

*Body, Voice and Noise:
Acting for Sound Films as Debated
in the Interwar Romanian Press*

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Abstract: Sound cinema arrived on Romanian screens in 1929 to a moderate response. Critics and artists alike pondered over their status as an altered version of silent cinema, filmed theatre or a new art form. All three alternatives were further confronted to the status of the actor, as delineated by theatre, in an attempt to clarify the uncertain future of the film actor who used both his body and voice. This paper conducts a survey of articles on these issues published by Romanian interwar newspapers. Their authors reached various conclusions, from predicting the imminent failure of sound cinema and, thus, the disappearance of the spoken film actor, temporarily subjected to enacting on celluloid a shadow of his defining stage performance, to examining solutions that conciliated spoken dialogue with the sound dimension of film.

Keywords: acting, sound cinema, sound film, spoken film, silent cinema, theatre, Romanian press, interwar period.

On 27 April 1929, *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927) premiered at the Trianon cinema in Bucharest. Newspapers included it in the ordinary program of silent films to be screened in the cinemas of the Romanian capital.

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However, audiences enjoyed a special Saturday evening film screening judging by the fact that it hosted tenor Arnoldo Georgewsky, alongside a choir and an orchestra, and featured the technical support of the Pantophone sound system. This alternative to the unavailability of the Vitaphone did not bother the only journalist who reported on the event. Having initially questioned the purely cinematic value of a film dependent on a sound device, he was left impressed by what he valued as “a new affirmation of the silent art.”² By the fall of the same year, *The Singing Fool* (Lloyd Bacon, 1928) was being advertised in the press in special highlighted sections as a sound film. The spectators who attended the premiere gala, on 27 October, in the same Trianon cinema, had been asked to wear formal attire.



Fig. 1: The Bucharest premiere of *The Singing Fool* advertised in the *Viitorul* newspaper, 27 October 1929

In a more relevant shift, the sound era of cinema started to be critically addressed. Articles published around the time *The Singing Fool* was distributed in Romanian cinemas operated a firm recognition of silent cinema as an art form, along theatre, as both were confronted with the assault of the “talkies”. A first attempt at predicting their future invoked the previous confrontation of silent films with theatre that revolved around the power of the spoken dramatic text. From the standpoint of cultural journalist and translator Vasile

² L. H., „Premierile săptămânii,” *Curentul*, April 28, 1929, 4.

Timuş, a decisive argument in this matter derived from the already proven inability of silent cinema to discrown the Word, despite its impressively perfected cinematic instruments such as on location *mise-en-scène*, detailing of the action by means of framing or visual effects. Even by taking into consideration future improvements to sound systems that would capture and restore the human voice in all of its tones and modulation, and even the ambient noise, Timuş concluded that sound cinema could achieve perfection and rightful success. But it would still remain “a wonder of lifeless mechanics”³ forever unable to equal the actor of the alive theatre.

A few weeks earlier, the pages of the same *Rampa* newspaper hosted journalist and future screenwriter Nicolae Kiriţescu who took a harsher stance on films in general, and sound films in particular, despite not having had the opportunity to experience the latter up to that moment. In his opinion, sound cinema represented a direct effect of capitalism, in a quest to redress the inherent decline of the silent cinema industry. Kiriţescu’s further arguments concerning the superiority of theatre to film coincided to a large extent to those formulated by Timuş. Thus, the sound film spectator’s task would not only remain that of contemplating “the acting of photographs”⁴ instead of the theatre actor’s physiognomy, but also listening to the gramophone instead of the human voice uttered on stage. As the frequency of articles on the subject started to increase, it became obvious that the broader question did not limit itself to interrogate the differences between the cultural experiences provided by the stage or the silver screen. Instead, it also addressed the status of the actor when he was to approach them both through his craft.

“Theatre cannot die; sound film cannot live”

Despite the delay in the projection of sound films in Romania, cultural journalists were soon eager to educate their readers with informed and detailed articles⁵ regarding the history and development of sound cinema, as well as

³ V. Timuş, “Cinematograful a vorbit şi la Bucureşti,” *Rampa*, October 30, 1929, 1.

⁴ N. Kiriţescu, “Cinematograful vorbitor,” *Rampa*, 4 October, 1929, 1.

⁵ I. D. Răducanu, “Istoricul filmului vorbitor. Chinetograful,” *Rampa*, 7 June, 1930, 2.

the effect it had on the American and European star system. A journalist signing with the pen name C. Henry wrote an instructive series called "A Brief History of Cinema" that followed the steps taken by the film industry towards the accomplishment of synchronized sound. Simultaneously, special columns titled *Echoes*, *New Production* or *Letters from Hollywood* gathered news on the international world of cinema, including films already in the production stage. Various opinions on the future of sound films expressed by renowned artists complemented this up-to-date overview. For example, one could find in the pages of *Rampa* contradictory predictions belonging to international playwrights, directors and actors. A similar debate among Romanian intellectuals became more articulate beginning with 1931.

In July 1931, playwright and professor Traian Gheorghiu wrote a series of articles for the *Opinia* newspaper, polarizing the crisis of the theatre and the development of sound cinema. In them, he underlined the financial aspect of the crisis rather than an exclusively aesthetic one, as the economic recession of the era left no financial endeavour unaffected, whether theatre tickets or books sales. But Gheorghiu also saw a culprit in the success of spoken films that generated profit in spite of unfavourable odds. In trying to explore the clash between the decline in theatre audiences and the growing interest of the public for films, all four articles in the series gradually built an argument for silent cinema as a fading art form to be deplored.

Referencing psychoanalysis in a non-sexual interpretation, as well as the importance of storytelling during the formative years of the child, Gheorghiu associated silent cinema to a limitless expression of the spectator's repressed desires of his daily existence. "Cinema was and should remain the rendering of tendencies through images, adopting by this the process of dreams."⁶

C. Henry, "Un mic istoric al cinematografului. Cum s-a ajuns la filmul sonor," *Rampa*, 14 June, 1930, 2.

C. Henry, "Un mic istoric al cinematografului. Filmul sonor. Primele experiențe practice. Aspecte tehnice," *Rampa*, 15 June, 1930, 2.

Henry, "Un mic istoric al cinematografului. Primele filme vorbitoare. Al. Jolson – Între Europa și America," *Rampa*, 16 June, 1930, 2.

⁶ Traian Gheorghiu, "Cinematograful și criza teatrului. (1) Filmul mut și sonor. Asemănarea cu visul. Exagerările lui Freud. Poveștile și sufletul omenesc. Anomalia filmului sonor," *Opinia*, 21 July, 1931, 2.

Therefore, cinema, that he restricted to silent cinema, became a complementary art to that of theatre, as theatre represented the artistic rendering of life by means of the actor, namely his pantomime and voice. In this equation, the spoken film fell short, an intruder with no place. Not even the possible task undertaken by film of saving memorable acting performances from oblivion, by recording them on celluloid, could save it from the status of "pseudo-theatre".⁷ Since the actor's art, his performance on stage, could not be separated from his being at that moment of specific connection with the audience, a recorded memory of it would be reduced to a noisy shadow. To sustain his demonstration, Gheorghiu felt obliged to provide several answers to the reasons behind the success of sound cinema. Admitting he had fallen to its curiosity several times, he added to this effect on audiences two more attributes of spoken films. First, he indicated their fast pace, in accordance with that of the daily rhythm of the modern spectators, and second, there was the comfort provided by light content, such as the adaptation of a novel for the screen. "Theatre cannot die; sound film cannot live"⁸ was Gheorghiu's abrupt conclusion.

By the end of 1931, D.I. Suchianu revisited his own similar sombre verdict. In "Funeral Oration for the Sound Cinema" the reputed film critic expressed his regret over having been right in predicting that "the spoken film falls, collapses lamentably, irremediably."⁹ In keeping with the caustic title of the article, Suchianu admitted the merits of sound cinema to have demonstrated the audiences "all that cinema is not, cannot do, and will never be."¹⁰ Once more, the main argument in this respect invoked the specificity and purity of silent cinema. In order to better illustrate the opposing nature of sound cinema, he resorted to an indicative example:

⁷ Traian Gheorghiu, "Cinematograful și criza teatrului. (3) Între artă și film vorbitor. Cauzele succesului inițial al filmului vorbit," *Opinia*, 23 July, 1931, 1.

⁸ Traian Gheorghiu, "Cinematograful și criza teatrului. (3) Între artă și film vorbitor. Cauzele succesului inițial al filmului vorbit," *Opinia*, 23 July, 1931, 2.

⁹ D.I. Suchianu, "Discurs funebru pentru cinematograful vorbitor," *Realitatea ilustrată*, 10 September, 1931, 22.

¹⁰ Ibid.

(...) we have a film in which the main idea is jealousy, or disillusion, or the struggle, or whatever it would be. The fundamental feeling decomposes artistically into facts, into events. The hero leaves, or instead he does not leave, or gets upset, or the opposite, he gets a hold on himself (choosing the facts depends on the talent and good taste of the filmmakers). But let's assume all these facts have been found. The hero must not leave howsoever, but strictly cinematographically. For this we will make him – I don't know – clench his fists, or button and unbutton his shirt, or grind his teeth – we will demand a movement from him, or more, as short as possible, manifold and more *other* than the previous ones. We cannot limit ourselves to printing letters on the screen "Then X leaves for the countryside", nor show him only getting on and off the train, first in New York, second in the small station of his ranch; it would be too deficient; the audience would not be satisfied; we would have to figure out hundreds of small movements indirectly evocatory, small arrangements of people or things, that would symbolize leaving, a toilsome leaving, or a desperate one, or an exciting one, in accordance with the requirements of the film. (...) But today, these innovations are useless. For the heroes feel cosy in their armchairs and explain in more or less literary words what is happening.¹¹

What Suchianu decried was an imbalance between movement and the spoken word. The first would be subordinated to the latter, depleting the cinematic composition specific to the silent film of its autonomous complex meaning. Thus, the film critic and historian saw as inevitable the return to silent cinema in a quest to achieve visual poems such as *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin, 1931).

Although subsequent opinions on the fate of sound cinema became more nuanced, its downfall was still being predicted as a certainty. In a short article dated 10 January 1932, film critic Alex. Calistrat praised the photographic image as the defining instrument of film, as long as it remained black and white. He dismissed all colouring processes subsequent to filming as inappropriate substitutes to the preferred natural colours of reality. To this quality of the image, he added the significant role played by orchestras in accompanying silent films, to operate a distinction between sound films and spoken ones. All these elements came together in defence of the black and white cinematic

¹¹ Ibid.

image, accompanied by live sound, to encapsulate the essence of cinema. At the other end of the spectrum, he placed the film whose characters spoke. He argued that by speaking actors stole declamation from the theatre, instead of remaining faithful to pantomime. Sceptical about the future of sound cinema, Calistrat described a possible solution that would reassess the artistic possibilities of the actor who spoke on screen in accordance with the defining features of silent films, solution inspired by the films of Anatole Litvak. If the actor's lines, reduced to the minimum, were to only substitute the intertitles, and if the music were to dominate the acoustic landscape by never stopping, thus partially covering the dialogue, then the spectator would identify only changes in tone that supported the actions of the character.

The case of the first sound and spoken Romanian film

A promotional short article¹² from 1931 recommended cinemagoing as an efficient solution for preventing... arteriosclerosis. In a humorous note, the ad described the program and facilities of a newly inaugurated cinema destined for sound and spoken films. Instead of an afternoon siesta, Bucharestians could benefit from the healthier alternative of attending one of the eight daily film screenings that started at 14 o'clock. They could arrive directly to the cinema by tramway, and once there, air ventilation provided the needed comfort for a July afternoon spent at the movies. Despite Suchianu's harsh disapproval of American audiences¹³ that he evaluated as superficial in their interest in sound cinema, such an ad proved that Romanian audiences displayed a similar positive reception. Furthermore, by 1930, the first Romanian sound and spoken film had been produced.

An adaptation of the novel *Ciuleandra*, written by novelist Liviu Rebreanu, the first sound and spoken Romanian film was anticipated¹⁴ to be a triumph, but turned out to be a fiasco. As a German-Romanian co-production,

¹² Opinia, "Ecouri," 4 July, 1931, 4.

¹³ D.I. Suchianu, "Discurs funebru pentru cinematograful vorbitor," *Realitatea ilustrată*, 10 September, 1931, 22.

¹⁴ Rampa, "Primul film sonor și vorbitor românesc," 24 October, 1930, 1.

it enlisted German director Martin Berger to direct a cast of Romanian actors, it was filmed in both Romanian exterior settings and Berlin studios, and benefited from two versions of dialogue, in both languages. On 23 October 1930, film correspondent B. Cehan telegraphed¹⁵ the editorial office of *Rampa* delivering the news that the film had been screened privately to the members of the Romanian legation and community in Berlin, anticipating a great success. Three days before the scheduled Bucharest premiere, the producer of the film, D. Max Schloss, gave an interview¹⁶ detailing elements of the film that were expected to reward the Romanian spectators with a memorable experience.



Fig. 2: Teaser scene from *Ciuleandra*, *Rampa*, 29 August 1930

¹⁵ Cehan, "Ciuleandra a fost proiectat la Berlin," *Rampa*, 23 October, 1930, 1.

¹⁶ *Rampa*, "D. Max Schloss, directorul soc. germano-române de producție ne vorbește despre *Ciuleandra*," 27 October, 1930, 1.

Primul film sonor și vorbitor românesc

«Ciuleandra», primul film sonor și vorbitor românesc, este desigur așteptat cu nerăbdare de publicul bucureștean.



Jeana Popovici-Voina

În curând acest film, care deschide largi perspective filmului românesc, va fi prezentat pe ecranele cinematografelelor Roxy și Capitol.

Scenariul filmului e bazat pe cunoscutul roman al d-lui Liviu Rebreanu, și a fost filmat de regisorul Martin Berger în țară și în studiourile berlineze.

Versiunea românească a filmului (câci are și o versiune vorbită în limba germană, destinată străinătății, care astfel va face cunoștință cu realizările noastre), este interpretată de d-nele Jeana Popovici-Voina, Elvira Godeanu, Alice Sturdza, Thinelles Anys și d-nii N. Bălățeanu, Petre Sturdza, D. Sirceteanu, Hans Stüwe și Eugen Rex.

Jeana Popovici-Voina joacă rolul Mădălinei, Elvira Godeanu este vampa filmului.

Aceste artiste sunt bine cunoscute publicului bucureștean, care le-a aplaudat de multe ori pe scena Teatrului Național.

D-ra Thinelles Anys e încă necunoscută publicului românesc.

Sub acest pseudonim se ascunde o frumoasă concetățeană, care a jucat în multe filme germane.

«Ciuleandra» este primul film sonor în care joacă.

Muzica filmului este în mare parte pur românească și e interpretată de cântăreți români, dintre care s'a relevat mai ales studentul Coste. Muzica de dans e compusă de Artur Guttmann, care o și interpretează.



N. Bălățeanu

Autorul dialogurilor este d. Aurel Constantinescu.

Sistemul de înregistrare sonoră este Signose-Breusing.

Fig. 3: Article promoting *Ciuleandra* as the first sound and spoken Romanian film, published days before its premiere, *Rampa*, 24 October 1930

The premiere of *Ciuleandra* (distributed internationally as *Echo of a Dream*) took place on 29 October 1930, at the Roxy cinema, in front of an audience that included members of the Romanian royal family. An exalted review¹⁷ of the film praised the Romanian scenery, music and traditional costumes, but subtly hinted at a certain awkwardness of the actors, excused as inherent to any first type of experience. But commentaries¹⁸ published by the *Cuvântul* and the *Curentul* newspapers during the following days casted light on the actual extent of the indignation the film had caused. Readers were informed that the committee of a society dedicated to the preservation of Romanian traditional dance and music was planning to address the authorities, demanding they prohibited the distribution of the film and calling for a public report on the funds that the Romanian state had invested in its making. The reasons of this outrage varied from a deficient representation of the beauty of the Romanian countryside, or the questionable morality of some characters, to ethnographic inaccuracies in the representation of traditional dances.

The unnamed critic of the *Patria* newspaper, that was published in the city of Cluj, learned¹⁹ that the scandal surrounding the film prompted some scenes to be altered and some to disappear altogether from the copies distributed in the cinemas across the country. In all possibility, such actions could do little to adjust the technical shortcomings of the sound component. In a vicious review, that included personal attacks damaging the reputation of both the director of the film and the writer of the novel it adapted, journalist Ion Dimitrescu described, most likely in an exaggerated manner, how:

the recording of the voices is appalling: some seem to speak from their bellybutton, others seem to have displaced their speech between the oesophagus and the bowel. One character, gifted with the vernacular name of Mirinescu, speaks a Westphalian Romanian, a peasant from the court, clad in

¹⁷ Criticus, "Cronica cinematografică. *Ciuleandra*," *Dimineața*, 2 November, 1930, 3.

¹⁸ *Curentul*, "Filmul *Ciuleandra* și milioanele contribuabililor," 3 November, 1930, 8.

Curentul, "Protest împotriva *Ciuleandrei*," 5 November, 1930, 8.

Cuvântul, "În jurul filmului *Ciuleandra*," 5 November, 1930, 2.

¹⁹ *Patria*, "Informațiuni. *Ciuleandra*?" 14 November, 1930, 4.

native apparel, sings Prussian hit songs and speaks his native language in the undecipherable dialect of Saxony. The honourable P. Sturdza, in the character of an officer of state, seems damned to purr his voice from the viscera.²⁰

In a more amusing account of the narrative of *Ciuleandra* and report on its premiere, the film critic of *Rampa* noted²¹ that, strangely enough, the only actor who spoke Romanian accurately was the German Hans Stüve. Not only did the technical system deteriorated the lines spoken by the actors, but the German director seemed to have imposed an unnatural rhythm to the Romanian pronunciation. The same film critic detailed the benefits of this “enunciation in instalments”²² as lead actor Nicolae Bălățeanu took long enough pauses between the words of the sentence “Good afternoon, father!” for him to leave for the foyer, grab a meal at a restaurant nearby and still return on time in the cinema to catch the last syllabus. By all accounts, the undeniable failure of *Ciuleandra* derived, at least partially, from an inadequate demonstration of speech rendered on screen.

The lead actress in *Ciuleandra*, Jeana Popovici-Voina, had addressed the particular aspects of performing in sound cinema in a interview²³ prior to the premiere of the film. Being at her first experience of this kind, she envisioned the artist performing in spoken films as being similar to that of the theatre artist, in the sense that an actor with perfect articulation was superior to others, as the acoustic system amplified all errors. To this quality, she considered the photogenic appearance as still remaining essential in front of the camera. Regarding the fate of those actors who had built a career in silent cinema, but were confronted with imperfect declamation, she identified as a viable solution their casting in roles demanding reduced dialogue, avoiding sounds that would alter the euphony.

²⁰ Ion Dimitrescu, “*Ciuleandra*. Dansul milioanelor, cu duetul Berger-Rebreanu,” *Curentul*, 3 November, 1930, 2.

²¹ Sell, “Maidan cinegrafic,” *Rampa*, 1 November, 1930, 1.

²² Sell, “Hors d’oeuvre,” *Rampa*, 2 November, 1930, 1.

²³ *Rampa*, “Primul film vorbitor românesc. De vorbă cu d-na Jeana Popovici-Voina,” 27 August, 1930, 1-2.

Balancing sound and words

In discussing *The Jazz Singer* and *Ciuleandra*, Romanian critics operated a distinction between sound and spoken films, under the broader concept of sound cinema. A sound film was described as featuring music and ambient sounds, while a spoken one included uttered words. A chronological survey of relevant articles touching on the art of acting in these two types of films reveals the debates spanned from 1929 to 1932 and enables tracing a more tolerant perspective on the possibilities of the art of acting in spoken films, mirroring the opinions expressed by Jeana Popovici-Voina.

In 1929, a *Rampa* contributor signing as B. C., most likely Cehan, estimated²⁴ that only two Bucharest cinemas were financially capable of implementing the Western-Electric sound system. The films to be projected were presumed to restrict themselves to two or three dialogues at most, in favour of the main attraction that was represented by the musical score. But in his opinion, minor sounds such as steps, applause or sobs were to complement it as the true revelation of sound films. A similar composition formula was supported by engineer and founder of a film production company, A. Ștefănescu, who referenced “spoken actualities”²⁵ such as the funerals of French marshal Ferdinand Foch as indicative of an impressive and efficient blending of the sound of marching troops and military music with the orders given in a low voice.

The paradox of the spoken film actor was highlighted by the already mentioned C. Henry. By being selected from the theatre stage, the first silent film actors had been forced to abandon vocal expression in their quest to develop another type of artistic language. The effect of words was translated into refined gestures and pantomime carrying the meaning of the character’s feelings. At the peak of this perfected art form, the same actors were demanded to speak once again, this time on camera. Henry illustrated his argument with the example of famous German actor Emil Jannings who in his roles “was silent, but his movements spoke.”²⁶ If he were to perform in a spoken film, Henry speculated

²⁴ B. C., “Vom avea filme sonore în România?” *Rampa*, 5 September, 1929, 2.

²⁵ *Rampa*, “În marginea ecranului,” 13 September, 1929, 2.

²⁶ C. Henry, “Interpreții în filmele vorbitoare,” *Rampa*, 30 March, 1930, 2.

that the audiences would feel a certain lack in his acting style, similar to “a ladder missing a step”²⁷ due to the attention he would feel obliged to assign to his voice. Instead of a conclusion, the author of the article asked himself whether there would ever be spoken film actors capable of resolving the dilemma of which weapon they should charge better, the word or the physical acting.

A question that did find a response concerned the future of spoken films confronted with the language barrier was envisioned in 1931. Resorting to the success of films made by René Clair, Josef von Sternberg and Ernst Lubitsch in cities all around the world, a journalist for the *Universul* newspaper declared their films “perfectly international, just as before, during the silent film era.”²⁸ In his opinion, the primal condition for a spoken film to achieve success among foreign audiences was to apply the principles of silent cinema, treating the dialogue as the least important element, a mere noise among the other sound manifestations. A fellow journalist for the *Dimineața* newspaper adhered²⁹ to this conclusion, praising the resonant aerial fight scenes in aviation films as eloquent for the possibilities provided to filmmakers by sound cinema.

From 1933 onwards, critical stands on sound and spoken films were replaced in the Romanian daily press mainly with interviews of artists discussing their development. On occasion, critics published commentaries on such perspectives they found stimulating or controversial. In 1935, Cehan addressed³⁰ an article published by Hungarian writer and stage director Ferenc Molnar in the *Wiener Journal*. Envisioning a future of sound cinema conciliatory towards theatre, Molnar saw “the film of tomorrow; the perfect film”³¹ with sound, in colours, available to be watched at home by means of television. “I see the future of theatre, its splendid and unimaginable future, in the evolution of the film”³² with halls filled with millions of spectators able to watch filmed theatrical achievements from all corners of the globe.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ M. B., “Poate fi internațional filmul vorbitor?” *Universul*, 14 June, 1931, 5.

²⁹ Ion Golea, “Filmul de aviație,” *Dimineața*, 19 January, 1932, 6.

³⁰ B. Cehan, “Un eretic,” *Rampa*, 31 May, 1935, 1.

³¹ Quoted in B. Cehan, “Un eretic,” *Rampa*, 31 May, 1935, 1.

³² Quoted in B. Cehan, “Un eretic,” *Rampa*, 31 May, 1935, 1.

Regardless of Cenan's reaction to Molnar's text, bringing it into requisition subtly signalled a certain flexibility regarding sources, arguments and case studies involved in the Romanian critical exploration of the future of sound cinema that was underway.

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