



During the 1920s the British film industry faced huge competition from America, with only 5 percent of films screened in the UK being British. Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, Clara Bow and Douglas Fairbanks all became household names as the US star system began to generate huge audiences for American products. Across Europe, film makers were experimenting with narrative techniques, the power of editing and discovering the impact that different shot types might have on an audience. Directors such as Eisenstein, Fritz Lang and Carl Theodor Dreyer were all creating a new filmic aesthetic.

Most of all, it was the advent of the sound picture which revolutionized the whole cinema industry.

Sound films had been around since 1926, thanks to sound-on-disc technology (using a device such as a phonograph to play music in sync with a film) rather than optical sound (which combined audio and visual information in one film strip).

In Hollywood Warner Bros.' 'The Jazz Singer' had ushered in the birth of talking pictures, so there was now increasing pressure on the British film industry to produce its own full-length sound talking features.

The first British sound films were much poorer quality than the sparkling backstage musicals that American studios offered during the same period and the British silent that had preceded them.

Adapted from Charles Bennett's 1928 play by director Alfred Hitchcock, 'Blackmail' was originally shot as a silent movie. However, during the shooting, Hitchcock re-shot certain scenes with sound. Released later in 1929 'Blackmail' became officially recognized as Britain's first official 'talkie'.

The film tells the story of Alice White who is the daughter of a shopkeeper in 1920s London. Her boyfriend, Frank Webber is a Scotland Yard detective who seems more interested in police work than in her. Frank takes Alice out one night, but she has secretly arranged to meet another man. Later that night, Alice agrees to go back to his flat to see his studio. The man has other ideas, and as he tries to rape Alice, she defends herself and kills him with a bread knife. When the body is discovered, Frank is assigned to the case, he quickly determines that Alice is the killer, but so has someone else, and blackmail is threatened

'Blackmail's cinematography owes a huge debt to German Expressionism with its use of light and shadow and wonderful acute angles. This may be down to the fact that the 25-year-old Hitchcock had been sent by Gainsborough Pictures to Germany in 1924. He worked at the prestigious UFA studios in Potsdam and was exposed to the artistic approach to film making exemplified by European film makers.

Between the end of World War, I and the early 1930s UFA employed some amazingly influential filmmakers: Ernst Lubitsch, Fritz Lang and Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. Hitchcock spent time with Murnau observing his making of his 1926 masterpiece, 'The Last Laugh'

Hitchcock's time in Berlin, including his 1925 directorial debut 'The Pleasure Garden' (1925), was clearly a wonderful apprenticeship. The claustrophobic perspectives and long shadows so typical of German cinema at the time are clearly seen in his first thriller, 'The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog' (1929).

Initially It was expected that Hitchcock would shoot only a portion of Blackmail as a "talking picture". However, the director instead shot most of the film in sound.

'Blackmail' displays many of the stylistic elements and themes with which Hitchcock would come to be associated: the famous Hitchcock cameo: here he appears in a more substantial interlude as a bus passenger being pestered by a little boy.

The 'blonde in peril' and the use of famous landmarks in his movies, in this case the finale taking place inside the domed roof of the Reading Room at the British Museum.

'Blackmail' boasts pacy dialogue and sophisticated sound design, such as when repeated mentions of the word "knife" weigh heavy on our heroine's conscience. This famous scene where the murder takes place sums up Hitchcock's infamous attitude to his thrillers: "if the audience sees a knife, they know it's going to be used".

The silent version of 'Blackmail' was released just after the sound version. It actually ran longer in cinemas and proved more popular, largely because most cinemas in Britain were not yet equipped for sound!

If the 1920's overturned the ways in which audiences experienced films, the 1930's would usher in a time of financial hardship and social problems which would also have an effect on the film industry.