recognisable in his early silent career. Chaplin believed that if this character were to talk, he would lose the power to connect with a wider audience. Although, Modern Times is undeniably a silent film, Chaplin does give way to the change in Hollywood as he sings a song in gibberish, (Richard Brody, New Yorker, 2014) perhaps as a way to keep the 'Tramp' a universally relatable character for all audiences to laugh at.

It is quite obvious through examples such as Charles Chaplin, that the introduction of sound into Hollywood would change comedy, and the way it would be portrayed in films. This idea is explored further by Scott Eyman (2015, p.326) , through the idea that silent film needed physicality of character, through both movement and comedic timing. Examples of these lay in the roles both Chaplin, Keaton and Laurel and Hardy played, which was altered significantly when sound quickly became one of most essential factors in the creation of films. For instance, comedy with sound relied more upon the writing and situations in which characters would end up, as opposed to the direction and movement required in silent films. Slapstick comedy is what made the Chaplin films so universally popular and iconic, especially as many people recognise his role of the Tramp without ever seeing the film due to the visual aspect rather than a verbal one. It is possibly true that Chaplin was reluctant to let go of the silent era as they were his "glory years" (Chris Wade, 2019, p.228) , in which he created many of his infamous and iconic characters in film history.

Nearly four years after Modern Times was released, Chaplin finally took the last step in transitioning into the new age of cinema, creating the satirical comedy The Great Dictator in 1940.

Charles Chaplin in The Great Dictator (1940)

Similarly, to Modern Times, Chaplin's political views are a centre of this film in which he plays Adenoid Hynkel and a Jewish Barber. As Charles Chaplin (1964, p.387) explains in his autobiography he could remain more of less silent as the Tramp (Jewish Barber), and as Hynkel (a parody of Hitler), he could talk to the audience in gibberish and jargon. He describes the story as an "opportunity for burlesque and pantomime." Chaplin cleverly uses these characters to keep their charm and distinctiveness, despite his reluctance to move with the times. In the end The Great Dictator became one of Chaplin's most successful films despite his defiance to transition into the talkies, and even gained him five nominations at the oscars. However, after the success that followed from The Great Dictator, Charlie Chaplin went on to star in only a handful of films, including A King in New York (1957) and A Countess From Hong Kong (1967). Charlie Chaplin's lack of filmmaking after the 1940's hit, was perhaps down to a few reasons; one being the outbreak of World War Two, or his return to England and ban from American for his political and communist views. Or perhaps it was Charlie Chaplin's initial hestitance to move with the times that ultimately lead to the decline of his career. The art of silent films had been driven out in just a couple of years and lead to the demise of a specific acting style, that in his

early career Charlie Chaplin had mastered so excellently. However, from comparing his silent films to his talkies it is apparent that Charles Chaplin and his art form was affected considerably through the introduction and progression of sound in film.

To conclude this essay, it is clearly evident that from the very first words spoken in the 1927 hit The Jazz Singer, the transition to sound throughout Hollywood was a big leap for everyone involved in the film industry. The speed at which sound progressed in the few short years undoubtably left many stars stuck in the silent age. It was a time in Hollywood, where a new era of filmmaking was born. Perhaps, why so many silent careers ended when sound was introduced, was due to a complete change in an artform the stars knew so well. This idea is further explored by Scott Eyman (2015, p.22):

“Talkies were not an evolution, but a mutation, a different art form entirely; as a result an art form was eliminated and hundreds of careers were extinguished. Major directors were ruined, great stars plummeted”

There wasn’t a clear path of guaranteed success for silent stars trying to make the transition into talking pictures, this is visibly evident when reflecting on the two careers or Greta Garbo and Vilma Banky. Looking at the two stars side by side you encounter a lot of similarities between the two; both women were beautiful silent film stars with foreign accents, one as thick as the other, yet Garbo shot to stardom in the talking era, whereas as Banky was left behind in the transition. Furthermore, looking at the career of Charlie Chaplin, it is obvious the comedy legend did not welcome the idea of sound into his films. I believe sound and the demise of the silent film lead to the decline of Charlie Chaplin’s success and the art form in which he excelled in. Chaplin, and many other silent actors and actresses craft of telling a story without words was phased out in a matter of years, and thus the power of silent films had to reach a wide range of audiences was gone. The transition of the talking pictures affected the stars of the silent era and their careers significantly, whether that be positively or negatively, but it is evident that without the transition that took place in those few short years, the film industry and the way films are made were changed forever.