

DIRECTION

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American Film VS. The American Scene

In bringing back the usual revelations from a trip through the Middle West, I want to repeat the oft-declared amazement that American films, although technically of United States manufacture, reflect the barest minimum of the American scene in these United States. The rare attempts of the *Grapes of Wrath* (or its more childish but just as sincere companion-piece *Gold Rush Maisie*) and *Primrose Path* to seek and show new dramatic settings, are the exceptions that prove the rule of formula.

If the producers are seeking new outlets for their newly bubbling patriotism, they might be (uselessly) advised to remove their blinders the next time they move from coast to coast and get out at some of the stations. They could see something of that magnificent drama of man, nature, time, need, greed, that is the struggle of the U. S. Soil Conservation Service. They could see a different civilization than they know by missing their plane almost anywhere on the Mississippi shore, or by taking an elevated through Chicago's South Side or a streetcar to the mills suburbs of Pittsburgh. Believe me or not, there's a lot more dramatic material in Pennsylvania than *Kitty Foyle* and *The Philadelphia Story* display. But I suppose that that, too, is a power lightly relegated to the documentary film. *Valley Town* doesn't play clever games—it is Pennsylvania. *And So They Live* is the Kentucky hills; *Power and the Land* is an Ohio farm. It does, however, require more imagination to work with reality than with the drawing room.

The only other group of films besides the documentary to enjoy the job of drawing upon the American scene (not even the newsreels realize how much they need this treasure) is the film comedy. From the dramatic comedy of *Primrose Path* down (or, equally, up) through the insane pleasures of the Marx Brothers and the life of frustrated whim led by W. C. Fields, the comic action seems to derive from authentic native source and observation. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm so grateful for the reflection, that I don't mind if it has been distorted in the comic or satirical process—it's still more a reflection than the cheap commercial passions that most of the "serious" scenarists and directors substitute for keenness and truth. The only real southern small town since *They Won't Forget* has been in *Sing You Sinners*. (Actually, the South has had a truer year than most years, in spite of *Gone With the Wind*, for it has had the rationality of *One-Tenth of Our*

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Nation and the belief of *The Biscuit Eater*.) Now, wouldn't it be wonderful if for every *Love Thy Neighbor* we could have a *Bank Dick*? Then we could sit back and tell all the A films to go sit on



Above: *CHRISTMAS IN JULY*, with Dick Powell and Ellen Drew, and *ARISE MY LOVE* with Claudette Colbert as a foreign correspondent (both PARAMOUNT).
Below: Katherine Hepburn in *PHILADELPHIA STORY* with John Howard, Cary Grant and James Stewart.
Bottom: Chico, Groucho and Harpo Marx in *GO WEST*. These two films come from METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER.



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their tax. Let us pray that Preston Sturges keeps aloft the banner of the B film comedy and that his success makes the American scene popular again in Los Angeles. The documentary can't do it alone.

FILMS TO WATCH FOR:

- Bank Dick.* My candidate for the big 1940 comeback.
- The Great Dictator.* My candidate for the future.
- The Long Voyage Home.* A pretty film, but too emptily sentimental for my taste. The critics can have its art. Take along a member of the N. M. U. when you go.
- Rhythm on the River.* The best tunes and twists of the year. Did you see *Sing You Sinners?*
- Christmas in July.* A film so pleasant that it seems too short!
- Go West.* Haven't seen this yet, but it has to be good.
- Power and the Land.* Don't let your local RKO theatre show this without your being there.
- Arise My Love.* If you have to see a movie about foreign correspondents, see this one.
- Hotel du Nord.* A film whose every move is unexpected and logical.
- Fantasia.* Even the disappointing parts are worth seeing.
- The Great Beginning.* A Soviet film, but did any American producer make a film on women's rights this year?
- The Philadelphia Story.* An enormously clever coating for a pretty nasty, or maybe I can say, vicious, pill.
- Night Train.* This thriller is 50% successful in its attempt to imitate Hitchcock.
- Trail of the Vigilantes and Rangers of Fortune.* Two Westerns ordinary except in competence, humor and point.
- The Howards of Virginia.* Miscast but in a noble mold.

SAVE YOUR MONEY

(if you can resist the obvious temptations of the following):

- Hudson's Bay* (or *Sabotage in 20th Century's Scenario Department*)
- Son of Monte Cristo, Little Men*
- The Letter* (sorry, Miss Davis and Mr. Stephenson)
- Comrade X* (I still can't believe that Vidor made this)
- Love Thy Neighbor, Kitty Foyle*
- Flight Command, The Thief of Bagdad*
- Santa Fe Trail* (John Brown as a newspaper cartoon anarchist)
- Escape*
- No, No, No, No, Nanette*

J. L.