

Uncanny Bodies

THE COMING OF SOUND FILM
AND THE ORIGINS OF THE
HORROR GENRE

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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 coming of sound fueled a number of genre developments in Hollywood cinema. One obvious example is the film musical. Less obvious is how the horror genre also dramatized and explored potentials that synchronized sound brought to Hollywood films. Where do we situate this outgrowth of the sound transition in relation to others of the period? We can start by noting that some genre developments were inspired by impressions, widespread at the time, that the coming of sound marked a huge forward leap in cinematic realism.

Signs of this impression appear everywhere in commentaries on the new films. Many noted that human figures in particular now seemed more excitingly present than before. Of a 1927 Fox Movietone short featuring George Bernard Shaw, *Photoplay* wrote that “it 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 Another commentator, considering sound films generally, wrote that “now, when a great singer opens his mouth in song we feel the thrill of his voice and his personality.”² Alexander Bakshy, one of the most perceptive critics writing about film at the time, agreed, noting 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 new 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*: "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

If filmmakers could tug harder at viewers' heartstrings than before, they also could aspire to new heights of intellectual achievement. A journalist writing in 1928 gleefully predicted that now "the sparkling epigram, the well-turned phrase, even the cadences of Shakespeare will make their appeal."⁵ Bakshy, although also critical of the period's stage-bound film adaptations of plays, felt that Hollywood definitely had something to learn from the theater's "relatively superior intellectual approach to the material of life."⁶ Striving for these heights more ambitiously than most other Hollywood films of the period was *Strange Interlude* (Leonard, 1932), MGM's adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's play. In the play the characters speak their thoughts aloud to the audience; in the film their thoughts can be heard on the sound track while the characters' lips do not move. This technique, though it may remind viewers today of a television soap opera, impressed the film's first critics. *Screenland* called the film "restrained, highly intelligent, beautifully directed."⁷ *Variety* called it "a natural for discourses on academic analyses of the contemporary 'art of the cinema.'"⁸ *Film Daily* called it "a class picture finding the talking film in its highest form."⁹

With sound, then, came new opportunities to arouse the intellect, stir pathos, and elicit sensations of realism. Hollywood took advantage of these impressions by adding sounds to the same kinds of films that it was already making and also by developing some new kinds. One existing film type was the topical newsreel. Popular during the period, these shorts were constructed, as Donald Crafton notes, to maximize impressions of "being-there-ness."¹⁰ A new film type, also popular and also energized by the perceived realism and immediacy of sound film, was the social problem film, especially the cycle of gangster films that began with *Little Caesar* (LeRoy) in 1930.

Social problem films led a trend that capitalized on impressions of sound films as open windows on the world. Not just the crisp reports of machine-gun fire or the slangy talk of the street persuaded viewers that these films held a special purchase on the real thing; also validating the producers' assertions was the resonance of these films with stories then in the news. A movie could be based on current events, or it might be built out of their very material. The *Motion Picture Herald* noted that *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932) was "written by a man who is himself still a fugitive from just such a chain gang as is here delineated. It is a tremendous selling point. That man wrote of his experiences and a motion picture has been woven from it."¹¹ Another critic jokingly reported that a prop used in *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932) was highly authentic: "The corpse flung from a taxi in one scene is no dummy but a remnant actually procured from some convenient morgue."¹² The same nouns and adjectives pepper the reviews of these films. *The Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931) was "raw and brutal with that brutality flung to the front," "a grim and terrible document," and a film that "will get you, with its stark realism."¹³ Also singled out was the films' *stylistic* leanness. Of *The Public Enemy*, one reviewer wrote that "there's no lace on this picture" and that "there doesn't appear to be a wasted foot of film. That means speed."¹⁴ These films, then, were less like paintings or poems than like crime scene photographs or court transcripts. These were *documents* struck unfussily on newsprint, the output of a cinema freshly ventilated by the bracing effects of synchronized sound. The special capacity of the medium to render in fine detail the sordid realities of the present day earned the gangster cycle detractors as well as fans. One of the former complained in a letter to *Picture Play*: "I can't understand why people like these underworld pictures. It really hurts me to see one of my favorites in gangster films, because movies seem so real to me."¹⁵

Another spur to genre innovation during the period stemmed from a very different experience of sound film, one in which viewers now felt greatly distanced from the world outside the movie theater. To get a sense of this other experience of the medium, picture a horizontal scale for measuring the relative strength or weakness of the perceived realism and transparency of sound film, with perceptions growing stronger as we move to the right. Now bisect this scale with a vertical line and place the disembodied, "intellectual" appeal of *Strange Interlude*'s voice-overs at the top. The result is a simple grid for imagining some of the evocative

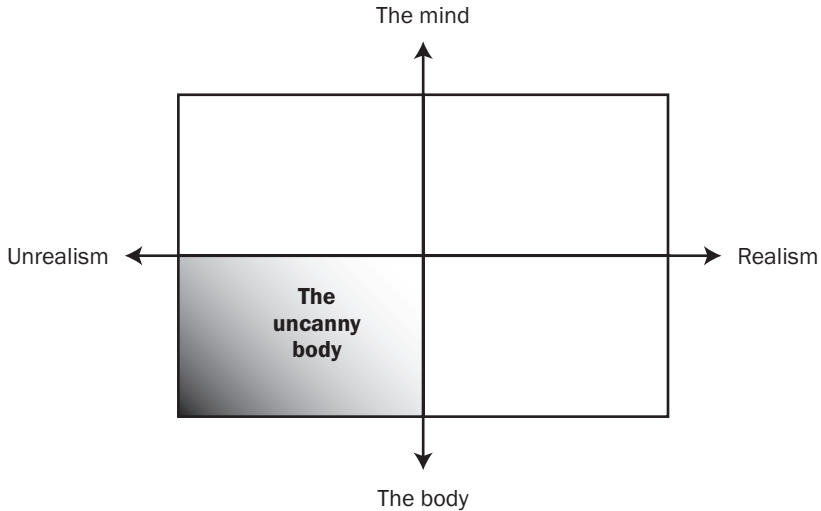


Figure 1

potentials of sound film (Fig. 1). On this grid, the bottom-left quadrant stakes out a zone of sensation in which the *unreal* and the *bodied* nature of sound film come across the most forcefully. This zone contains what I call *the uncanny body modality of early sound films*. Out of this zone the classic horror cycle emerged near the close of the sound transition period. We can gather some initial clues to the existence and source of this reception phenomenon from critics of the day who voiced their dissatisfaction, often in vague and grasping terms, with the touted realism of the first sound films.

THE SHRINKING OF PERSONALITY

Synchronization of music and movement was perfect.
It left nothing to be desired and created an illusion of
reality—almost.

Ruth Russell, "Voice Is Given to Shadows of Silver Screen,"
Chicago Daily Tribune, 16 September 1926

Within the chorus of praise for the realism of the new films were indications that sound simultaneously was *getting in the way* of viewers' sensations of the figures speaking and singing on the screen. 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 delivered a brief speech. Green wrote that Hays “seemed to be present, and yet he did not seem to be present.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ Of the partly talking film *Tenderloin* (Curtiz, 1928), *Variety* wrote that “another angle is whether the voice on the screen does not suggest something missing, with that missing element the physical self. This is undeniably felt.”¹⁸ And in what was perhaps the most in-depth articulation of this potentially troubling quality of the new films, Bakshy—who, as I noted, also championed the human warmth of the films—reflected on his dissatisfaction with recent films in which such stars as George Arliss and John Barrymore 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.¹⁹

Bakshy goes on to blame the theatricality of the current cinema, specifically its 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 definitely has a point, I believe we can discern a deeper source of the trouble than the decisions of any individual producers regarding this or that source or setting. A *Variety* reviewer of a 1927 program of Vitaphone shorts came much closer to grasping this deeper cause:

An hour of mechanical sound production, together with its flicker accompaniment, is a pretty severe experience. 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.²⁰

The root of the problem was, as this critic intuited, viewers' renewed awareness of the mechanical nature of cinema. This awareness stemmed from two sources: the temporary coarsening of film style that accompanied the transition to sound film production, and the initial sensational novelty appeal of synchronized sound films.

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, 1889²¹

During the earliest years of cinema history, viewers were aware of qualities of films that most later viewers would tend not to notice. They were medium-sensitive viewers. I take this term from Yuri Tsivian's book *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, in which, following observations made by Eileen Bowser, Tsivian notes instances in which commentators during the early cinema period write vividly about such seemingly mundane events in films as a train or other object coming into the foreground, a bush trembling at a water's edge, waves breaking on sand and bursting into rivulets, and the faintest unsteadiness in a card player's fingers.²² Viewers then also might notice elements of the cinematic dis-

course that later viewers would find unremarkable. These elements could include a close camera distance, a camera tracking forward or backward, the edges of the frame, the flatness of the image, and the monochrome color of the film.²³ Tsivian's observation of this phenomenon of early cinema reception is important for our study of early sound cinema reception because the coming of sound triggered the first major return of medium sensitivity to ordinary viewing in thirty years.

A number of practical and technical realities of production during the early sound period imprinted themselves on the finished films in ways that help to explain why viewers now were suddenly much more aware of films as manufactured objects. The addition of the recorded voice alone went a long way toward producing this result. Most obviously, there could be synchronization problems, which continued to occur in sound-on-disc film presentations until Warner Bros. phased out the technology in 1930—and later in theaters that continued to show sound-on-disc films.²⁴ Every synchronization mishap 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. But even perfectly synchronized voices could heighten medium awareness in several ways.

To begin with, the voices could sound unnatural to viewers' ears. The technology was derided as "the cold, rasping Noisytone inventions."²⁵ *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."²⁶ At the end of 1930, Knox recalled "how queer some of the first talking pictures sounded. . . . Actors and actresses often sounded as though they were lisping and voices were quite unnatural."²⁷ A history of film published in 1931 noted 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."²⁸ Whether the problem was solved by 1927 or later depended as much on the acclimation of individual viewers to sound film as it did on the ongoing improvements in the technology itself. At any rate, locating a precise line of demarcation to characterize the before-and-after experience of most viewers is less important than is simply recognizing that, initially, the voice on sound film could strike a viewer as patently unreal.

Also making the speech seem unreal could be the slowness of its delivery. A reason for the slowness was a set of notions that preoccupied critics and industry professionals during the transition period concerning

the so-called quality voice, which, Crafton notes, drew heavily on speech standards derived from the theater.²⁹ One result was that film dialogue was often articulated noticeably slowly and distinctly. Further, sound technicians seeking to record maximally intelligible dialogue could insist that actors enunciate carefully and deliberately. As Alexander Walker writes, “there was a heavy concentration on picking up every syl-lab-le, which led to retarded delivery.”³⁰ Such plodding deliveries could make already muffled, hollow, and tinny speech sound even more unnatural.

Finally, the speech could seem unreal because viewers could tell that the sounds were 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.”³¹ But this problem continued to crop up after 1926, in *Tenderloin*, for example, of which *Variety* wrote that “the voice, though issuing from the picture player, seems a thing apart, albeit synchronizing.”³² French film critic Alexandre Arnoux reported, after watching an early talkie in London, 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.”³³ Rick Altman notes that some industry professionals 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 the only way to solve this problem.³⁴ It turned out that no such measure would be necessary, 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. Once audiences got used to the loudspeaker-screen configuration, the bodies on the screen merged with the voices. Until then, even perfectly synchronized and acceptably natural-sounding speech could strike a viewer as a transparently mechanical contrivance.

Elements other than sound functioned to raise general awareness of the films as films. Synchronized speech in the first sound features came in distractingly discrete packages within the films. These were talking sequences abutted, usually at both ends, by silent sequences that had been scored with music. A 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. All at once, dialogue titles gave way to synchronized speech; figures emoting and gesturing in the familiar silent-film acting style became figures keeping comparatively still so as not to make distracting sounds that could be picked up by the insufficiently discriminating microphone; the mobile frame of the silent film became the noticeably more restricted camera viewpoint of the early talkie; and flowing music yielded to a scratchy quiet that engulfed both the figures and their speech. Transitions 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."³⁵ Another, 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."³⁶ The edits that marked these transitions were more obtrusive than the edits in silent films. They could seem like raised seams along which disparate types of cinematic material came together. This problem, moreover, would persist after all-talking feature film production became the norm, for the first all-talking features also 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.³⁷

Actors could exacerbate the general medium awareness for reasons other than their slow talking. Because of the difficulties associated with editing sound film, dialogue scenes now were being assembled out of fewer total shots.³⁸ This meant that actors needed to get their lines and blocking right for longer stretches, and this imperative, combined with the higher costs of filming retakes in the period, increased the likelihood of a slightly flubbed line here or a missed cue there making it into a finished film.³⁹ Viewers watching 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 soon be again) intrinsic to the classical Hollywood viewing experience was partially disrupted as the augmented medium began to exhibit its materiality and the unsteady practice to flaunt its techniques.⁴⁰

Switching focus from the films to the viewers brings to light more reasons why general viewing during the period was shot through with uncommon medium sensitivity. For one thing, viewers were aware of a connotation of *synchronization* that the word no longer carries today. During the silent era, as James Lastra notes, the word in the context of moviegoing had referred primarily to live musical accompaniment.⁴¹ *Synchro-*

nization in this context suggests something extratextual pieced onto the whole for effect rather than something intrinsic to the profilmic world that has 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 explain instances in which the word is applied, during the early sound period, to describe sloppy postdubbing and even foreign speech that has been dubbed over English-speaking mouths.⁴²

The sense of synchronization as something more provisional than essential accorded well with a viewer's 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 synchronization, the quality of the sound, or the disparity between the locations of the loudspeakers and the speaking mouths, viewers still would have experienced a heightened awareness of the artificial nature of cinema as a direct result of the sound. The editor of *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."⁴³

The novelty of sound produced some unforeseen side effects, one of which appears to have been an increased awareness of the image as a flat entity. Sound, that is, reasserted the presence of the screen within the space of exhibition. It was a reassertion because, as Tsvian notes, the screen during the early cinema period had fascinated viewers.⁴⁴ Hints of the screen's restored visibility include this comment from 1926: "So remarkable is this synchronizing machine it seemed incredible the figures on the screen were only shadows."⁴⁵ This writer, in addition to indicating that the "synchronizing machine" is what is drawing her notice, conveys an impression of the figures on the screen as flat shadows. Hall likewise described a Vitaphone short featuring opera singer Giovanni Martinelli in which "the singer's tones appeared to echo in the body of the theatre as they tore from a shadow on the screen."⁴⁶ In 1922 a journalist covering a Phonofilm demonstration remarked that "each word was clearly audible as articulated by the moving lips of the moving picture."⁴⁷ Here the suggestion clearly is one of lips belonging to a picture and not to any person. Sensations of the image's flatness could, moreover, be heightened by the emerging practice of rendering dialogue comparatively loud and keeping it at a steady volume in order to make it easily comprehensible. A commentator wrote in early 1930 that speech so

foregrounded, “while it may result in technically good recording, will cause all voices to seem to come from the same plane and thus destroy the effect of spatial depth, so necessary for dramatic effect.”⁴⁸

The novelty of sound also could induce viewers to register the unnaturalness of the sound more acutely. The novelty drew attention to qualities of film speech that soon would become submerged within the total filmgoing experience. Initially, viewers were unable to process synchronized speech as routinely and transparently as they had the silent film intertitle.⁴⁹ They might find the speech fascinating not for anything a speaker was saying but simply because the speaker could be heard saying anything at all. To viewers used to following a film narrative relatively distraction free, this sort of ravenous interest was something new. Viewers would soon be gauging, unimpeded, the characters’ emotional states from the tones of their voices and listening, undistracted, to dialogue to gain information about what was happening in the stories; at first, however, synchronized speech could harbor fascinations that competed with these basic functions. A *New York Times* foreign correspondent implied in April 1930 that Parisians who could not understand English were turning out to see Hollywood talkies.⁵⁰ Clearly the virtues of synchronized speech as a conveyor and clarifier of story information were not foremost on these viewers’ minds. A critic noted that the first all-talking film, *Lights of New York* (Foy, 1928), “would have been laughed off the stage had it been presented without benefit of Vitaphone”; he then added that “novelty, however, has a fascination all its own.”⁵¹ Another commentator recalled in 1931 that “in the early days of talking pictures both stories and actors were forgotten—every one went to the cinema for a voice.”⁵² Such comments suggest that early sound film viewers could be engaged less by the semantic content of a speech utterance than by the very fact of it. Viewers so engaged would be more inclined to notice the *textural* qualities of the speech, which, as I have noted, could seem to them obtrusively unnatural. Initially, then, synchronized speech carried a strong potential to impress viewers with its *strangeness* and its *materiality*, two qualities the speech would substantially lose once viewers grew accustomed to sound film and once the quality of the sound itself had sufficiently improved.

The increase in medium awareness meant that general reception during the period could be less predictable than in the years immediately preceding and following the transition. During this time of relative instability, synchronized speech could pin a viewer’s attention on a speaking figure, as it did the *Photoplay* critic’s on Shaw, or it could direct attention to the

film as a visibly and audibly present object within the theater auditorium. Crafton's characterization of critical debates surrounding the voice during the early part of the 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."⁵³ Until the voices took up permanent residence within the actors' bodies, sound film could strike a viewer as a dazzling reproduction of a preexisting unity or as merely an approximation and reassembly (however thrilling) of that unity. According to the latter view, cinema was less a window that had always been transparent—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.⁵⁴ This is our starting point for understanding the "shrinking of personality" 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*

Like the smallest movements that could rivet viewers 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 Will 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."⁵⁵ A 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." *Photoplay* wrote that when Shaw walks forward, "you hear his footsteps—scrunch, scrunch—on the path." And reportedly Sam Warner was thunderstruck when he found that he could hear the pianist in a Vitaphone demonstration film unbuttoning his gloves.⁵⁶

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."⁵⁷ But

were actors now really exercising their lips to a greater degree or were viewers now just more sensitive to these movements? Another commentator, without mentioning sound film, 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.”⁵⁸ Another, who did explicitly link sound to his sense of the current enhanced potential of faces—especially ones viewed in close-ups—to appear grotesque, 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 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.⁵⁹

This comment, which resembles ones that Tsivian finds from the early cinema period—expressions of shock and disgust at the graphic ugliness and gigantism of close-up faces—suggests that faces in early sound films could appear strangely energized when they were mouthing synchronized speech.⁶⁰

Such changes in the appearance of objects in pro-filmic space could be compounded by another by-product of medium-sensitive viewing. Audiences also now—and just as Tsivian finds them doing during the early cinema period—were projecting elements of the cinematic discourse onto the diegetic or story worlds in the films.⁶¹ We see this happening in mild form above, where a close camera view yields a “huge physiognomy.”⁶² Tsivian’s examples of this act of projection in early cinema viewing include interpreting a shot in which the camera is moving toward a figure’s head as one in which the head is moving toward the camera (or growing larger in size), and perceiving the edges of the frame as bounding a mysterious, unseen zone with the power to suck objects, persons, and even physical space into itself.⁶³ Tsivian is careful to stress that, very quickly, viewers learned to distinguish discursive elements from diegetic

ones. Still, he maintains, throughout the early cinema period, films could elicit sensations of motion and transformation, even in viewers who knew better, and these sensations could turn watching the (to our eyes) most mundane film into a strange and even vertiginous experience.⁶⁴

Sometimes early-film viewers projected onto the diegesis elements they perceived to be *missing* from the cinematic discourse. And so 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 1895 review of the first Lumière program when it came to Russia. For Gorky, the views these films presented of domestic life and other everyday scenes were far from ordinary. They provided glimpses into a world that was strangely lacking in sound and color, a "kingdom of shadows."⁶⁵ 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 during 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."⁶⁶ Considering *The Jazz Singer*, *Harrison's Reports* noted 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." 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." A journalist covering a 1923 Phonofilm demonstration featuring a man and woman dancing to musical accompaniment found it "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."⁶⁷

These comments suggest that "absences" in the cinematic discourse could trigger perceptions of altered presences within the diegetic world. Among these presences, the most notably altered consistently was the human figure, for at least two reasons: the instant centrality of synchronized *speech* in the initial responses to sound film, and the long-standing centrality of human figures in classical Hollywood cinema. What then was projected onto these figures? 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 whose power rivaled the uncanny realism of the first sound films.

The force of sound's novelty could impart to the image tremendous vibrancy, 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."⁶⁸ But, as I have noted, Martinelli also seemed to Hall like a mere shadow on that screen. Figures now could seem anemic compared to the full-blooded characters and stars in silent films, and their voices could sound as attenuated as their countenances were wan. Something vital had been added along with the sound, but also something vital had been leached away.⁶⁹ Figures now seemed more vivid and 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, these figures now could seem distinctly *less* alive than before.

This negative potential of sound film was intuited by Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler in their 1947 book, *Composing for the Films*. The authors wondered why musical accompaniment had so often been considered indispensable in silent film exhibition. They speculated that music helped to compensate for the lack of sound and color in the image, and masked its inherent ghostliness—then 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."⁷⁰

The authors point to two reasons why film speech during the early sound period could seem to issue from bodiless mouths, "speaking effigies." First, at that time every viewer was "uninformed." Second, nondiegetic music was not yet a norm of Hollywood sound cinema. There was disagreement as to how much, if any, nondiegetic music a film should contain. Some believed that music would annoy viewers who were trying to listen to dialogue; others worried that viewers would be wondering where the music was coming from.⁷¹ Still others feared that viewers would find incidental diegetic noises distracting, as well.⁷² As a result, dialogue scenes sometimes played out against inordinately quiet backgrounds. One who complained wrote in 1932, in the *Motion Picture Herald*, that "it seems strange that the power of music to make mobile and to vitalize has not been given more

recognition in its application to the audible screen.”⁷³ (The previous year Bakshy had written that most silent films, when screened without musical accompaniment, “appeared emaciated, bloodless, lacking in emotional appeal and dramatic accent.”)⁷⁴ Unaccustomed viewers—and talking films with long stretches of virtually no sound *except* talk: Adorno and Eisler suggest that this combination could send disquieting sensations rippling through film audiences during the early sound period.

Comments from the period suggest that persons in sound films could indeed look to viewers like flat photographic entities. Luigi Pirandello wrote in 1929 that “the voice is of a living body which produces it, whereas on the film there are no bodies or actors as on the stage, but merely their images photographed in motion.”⁷⁵ A critic commented the previous year that “the moment a character begins to speak from the screen his bodily unreality becomes marked—at least until one becomes accustomed to it.”⁷⁶ Such feelings of unreality contributed to a general sense that more sensory information needed to be added to Hollywood films. A commentator in 1930 wrote that “the demand for color photography . . . increased to an almost unbelievable extent after the advent of sound and is steadily increasing. No doubt the incongruity of black and white images speaking lines and singing songs like living beings created a demand for a greater illusion of reality. This color photography helps to supply.”⁷⁷ In 1929 Bakshy, after expressing his dissatisfaction with the illusion of reality on view in current films, wondered if “the introduction of stereoscopic projection coupled with color will solve this problem.”⁷⁸ Cinema has long aspired to present an ever fuller sensory experience of the world. It is an impulse that André Bazin celebrated and one that Noël Burch, less delighted, has called “Frankensteinian.”⁷⁹ Evidence suggests that this impulse grew more desperate when sound was added to the sensory mix.

Especially troubling was that this impulse could become even more desperate when faces were shown vocalizing in close-ups. Close-ups could seem to frame, as I have noted, huge physiognomies, marked men, and disgusting displays of lip gymnastics. Also, faces in close-ups could appear more *lifeless* than when viewed from other distances. Sound expert Joseph P. Maxfield found it “difficult and at times almost impossible to obtain a good illusion with extreme close-ups, that is, with pictures where the head and top of the shoulders only fill the whole screen. The reason for this partial failure is not wholly clear.”⁸⁰ Another wrote that “in dialog sequences, quality and volume remain constant while the cutter jumps from across the room to a big close-up. At such times one becomes conscious that he is witnessing a talking picture.”⁸¹ Spiked increases in

awareness of the artificiality of a film probably provoked more intense projections of cinematic discourse onto the faces on display. Close-ups, then, long valued by Hollywood for their capacity to strengthen character identification and glamorize stars, could distort and enervate human faces with a special power.

Regardless of the shot scale, sound film could seem to lack something, whether it was color (though it had always lacked this) or realism (though sound should have made films seem more real). Human presence in particular seemed afflicted. One option for figuratively describing this impression was to note a “shrinking 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.”⁸² A third possibility was to call the figures ghostly.

Soundless feet could seem to wear rubber shoes or, as for a 1915 viewer of Edison’s Kinetophone, could effect a more total, ground-up transformation: “A dog runs about noiselessly like a disembodied ghost, but his barking is far too loud.” In 1929 a commentator described a film with “but two oral sequences in which the characters roared like monstrous ghosts.” The same year, Pirandello attributed the inherent absurdity of 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.”⁸³ 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 ‘eyefull.’ In the talkies, much as you may be moved by the drama, you feel it is a drama in a world of ghosts.”⁸⁴ And in 1990, a respondent to a Maine survey on cinemagoing 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.”⁸⁵

These comments suggest that 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.⁸⁶ Both times, the discursive element that was new raised awareness of the remaining silences and blank spots in the total sensory package, and the sensations that could result had the power to infiltrate and counteract impressions of the medium’s advancement toward greater realism.

Tsivian and also Tom Gunning have described this dynamic of ambivalence running through the earliest responses to cinema.⁸⁷ They help us discern 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 alike, 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; and at both times, a possible outcome of their efforts was to find the filmic world altered in a way that made it appear ghostly. At the dawn of the sound era, the both immediate and ingrained centrality of the human figure within the viewing experience guaranteed that the foremost manifestation in the freshly resurrected ghost world of the cinema would be an uncanny body.

SHADOWS IN THREE DIMENSIONS

One of the most pleasing numbers on the program followed. It was not a motion picture at all, but a shadow-graph dance, performed by real people behind a screen. When viewed through the televue the shadows were not flat, as they would be ordinarily, but rounded, and separated as figures from each other. The effect was decidedly novel and pleasing.

“Vivid Pictures Startle,” review of a demonstration of the Televue, a stereoscopic film process, *New York Times*, 28 December 1922

The bloodless faces could appear ghostly. Ghostliness suggests a lack of physical substance, the semitransparent wispiness of an apparition. Impressions to this effect probably were helped along by the period’s increased screen awareness, which would have made the figures seem as flat as shadows. Comments from the period, however, also suggest that synchronized speech could imbue figures with a physically emergent quality. Hall, for example, who wrote that it is “better to have words missed than to have them exploded from the screen in such a frightening fashion that it virtually killed the action of the story,” also found, as I have noted, the singing Martinelli himself seeming ready to burst through the screen.⁸⁸ The two comments taken together suggest that in a reception environment in which discursive elements are tending to slip easily onto diegetic entities, perceptions of synchronized speech exploding from the screen possibly triggered perceptions of speaking bodies about to do the

same—this at a time when the flatness of the screen *also* was asserting itself with a forcefulness to which viewers were not accustomed. I am describing a possible tension between the heightened awareness of the two-dimensionality of the screen image and the potentially frenetic visual intensity of the vocalizing human figure.

A theater chain executive wrote in 1930 that “no matter how effective your silent sequences might have been, they were still shadows, legends, phantoms. Once they become vocal, however, they become people; they come right off the screen into the laps of the audiences—whatever their effect was while mute, it trebles, and trebles again, in voice.”⁸⁹ In 1932 Knox, describing recent improvements in motion picture sound technology, wrote that “many persons listening to Wide Range reproduction have expressed themselves as having the feeling that the actors are actually present in person. They seem to stand out in bolder relief, and one is not continually aware that it is only a picture.”⁹⁰ It seems safe to assume that if improvements in synchronized sound technology could endow human figures with a quality of embodiment, the initial applications of the technology probably aroused similar sensations—with an added force deriving from the technology’s newness. If so, the impressions of bloodlessness may have combined with ones of the vocalizing figures as more densely and protrudingly corporeal than the figures in silent films. This would help to explain why figures in silent films seemed to Bakshy “more phantom-like, but no less expansive and penetrating,” than the ones in sound films. Possibly, then, viewers experienced a *composite* sensation of these figures. First, as Claudia Gorbman writes, “the recorded voice fleshed out the human body on the screen.”⁹¹ Also, however, the voice initially drained this body of its color and vitality. Such a body, at once lifeless and three-dimensional, might have born a resemblance to a living human corpse.⁹²

A MODALITY

BELA LUGOSI: I just finished *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* for Universal.

FRED ALLEN: Another musical, hey?

“Texaco Star Theater” radio program, 25 April 1943⁹³

I began this chapter by making some contrasts between horror films, gangster films, and the lofty, experimental *Strange Interlude*. I conclude it by claiming that with respect to the coming of sound, the closest rel-

ative of the horror film is the musical. Describing their relationship now will help me refine my characterization of the uncanniness of the sound transition cinema while also previewing the means by which I will link that uncanniness to the origins of the horror genre.

Both genres seized on the abrupt tonal shifts that early sound filmmakers sometimes effected in their films unintentionally. Consider movie musicals, in which musical numbers stand apart stylistically from the sequences that precede and follow them. A film shifts gears when a number starts, then shifts them back again after it is over.⁹⁴ The songs would threaten to break away from the rest of the film if their narrative motivation (the characters are putting on a show, the characters are falling in love) and the viewer's familiarity with the conventions of the genre were not holding the numbers firmly in place. This characteristic register switching has roots in the cinema of the sound transition.

During the transition, as Lastra and Altman note, two models competed for dominance as film practitioners experimented with different ways to integrate sounds and images.⁹⁵ One model, the scale-matching (or invisible auditor) approach, adjusted the sound scales of the individual shots to correspond to the shots' image scales. And so close-ups would be accompanied by "close-up sounds," while figures speaking in long shots would be harder to hear. The other model, the foregrounded-sound approach (which I have already found contributing to sensations of the unreality of close-up faces), placed dramatically significant speech atop a hierarchy that overrode the image scales of the individual shots and organized within itself all sounds according to their narrative relevance and presumed viewer interest.⁹⁶ Lastra writes that the scale-matching model, though it did not prevail, "found validation in an important early sound film form—the Vitaphone short—whose representational needs meshed seamlessly with the perceptual model of recording."⁹⁷ A model aimed to reproduce the experience of watching a live act from the vantage point of a theater seat proved ideal for the early Vitaphone shorts, which, Crafton observes, strongly resemble the numbers in many early musical feature films.⁹⁸ Through this pair of observations we can sketch a line of likely influence and development.

According to this sketch, the scale-matching model, which from the standpoint of narrative flow, represents the more disruptive of the two, gets funneled into the numbers in early musical feature films. The genre takes advantage of this model's assertion of an invisible auditor to position viewers in front of virtual live musical performances. Musicals latch onto—and codify—aspects of the more "disturbing" model, the one that

tended to imbue single shots with too much weight and distinctness with respect to the other shots in a sequence. These codified aspects, with the weight and distinctness transferred from individual shots onto whole, segmented musical numbers, are in turn passed down through the history of the genre, which never stops encapsulating musical numbers to varying degrees.⁹⁹ Musicals thus carry forward into the sound era vestiges of the scale-matching model, and a short-lived idiosyncrasy of the transition furnishes raw material for a durable genre practice. We can compare this development to the inception of the horror genre as it relates to the sound transition. The precise nature of the parallel I want to draw is richly suggested by Katie Trumpener, who considers the first feature film that Douglas Sirk directed, when he was still in Germany and his name was still Detlef Sierck.

The film is *April, April!* (1935), which interests Trumpener because it manifests the “texture of transient moments” and because it poses what she refers to as “the problem of the overlap film.”¹⁰⁰ Already the prospects for comparing the musical and horror genres seem tantalizing, even though the transient moment that is Trumpener’s main interest concerns the overlap between the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of fascist Germany. Still, Trumpener also is interested in sound in Sierck’s film, which, she finds, bears the markings of an early sound film. For her, the film’s transitional status (in both senses) is most evident in its two brief musical sequences, especially where they begin and end:

Sierck audibly and visibly shifts out of one modality (with its own particular use of space, sound, rhythm, and the bodies, gestures, and language of the actors) into a different modality, then back again. By now, nothing could be more familiar than such shifts. Since the early 1930s, indeed, they have formed part of the generic code of the musical, evolving from the practical need in early sound films to change the miking (and thus the mode of camera work as well) whenever there was a move from an action sequence into a singing sequence or vice versa. Ever since, when musical numbers appear or disappear in a musical, there is often a perceptible shift in the atmosphere, the emotional “weather” of a movie. The action of the film slows to a dream-like halt—or shifts into a different tempo; and then, suddenly, the onset of the music lifts the audience out of the inert everyday world into the more magical world of the song. When the music is rudely interrupted, or slowly fades away, the audience awakens, as if from a dream. If the movie itself works on its viewers as a kind of enchanted dream, a song sequence is a dream within a dream.¹⁰¹

Several points Trumpener makes here are worth underscoring: that aspects of musical films reach back to practical production realities of the

sound transition; that the grouped, salient, formal characteristics of musical numbers can usefully be called a modality; that the modal shifts into and out of these numbers trigger changes in the “emotional ‘weather’” of a film, with the numbers themselves constituting something like self-contained weather events traveling across the screen of the viewer’s consciousness; and that this emotional weather is manifestly dreamlike, even against the dreamlike background of the film itself.¹⁰² Each of these points correlates with an aspect of the uncanny body of early sound films.

The uncanny body was a modality. Its appearance marked a shift in a viewer’s perception of the space, sounds, rhythms, bodies, acting gestures, and spoken language in a film. And like the numbers in a musical film, this body came and went. It might be called up by a voice suddenly sounding reedy or booming, a cut to a close view, an audible pop accompanying a film edit, or a combination of these events. Also, this shift, like the one into a musical number, reorganized a viewer’s experience of a film. It provoked a change in the movie’s “emotional ‘weather,’” effecting a transition into a more deeply dreamlike state—although in the case of the uncanny body, this state was closer to a nightmare than to an enchanting reverie.

The patchy, inconsistent quality of early sound films thus becomes important for understanding the early developments of two genres. In the case of the musical, the numbers are not distinctive unless comparatively banal talking sequences precede and follow them. Put another way, there is no modal shift if the whole film is more or less uniformly dreamlike. Trumpener juxtaposes Sierck’s film with ones directed by René Clair in which “the extremely subtle, balletic passage between spoken and sung sequences reinforces both the sense of waking dream *and* the sense of everyday life itself—street life, domestic routine—as a kind of unselfconscious but choreographed group dance, enchanting in its quotidian ordinariness. *April, April!* handles its transitions far more baldly, pasting its two musical sequences into the narrative with an audible montage, a visible shift in register and rhythm.”¹⁰³ Gradual transitions of the sort Clair orchestrates, however beautiful, prefigure the formal distinctness of the musical film less strongly than do the abrupt starts and stops in Sierck’s film.

Similarly, perceptions of the uncanny body were intensified by perceptions of the sometimes normal appearance of human figures in early sound films. That is, the relative instability of film style and reception during the period acted to set the uncanny body off against its surroundings more crisply. A dismayed fan wrote to *Picture Play* in 1928:

With the Vitaphone the smooth effect of varied action must be cut and always subordinated to the voice, to words, thus striking at the very heart of all that motion pictures have come to represent.

With the Vitaphone, one has a feeling of discord within, or a sensation like a tug-of-war. That part of one's receiving set which the cinema has developed is led to expect one thing, and before this is completed, the *mind* must be focused on the voice. It is a case of oil and water mixing.¹⁰⁴

Impressions like this one—of churning internal disarray, fugitive parts within stormy wholes—enhanced the general “atmospheric conditions” for the integrations of both songs and living corpses into new Hollywood genre productions.¹⁰⁵

We can think of the uncanny body as a form of reception interference or static. This shadow of life did not represent—from the standpoint of an institution dedicated to telling stories about flesh-and-blood living persons—a welcome side effect of adding synchronized sound to films. But neither were these incidental viewing energies counterproductive from the standpoint of every Hollywood interest. In the pressbook for *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), director James Whale made the following analogy as he reflected on the art of frightening audiences through the power of suggestion: “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.”¹⁰⁶ Whale, Tod Browning, and others made monsters out of the static of the sound transition. Browning's was not the first film to do this. The next chapter looks at some other early sound films as it examines the mechanism of this transformation.