

THE TRANSITION FROM SILENT TO SOUND FILM IN POLAND

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In my dissertation I study the transition from silent to sound film, including the pre-conditions and aftermath, that occurred in Poland in 1929 and 1930. I argue that in the transition the language chosen for scripting and producing films contributed to the widening cultural divide between majority and minority groups in Poland. I contend that in the 1930's film ceased to present the possibility of national unity or universal, non-language-based understanding and came to be acknowledged as an international, but language-specific cultural product. As it became a necessity, the act of choosing a language for film production began to carry cultural, psychological and social consequences for the minority and majority national groups in the country. From this point it is possible to speak not of film culture as it existed in the years of silent cinema, but of multiple film cultures. I develop my argument through analysis of the changes in production, exhibition, and theoretical writing brought about by the transition.

The introduction to my dissertation serves two purposes. First, it offers a brief overview of Polish history in the first four decades of the 20th century. I describe the conditions relevant to the emergence of cinema: the Russian, Prussian and Austro-Hungarian Empires that divided the formerly Polish lands and the reinstitution of the Polish state after the First World War. I then provide a summary of the main political and cultural events of the twenty-year period of political independence and analyze the impact of these events, including the economic depression, political transformation, rising tension between majority and minority groups, and the expansion of creative output in the fields of Polish and Yiddish literature, print media and literary theory on the film industry. Second, I trace the transition from silent to sound film in several different countries in order to situate the film industry in Poland. I consider the motivations, practical difficulties and successes experienced by national film industries of various sizes and in various stages of development, noting the contending desires for technological advancement and economic growth that the holders of the patent rights in sound film equipment attempted to reconcile in their foreign markets.

This dissertation aims to be the only extensive English-language history of Polish and Yiddish filmmaking and exhibition in Poland between 1896 and 1939. The first chapter chronicles the history of film production from 1896 to 1939. I provide descriptions of the major films of each period and biographies of the major filmmakers. I examine the people and events of each period: the beginnings of film production, attempts at inventing equipment and the first narrative films in 1896-1914; documentary production during the First World War; the foundation of a national film industry in the newly independent country and the "golden age" of silent cinema in 1918-1929; the transition to sound film; the consolidation and commercialization of the film industry in 1930-1935;

and the blossoming of Yiddish cinema, after a seven-year lapse in production, in 1936-1939. I provide an in-depth examination of the situation surrounding the production of the films that marked the transition to sound in 1929 and 1930, including the import of new equipment and the acquisition of skills. I look at foreign investment and initiatives to create films simultaneously in several languages. I examine how the demands of investors, which began to include cinema owners and people outside of the industry, increased as a result of drastically rising production costs after the transition. I analyze the most well-received films as well as student movements to reject the emerging system in support of avant-garde, “artistic” and “socially constructive” films. Through an analysis of the process of acclimation to the new technology, I argue for the attachment of great significance to the differences in film production in Poland before, during and after the transition.

The second chapter takes up selected writings from the period between 1927 and 1933. Drawing entirely from original sources, I analyze the changes in theorizing about film with regard to the relationship between word and image just before and during the transition. I study the writings of theorists, critics and other intellectuals on the differences between silent and sound film. I study the meaning assigned by writers in Poland to film language. I analyze their repeated requests for film to serve as a universal language in connection with related linguistic movements, such as Esperanto, that flourished in Poland at this time. I argue that these theories and movements relied on the filmic image as silent and therefore were displaced in the transition to sound. During the transition a new understanding emerged with regard to the communicative properties of the medium that questioned the desire for non-language-based communication. This new understanding produced a significant change in the possibilities and perception of film in Poland.

The third chapter chronicles the history of film exhibition from 1896 to 1939. I trace the evolution of cinema from the travelling exhibitors at the turn of the century to the elaborate supercinemas of the 1930's. I describe the growth of distribution companies and the effects of the government's fiscal priorities and censorship policies on film distributors, cinema owners and audiences. I compare the exhibition of imported films with the exhibition of domestic films and describe the traditions surrounding the practices of intertitles, subtitles and dubbing. I examine the situation of motion picture theaters before, during and after the transition in order to demonstrate the impact of the transition on film-going practices. I describe the changes in social behavior that accompanied the transition, specifically with regard to the division of motion picture theaters into Polish-only and Yiddish-only that occurred as films began to speak to one language group exclusively. I analyze the role of cinema in the country's social structure and the reaction of audiences to its transformations. I argue that the transition from silent to sound film in Poland in effect increased the segregation of the country's majority and minority groups and ensured the complete separation of cinemas into Polish and Yiddish.

Based on my study of these four decades of cinema history, I contend that the importation of sound film technology had a broad and lasting effect on culture in Poland before the Second World War.