

"THE PICTURES"

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THE Pictures in a human-short life have grown into one of the world's great industries and one of the chief occupations ("going to the Pictures") of mankind. During their growth they have been singularly free of friends, champions and apologists. Most business or social developments of size, and appropriate wealth, are called a boon to humanity, or at least a new opportunity. But the Pictures have been vilified: they are immoral and obscene; they are vulgar; they are an extravagance (the unemployed should not go to them at all, and the whole class of the poor would be better away); they are full of propaganda and insidious advertising; they are contrary to religion. So they have been censored, banned, quota-ed, tariff-ed and czar-ed. They have had to depend on the average unvocal man, woman and child, who went to the Pictures in England for instance during 1935 on the average more than once a week.

However, a few intellectual friends can be found for almost anything. An expensive American magazine recently published a handsomely illustrated leading article, glorifying the roadside hot-dog stand! The Pictures were difficult for intellectuals because of their overwhelming popularity with the masses. They were a social phenomenon indeed, but did not seem to possess inherently discussion-group qualities. The difficulties were overcome by the adoption of other names, "the Films" and "the Cinema" or "Kinema," and an announcement that in these were the potentialities of a new art. At the same time the esoteric friends sought out rare Pictures, usually of foreign production, and showed these to the private societies into which they banded themselves.

Film Societies have existed and thrived for several years in London, New York, Paris, and a few provincial centres. It is now possible to appraise their theoretical value and practical accomplishments. It is interesting to do so, because the difficulties which in the past have prevented such societies from being carried on in Canada have recently been overcome. The *National Film Society of Canada* was incorporated under Dominion charter in 1935, and active branches have been organized in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver, with others in process of formation at the time of writing.

Certain important conclusions about the Pictures, determining other conclusions about film societies, their own giant growth

has drawn. If there is an art or the possibility of an art in the Pictures, it is an essentially popular art. Here is why. The Pictures are produced with a very complicated, massive and expensive equipment of machines. (Incidentally, a test of the long-debated compatibility of art and machines can be made with the Pictures). As with most machine processes, there are tremendous economies in mass production. There are also important economies in a method of distribution which was perfected by the famous *Standard Oil*, and which is now so general in business that it deserves one of business's own overworked terms,—“streamlined”. More has to be said of this streamlined system of distribution in the Pictures business in later paragraphs. The result of these conditions of production and distribution is that the Pictures must have a mass audience. Now that the Pictures talk and sing, this truth is final.

A popular art, if the expression is not self-contradictory, must be a pill thoroughly coated with entertainment. It can be argued that the pill must be a candy, sweet all the way through. Even so, the Pictures can be a department of aesthetics, according to some theories of that science. If the process leading to genuine aesthetic emotion must be direct and uncererebrated, aesthetic appreciation can be a popular capacity. Then, unawares, the Saturday night crowds going to the Capitol and the Paramount, by their relative size showing preference, are passing authoritative aesthetic judgment.

Relations between popular interests on the one hand, and minorities claiming to be distinguished by superior and usually bookish knowledge on the other hand, are often difficult. The commercial picture theatre and the film society are like the dirt farmer and the agricultural college graduate, with this difference: while neither the college farmer nor the film critic can use his own feelings or learned opinions as superior authority, the film critic is further limited by having no crops to show. Final decisions of the commercial Pictures audience are absolutely final in this popular art. Thus it can be concluded about film societies that unless they have some influence which is accepted by the Pictures, they serve no purpose but to satisfy individualism, of the flaccid not the rugged sort, in the people who patronize them. The whole reference of course in this article, it should be said, is to film societies as interested in entertainment or art. Pictures can serve other purposes—advertising, education. Film societies encouraging Pictures as a tool of education are of the same nature as kindergarten associations.

However, this negative conclusion about film societies, drawn à priori from the character of the art of the Pictures, can be counter-balanced by a demonstration that they have helped to improve the standards of popular entertainment. The sole opportunity for critical and cultural activity in a purely hedonistic field is to prove more, and more durable, pleasure.

There is evidence that film societies have contributed to the success of the Pictures in giving pleasure to their popular following. There are indications furthermore that the Pictures as a popular industry and occupation are now badly in need of further assistance which critical groups can possibly provide. The first part of this case finds its facts in the recent success of the branch of the commercial Pictures industry which is located in England. A former world monopoly of Hollywood has been broken. The British industry is commercially successful, very profitable, while the American industry has lost so heavily that its corporate and financial structure has been thoroughly shaken. While still technically less perfect, British pictures are distinguished by their realization of the entertainment values in a wider range of subjects. Like the cultured individual, the British industry is interested in and communicates its interest in many aspects of human activity. The romantic love of Hollywood is by contrast an adolescent preoccupation.

In the development of the Pictures industry in England, many forces of course have been at work, but influence can be attributed to the active film societies there on account of, first, the matter they have put into their programmes, and, second, the audience they have reached. English film societies have shown, for instance, a great many Soviet films. Especially in the early Soviet films, propaganda for economic objects, for instance the increasing of Russia's capital equipment by methods illustrated and glorified in the film "Turksib", was a guiding purpose. The success of these Pictures as entertainment proved that the stereotyped Hollywood "love interest" was superfluous. Again, the film societies, being less inhibited in their enjoyment by the obstacle of foreign languages, have served to bring to English notice outstanding directors, actors and camera men whose audience otherwise would have been limited to their native countries.

The audience reached by these film societies is, among other things, a part of the great audience of the general public. Having studied entertainment values in the societies' programmes somewhat systematically, and being also accustomed and able to publish its judgments, this audience has been able to speak to Pictures producers on behalf of the mass audience. This influence has been

beneficial in so far as the film societies group is guided in its expressed judgments on popular Pictures exclusively by the elementary aesthetic canon of entertainment.

Besides educating its members, making them critical, the English film society has influenced the general public indirectly through the public's critics, the newspaper writers, most of whom are ordinary members of the film society audience. A higher critical standard in England shows itself in Pictures reviews in the popular press which make genuine efforts to discriminate, instead of merely summarizing and reporting all advertised Pictures with equal and often fulsome praise, and the undisguisable touch of the press-agent's advance notice.

Whether film societies, to which many successful artists and writers have belonged from their beginning, will or will not be allowed the credit, it remains a fact that outstanding figures such as H. G. Wells in England and Jean Cocteau the French poet are actively participating in the present development of commercial Pictures.

An opportunity more than normally favourable to the film society type of influence was remarked above as existing in the present situation of the Pictures business. The delayed extension of the work of film societies to Canada is in these circumstances not belated. Indeed it is a symptom of a contemporary condition of the Pictures which film societies can help to improve. The influence of Canada, as the third largest market, the largest of all export markets for Pictures with sound in English, on an industrial art dependent on the loyal support of a mass audience, is not anything so negligible as Canadian participation in the production of Pictures.

Increasing difficulty of the Pictures industry in the last two years in providing entertainment that will draw the public to its houses is the phenomenon that film societies can take as an opportunity. The depression that is admitted in the Pictures business came so recently that it cannot be attributed entirely to the world economic depression. Signs of depression in the business are the familiar reactions of business worried by decreasing returns; Picture house managers are "fired"; there is juggling of positions in the higher levels of management; the "stars" of Hollywood make the news in fights with their directors instead of entertaining royalty; lawyers are getting work drafting amalgamations and reorganizations of the industry's super-companies; bankers are actually losing money. But this is not ordinary hard times, because some Pictures still draw old-time audiences, and a few producers, notably Walt Disney, are making a great deal of money.

While depression characterizes commercial Pictures, film societies including the branches of the National Film Society of Canada, as well as the occasional public offering, are meeting with increasing success. Film societies are drawing limited but capacity audiences. The explanation would seem to be that they are showing regularly what the industry would call "smart Pictures". These Pictures are superior as entertainment. The subjects commonly presented to film society audiences to-day have, in the first place, technical excellence. Technical skill in films comes *not* from the stage-designers, costumers and such, but in photography and the new trades of editing and cutting. Cutting and editing are processes of selection and arrangement (terms familiar in literature and painting) by which the individual "shots" and "sequences" of exposed film are built into the continuous reels of a Picture. In addition to these skills, the definitely artistic quality of imagination in the choice and handling of the subject filmed is evident. To define what is intended by the term "imagination" here would be to accomplish something writers on, for instance, the art of the novel have balked at, with the statement that it is an original and unanalyzable quality. So it may suffice to say that it does not produce a "Captain Blood" to show within weeks of the success of a "Mutiny on the Bounty".

Film societies are maintaining their following by selecting from the whole world's production those Pictures which by form of presentation or character of subject have outstanding merit as entertainment. They lean heavily on the production of "independents", small companies producing in English, companies producing in other languages which however are not difficult for their type of membership to understand, even companies which produce advertising or propaganda Pictures. By selection they are able to maintain their superior standard of entertainment.

It is customary at this point, in writing of "the films", to attribute film societies' success to their relative freedom from the dominant commercial influences, and to charge "big business" in the Pictures with degrading them to their present low standard of entertainment. The malign activities of big business in the Pictures are said to be, first, mass production, and second, a corollary, the "streamlined" system of distribution. The products of mass methods have to be disposed of with the same kind of efficiency. Producers' ownership, management, and unification of all stages of distribution right up to the ultimate consumer are as essential to large-scale, economical and profitable handling of Pictures as to the handling of the gasoline of *Standard Oil* and the cigarettes of *Imperial Tobacco*. For business (if not for politi-

cians) the channels of trade are the steady-flowing pipe-lines of *Standard Oil*, rather than Adam Smith's erratic markets which were constantly being flooded or running dry. To-day the products of the large Picture-making concerns are sold automatically; the majority of theatres belong to a circuit, and operate under contract to take whatever the producers controlling them have to offer.

The devices of big business in the Pictures work out in practice to have a number of effects which big business probably never contemplated and certainly disclaims responsibility for. A first effect on the consumer is that his choice of entertainment in the Pictures is limited. It becomes more and more limited as rationalization of the industry is more successfully carried out. As choice is restricted, the consumer's primitive but adequate method of artistic criticism, which is to prefer by his attendance the theatre which suits his taste, is lost. Loss of consumer's choice is a serious artistic loss, because through the local theatre manager it can powerfully influence the quality of Pictures entertainment produced. The independent theatre manager, making a study of the taste of his audience, can intellectualize their artistic responses and transmit them to the producers. If however the theatre manager must take what comes, artistic criticism falls to the most primitive form of all. The consumer's final critical procedure, which cannot be inhibited entirely by even advertising and the boredom of modern working hours, is to stay at home and listen to the radio. Doing just this has enabled the consumer to produce the current panic in the Pictures business.

Effects of business methods on the way in which Pictures are produced are apparent. With distribution guaranteed by financial control over theatres, the producers find that profits can be most effectively squeezed out of their great organizations by attending most particularly to their cost accounting. A better Picture will not get into more theatres and so increase their income from booking fees. Therefore, to realize increased profits the producers must reduce costs per Picture. And of course, having the huge overhead of their facilities for mass production to contend with, they must maintain and if possible increase their volume of production. But accelerated production schedules and the effort to reduce costs hurry actors and directors beyond their capacity for doing their best work. Time and money are not allowed for giving the care and finish to scenario on the one hand, editing and cutting and recording on the other, which are so important to the artistry of the final Picture. And most obviously of all, subjects and treatments become stereotyped.

Following these primary effects of big business methods in the Pictures on consumers and producers, there are also secondary effects. When the standard of entertainment falls near the limit of boredom, the consumer returns to entertaining himself. Then the bankers foreclose on the producers, whose super-companies are now their masters, demanding that since they decided to measure art by cost-accounting methods, their own skill must meet the same test. But the cycle does not end with the banks' foreclosures and allow production to begin on a new and perhaps sounder basis. Banks cannot lose, or at least cannot admit losses. Instead they attempt to thaw out frozen assets,—a process which for anyone but banks would be throwing good money after bad. Production remains on an unsound basis, whether operated by the 1929 type of merger promoter or by the present type of bankers' representative, if and as long as Pictures are treated as another business, governable by the same principles as oil, steel, tobacco.

The great Fox concern, although reorganized to cut current liabilities to a minimum, showed no capacity to earn what the bankers in control required to liquidate their loans. It appeared as a solution of this problem that all Fox needed was a director whose Pictures were making money. Such a director was Darryl Zanuck, who was making money for his company, *Twentieth Century*, by producing Pictures at low cost (for Pictures) in certain definite genres which he thoroughly understood, on an easy schedule, doing a remarkable amount of the work—scenario, directing, editing—himself. Zanuck's Pictures were made by arrangement with space and equipment at the *United Artists'* studios in Hollywood, and they were distributed on a percentage basis through *United Artists'* channels. For no other apparent reason than that his Pictures were profitable to the small company *Twentieth Century*, the bankers brought Zanuck to the Fox organization where there were facilities for a very large production schedule, a staff of assistants to keep efficiently busy, a tremendous overhead to be carried by the Pictures of the former self-sufficient independent Zanuck. In this situation there is no reason to expect the Fox financial situation to be greatly improved, and plenty of reason for the quality of Zanuck Pictures to deteriorate.

It is not necessary to elaborate the discussion of the Pictures industry to make convincing the argument that big business ruins the art of the film, and film societies should devote their showings to the work of independent producers. Sometimes this argument runs further, to the effect that film societies should make it their aim to educate the general public against the "combines" of large producers and chains of distributors. But there is an inconsistency

in the argument thus extended. Attacking the "combines" is especially illogical on the part of believers in economic planning to make fuller use of the benefits of mass production. Mass production of Pictures, keeping fully occupied the very expensive equipment needed, can be carried on without great losses only if there is a guaranteed outlet for all the Pictures produced. The advance bookings made by the chains and associations of distributors provide this outlet. Furthermore, distribution itself would be very expensive, and so disorderly as to cause interruptions of service, without a system of group and advance bookings. The economies of the present system are obvious and necessary.

It would be an alternative to attacking the system of distribution of Pictures, which admittedly has allowed methods bad for art to be used in production, if influence to improve artistic standards could be brought to bear directly on production. Let it be suggested, then, that the small critical group like the film society can be constructive, can help the popular art and the Pictures business in its present difficulties with the public, by supporting the work of directors of imagination and originality with the definite purpose of getting them opportunities to work in the larger public field, using the facilities of the large production and distribution combines, on terms of course which they will set so that their standards can be maintained. This plan is quite feasible; in fact it is working already in the Pictures, as will be shown by examples, and it needs no more power or force to make it effective with the leaders of Picture production than the publicity and box-office potential which a few film society successes give.

The artistic quality and the economic position of the Pictures are likely to be improved in the immediate future, without radical structural changes in the industry which must take time, if film societies simply exist. They must give their members better entertainment in order to continue in a healthy condition, and so almost automatically they give support to promising film artists. For the more distant future there is also reason for optimism. A form of organization which harmonizes machine production and mass distribution with the conditions needed for creative work has already been found, even in Hollywood. It remains only for this form to come to characterize the whole industry.

Significantly, John Ford's world-famous and all-popular Picture, "The Informer", was produced in conjunction with the *United Artists* organization in Hollywood. *United Artists* is a large-scale production and distribution organization. Founded by a group of older "stars" (Chaplin, Fairbanks, Pickford) who wished to produce Pictures for themselves, it is a production or-

ganization chiefly by providing facilities, equipment, for the making of Pictures. Independent individuals or groups can work with *United Artists* facilities on a rental or royalties arrangement, as their own masters. Through *United Artists* they can also obtain unobstructed access to substantial markets.

The example of *United Artists*, followed by the other large companies, would mean their offering to directors of originality and sufficient practical experience, financial assistance, studios, cast, distribution, and in lieu of present salary contracts, a bigger share in profits. It seems reasonable to believe that under this system some of the worst deterrents to artistry in Pictures would disappear. Certainly the companies would be in a better business position. High costs, the nearly victorious enemy of Hollywood, have their example in the high-rate, long-term contracts for salaries offered "stars" and directors and paid in advance of earnings. The legitimate theatre in New York and London has never permitted such practices to develop, and there is seldom difficulty in casting. In a more primitive way the legitimate theatre shows almost universally the form of organization recommended for the Pictures, with its separation of the functions of the theatre-owner and the producer-director or the producer-director-actor.

Meanwhile, film society members, as part of the general public, are seeing or will shortly see as outstanding commercial successes the latest work of several directors hitherto patronized chiefly by their groups. René Clair has made "The Ghost Goes West". Flaherty is making a film version of Kipling's *Jungle Books*. Anthony Asquith has directed an outstanding spy thriller, "Moscow Nights". A young director for whom a similar development may be expected is John Grierson. His "Drifters" and "Song of Ceylon" have been very highly praised after film society showings. Even the actors popularized through film society successes have been offered to and accepted by the mass audience, notably Peter Lorre of "M" in "The Man Who Knew Too Much", and Conrad Veidt, unforgettable in "The Student of Prague" and "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari", in a number of recent British Pictures.

An "elite", such as a film society would claim to be, to deserve the name, must work an influence on the taste of the general public. If exclusive or esoteric, even unintentionally or unconsciously, the group is merely a group, a negative group giving satisfactions of snobbery rather than art. Usually societies for the cultivation of artistic enjoyment begin with altruistic intentions, perversions coming about when expression for their intentions is thwarted. A policy for film societies to enable them to serve a purpose in the Pictures is easy to form when the characteristics of Pictures as industry and art are understood.