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AN ENLIGHTENED EVALUATION OF THE MOVIES AS A SUBJECT OF CONVERSATION—AND CRITICISM

ALTHOUGH some 85,000,000 admissions are paid every week in the United States, there are only three groups of people who have anything to say about what they have seen in a movie theatre. Of course I am not counting such conversational flights as "Jees, some picture, eh?" or "They get worse every time!" Nor am I considering the remarks of the man who sat right next to the lucky devil who won five dollars on the Screeno-Bingo.

Of those who can or care to converse about the films there are, first of all, people from Hollywood connected with what is reverently known as The Industry. They can talk of nothing else, and conversation soon takes the form of a monologue in which you play the original listening stooge.

As a rule, Hollywood people have little serious interest in the films beyond their salaries and their vanities. Unlike novelists, painters or musicians they are not trying to "say something." If you assume they are, you will reveal yourself as an innocent. Remember that for the producers Hollywood is simply a factory assembly line, and for the writers and performers a chance to get theirs in a hurry. Once a film has come off the line and run through the chain theatres they all want to forget about it. It is bad manners to talk to Hollywood people about a picture more than six months old. Maybe this is an unconscious admission of the fact that most films are of necessity trash. Always, however, the *new* picture on which they are now working is going to be a honey . . . "big . . . great . . . stupendous . . . a colossal smash . . ."

It took the Film Library, organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, to start the first serious, comprehensive collection of old films and historical motion picture material in America. Reluctant and bewildered at the stupidity of anyone with a historical interest, Hollywood however granted this Film Library rights to sufficient old negatives to make up

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programs which are now sent around to colleges and art museums all over the country, for study. If you run into any of these they will give you useful background material.

Second among those who are interested in discussing the movies are the hundreds of thousands of adolescents and lonely women who fatten on the high sugar-content of the fan magazines. These people live in a neon-lighted, chromium-plated dream world in which the movie stars are their personal friends. Their new hair-dos, dresses, husbands (or wives), and dance steps are of vital importance. Obviously your first move is to disassociate yourself from these hard-breathing enthusiasts and quickly identify yourself with the third group—those who, in spite of everything, believe the motion picture to be a respectable and important medium of expression.

There are quite a few in this last group and some of them take what they call the cinema or even the *kino* (not to be confused with a gambling game) quite seriously indeed. Some are in high schools and colleges where they attend lectures on the history and technique of the film. In this same group is a smaller band of super-critics who work desperately to prove they have nothing in common with the ordinary, vulgar movie fan. Some of these become quite snobbish and their talk gets so rarefied you can hardly understand what they are saying. More about these later.

There is probably no quicker way to prove that your intentions toward the movies are honorable than to talk about pictures in terms of their directors. Although Hollywood publicity only occasionally mentions directors, they are infinitely more important than actors in producing good pictures. Directors are assisted by writers, actors, scenic designers and cutters, but they are the bosses. They set the style and pace. They encourage or discourage an actor's natural tendency to give a scene a particular inflection. In a very few cases they share their authority with the leading actor

involved, but even then they are the co-ordinating forces which make the pictures jell into a final form.

Directors often have styles as distinctive as those of novelists, musicians, or painters, and in spite of Hollywood's big business tendency to get the wrong man to direct the wrong picture, it is often possible to recognize these styles. Some of the more important directors of recent years are:

FRANK CAPRA: *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*

WILLIAM DIETERLE: *Story of Louis Pasteur*, *Life of Emile Zola*

JOHN FORD: *The Lost Patrol*, *The Informer*

GEORGE CUKOR: *Dinner at Eight*, *David Copperfield*

FRITZ LANG: *M*, *Fury*

MERVYN LEROY: *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, *They Won't Forget*

FRANK LLOYD: *Cavalcade*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*

LEWIS MILESTONE: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Front Page*

WESLEY RUGGLES: *True Confession*, *Sing You Sinners*

KING VIDOR: *The Big Parade*, *The Crowd*, *The Citadel*

ALFRED HITCHCOCK (British): *The 39 Steps*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*

ALEXANDER KORDA (British): *Private Life of Henry VIII*, *Rembrandt*

RENÉ CLAIR (French): *Le Million*, *À Nous La Liberté*

JULIEN DUVIVIER (French): *Poil de Carotte*, *Carnet de Bal*

JEAN RENOIR (French): *Madame Bovary*, *Grand Illusion*

Two other names should probably go on any honor roll of today's film makers: Walt Disney of the animated cartoons and Pare Lorentz whose Government documentary shorts show a rare intelligence and understanding of the cinematic idiom.

While Hollywood as a whole often boasts that it is an industry and not an art, individual writers, directors and actors sometimes sneak in a little art here and there so that bits, sequences

or even whole pictures are frequently excellent. How these get through the religious, nationalistic and commercial censorship meat grinders is a mystery—but it is enough that every year some do. These few pictures and their equivalents from other countries furnish the basis for serious conversation about the motion picture.

The movies in general may be tricky conversational topics for those who think they can safely glide out with a firm footing on the assumption that any picture which is received with delight by the millions is necessarily dreadful. This may be a safe rule in other media of expression, but with the movies you can't be sure. Remember that everybody, including the critics, liked *Test Pilot* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, to pick two at random.

Despite the almost psychopathic adoration which some young people have for movie stars, there is no reason why you should speak of all these highly publicized people as either unimportant or stupid. Good acting requires extraordinary intelligence and insight into character and should command all your respect. You are no longer just or justified in talking about the beautiful-but-dumb movie star. When sound came in around 1929 and actors were more completely revealed by their voices, there was a great change of personnel on the Coast and many a luscious cutie disappeared. A high percentage of today's leading players are first-rate actors. It has taken considerably more than a handsome profile or a seductive figure to put Charles Laughton, Paul Muni, Spencer Tracy, Charles Boyer, Harry Baur, Bette Davis, Margaret Sullavan, Greta Garbo, Myrna Loy and Katharine Hepburn where they are today. Nor can you deny that the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields and Carole Lombard are brilliant, if slightly cockeyed.

Merely to insult Hollywood and all its workers is to indict yourself on two counts. It shows first, that you don't understand the appalling difficulties involved in turning out over five hundred features a year, and secondly that you think Hollywood is making pictures to please you. It is not. It doesn't give a whoop for you. It is aiming at an abstract average of you and 100,000,000 other customers located all over the world. All it hopes is that you may like some parts of each film.

Don't say to your friend who has just returned from six months' work on the Coast: "You know better than that! Why did you put such-and-such in your picture? You know that doctors (lawyers, reporters, engineers, etc.) never talk like that." Of course he knows better, but the other three writers, the supervisor, the director, and the actors all thought differently, and they outnumbered him.

Don't blame Hollywood for its lack of interest in the world in which we live. Every political, economic, religious and commercial pressure group on earth camps on Hollywood's doorstep. By threatening reprisals in the form of special boycotts they succeed in keeping the movies impartial, noncommittal, non-controversial—and, usually, dull. In the past, even things which Hitler and Mussolini disliked were kept out of a film, although it now appears this restriction may be lifted. Already the Warners are making *Concentration Camp* and a story about German bunds in America.

This does not mean, however, that Hollywood is going in for controversy. It simply means that the cash revenues from Germany and Italy have vanished, and that since popular resentment against dictators has increased enormously here, fascism has become a safe and acceptable villain. In other words, fascism is no longer controversial.

Don't say you didn't go to see a certain picture because of lurid advertising. No movie ever made was as bad as some of those quarter-page ads make out. Frequently publicity men will seize on some irrelevant detail of an excellent but unspectacular film, and exaggerate it so that all intelligent people will keep as far away as possible. You have to find out about good films from reviewers and friends whose opinion you trust.

The most startling example of this I can recall was *A Lady's Profession* of a few years ago, a gay and charming comedy in which Roland Young and Alison Skipworth portrayed an impoverished English nobleman and his wife who came to New York to run a speakeasy. Red lights and pictures of Miss Skipworth leering out of a peephole in a door did everything to suggest the picture was about a brothel keeper.

Those who value the motion picture and see in it the most instantaneous and compelling means of communication devised since cave men

first started scratching drawings of running animals on walls, overlook such crude departures, just as parents overlook their child's bad manners.

Don't be patronizing about the motion picture's technical achievements. Whatever swaddling clothes may still hamper its subject matter, its mechanical achievements have been phenomenal. There have been no censorships or taboos holding back the cinematographers and sound engineers. Money for experimentation has been plentiful and new developments quickly put into practice.

And finally, *don't* patronize the motion picture's story telling techniques. To place yourself as seriously interested in the movies you should realize that although they are only about forty years old (with sound for about the past eleven years), their directors and technicians have invented, evolved and perfected a technique of telling stories and building up emotional climaxes so effective that it is now influencing all other forms of communication.

As I suggested before, there are among those seriously interested in the films a few very vocal super-critics who will go to desperate measures to cut themselves off from the sixteen-year-old fan club members who are interested only in Joan Crawford's latest costume. These people, usually earnest young men, are snobbish and inclined to be dangerous conversational adversaries. They are up on all the remote foreign pictures not shown in America, and will gladly use a foreign term just to put things on a higher cultural level and make you feel an oaf. They will talk to you about *régisseurs* (which is French for directors), cinematic fluidity, cinéastes, cinéplastics, ciné-organization, and the like. These last of course derive from cinema, and mean about what

you want them to. *Montage*, which abroad means simply the making and editing or cutting of a film, is not heard so much over here since it has come to mean a double exposure or trick picture.

Paul Rotha, the scholarly British film critic, takes all these matters very seriously in his 362-page *The Film Till Now* and his shorter, *Celluloid, the Film Today*. If you really want to qualify as an authority you might look into these studies.

All too often the hyper-critic is inclined to be a hothouse plant. He lives in a world of his own and gets precious little attention from any of the actual practitioners who are making our films, except occasional directors. Often he sees in a picture, even a bad local one, tendencies, techniques, and ideologies which the director and cast never realized were there. Certainly they never knew they had such wonderful foreign names.

Of all the special terms which have been evolved to describe cinematic characteristics, *visual flow* is probably the most justified, and most common. It applies to the smoothness with which both the pictorial and emotional elements are blended into an uninterrupted stream. But don't take this definition as hard and fast. It's every man for himself in this business.

The super-critic's real trump card is a foreign-made picture which has never been shown in America, talk of which leaves you far, far out on a limb. The only way you can reply to a panegyric about the subtleties of Nushi-Vlovvlovv's masterpiece *Fear, Pain and Starvation* is to ask your learned friend point-blank if he has ever seen the film. Nine times out of ten he will fumble and admit he has not. You can push him farther into a corner by asking him where it *has* been shown. If it has been seen only at a private showing in a friend's house in London or Paris you need have no further fears. Maybe it was directed by the friend. You can safely assume that any film which has never found enough of an audience to make an importation to New York profitable is of little consequence. Among the city's 7,000,000 people you can recruit an audience for almost anything.

Since the War we have had succeeding vogues for the best German, Russian, British and French films, the two latter enthusiasms still being in force. Some of these pictures have been mag-

nificent and a revelation of the film's versatility, but you have to be a little careful in discussing foreign pictures. American critics and literary people often have a bad rush of blood to the head and a bad rush of type from the typewriter when they catch a load of something foreign. All too often, it's the old trans-Atlantic snob appeal, for which we have been eager victims since Columbus' day.

The best way to embarrass a loud-speaking Hollywood missionary who salts his conversation with extra zeros until he is well into the millions, is to ask him whether that $86,000 gross that his picture earned during its first week in New York could have been due to the fact that Benny Goodman was at the theatre at the same time. Or maybe it was Maxine Sullivan? Or maybe they were giving away a car that week in Denver when the customers stood in line for two blocks before the box office opened? These gambling games, lotteries, and give-aways, together with the quantity-not-quality implication of the double feature, have lowered the prestige of the movies enormously in recent years.

As a final embarrassment for your friend with the fur-lined swimming pool you could ask him about that harmless but highly inaccurate bit of American folklore to the effect that the motion picture is America's fourth (or fifth) largest industry.

Comparative figures are difficult to get and inclined to be tricky, but from data compiled by the U. S. Census of Manufactures (1935), the annual dollar revenue of the whole "amusement industry"—including stage, opera, carnivals, circuses, etc.—puts it about thirty-first on the list. And of this motion pictures account for but 73 per cent.

But you are safe in maintaining that the motion picture is, and for years will probably continue to be, one of the world's great media of communication. It is far greater than any of its practitioners, and infinitely greater and more permanent than Hollywood.

—Creighton Peet