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THE CRITICAL CONDITIONS OF THE MOVIES

Taking the movies seriously can be a lot of fun—and very serious business indeed, fraught with profound cultural importances and profounder trivialities. Unlike the apocryphal blind man, who did not care what was playing as long as it was a movie, most people do care about what films they see, one way or another. But like the blind man, movie audiences usually have little choice. Or, rather, they usually have only an appearance of choice, from among an infinite assortment of commonplace variations on a few hackneyed themes, played by actors whose distinction is their predictability.

Those of us who see a great many films either acquire a heightened sensitivity to this illusory variety—and an exacerbated awareness of mediocrity—or we protect ourselves by simply re-entering each new film experience through the same door by which we left the last, aesthetic somnambulists too anaesthetized to keep awake. One of the worst things about the latter happening is that when the unusual, stimulating films do come along, we may be fast asleep and not get in the door at all.

Only a few films, of course, can be superlative. We sometimes forget that the others, inexhaustibly numerous and dependent for their success upon the very fact that they seem to recall every movie ever shown, are somehow needed in order that good ones can be made. As Gilbert Seldes remarked in a broadcast, for there to be good films "you've got to have the background of the second rate." But this must never be construed as an argument *in favour* of the second rate. What is meant is that in practical terms most of what film makers produce is not first rate, and that it could not be, even if they all tried their best with all their resources all the time.

Beyond the mass of movie "product"—the "programmer" films manufactured to provide exhibitors with staple merchandise—are the small numbers of films attempting to express some creative intentionality, as well as to make money. And beyond these, forming the growing edge of film as an artistic force, are the few great works—sometimes commercial

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failures, occasionally returning their costs only after long periods of release and re-release, but recreating the cinema in subtle or shattering ways, changing our lives for having seen them and their successors.

The great works presume the others and the industry that enables them to be made and to be shown. But they grow out of the creative failures, those fine films in their own right that may miss being masterpieces only by the distance between eloquence and the sublime. This is not a matter of progress, which would imply that today's mediocrity is somehow better than yesterday's masterpiece. What is involved is the need for a climate wherein creative people may be encouraged to risk failure, however magnificent, instead of being constrained to emulate success, however trite.

Such a climate cannot be created by the industry itself, although the producers and distributors unquestionably can assist or prevent its maturing. The public, informed and stimulated by responsible criticism, has the first and last say. But "the public" in this sense is not the mass audience, although it may be very large. A "public" is not a matter of size, but of awareness and concern. The mass audience forms and disintegrates casually. Its members relate to each other only by accident, suspending their separate identities as they direct their attention toward some seductive stimulus. A public is composed of individuals, who communicate with each other and themselves, participating in the experience of a work of art rather than submissively receiving the impacts of the moment in the noisy torpor of industrialized entertainment.

Films which do not conform to habitual ways of seeing are essentially *invisible*, in the phrase of Jean Cocteau. In a sense, one of the first things a creative film-maker must do is awaken the audience, transforming it, within the limitations of its members, from an inchoate mass to a sentient public. This is difficult to do without being merely sensational. Moreover, the most ingenious devices may become so commonplace, as movie follows movie, that they are absorbed as merely graphic symbols of the filmic language. Audiences seeing one of D. W. Griffith's early close-ups of an actress's face resented this apparent decapitation, shouting, "Show us her feet! Show us her feet!"—as yet unable to visualize a cinematic relationship that soon was so ordinary as to be considered necessary. More recently, the eccentric camera angles and severe, contrasting lighting of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* pounded the audience's sensibilities in shot after shot, until we were almost numbed, rather than stimulated. Yet, seeing *Citizen Kane* today, after more than fifteen years, we would have to pay special attention to be aware of those devices that were once simply shocking. By now they are part of the common

armament of film production, even as they are familiar terms in our visual vocabulary.

With so much profit possible from keeping people pleasantly unconscious, the wonder is that so much is made that tries to awaken and engross us. That most of these films do not achieve the sublimity they seek does not diminish their worth, which is real, even as the intentions of their producers are admirable, however unrealized. After all, there is more to be said for the faults of such efforts as *Bad Day At Black Rock*, *Night of the Hunter*, and *The Desperate Hours*, than for the perfected pointlessness of *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, the monumental vulgarity of *The Prodigal*, or the polished triviality of *Soldier of Fortune*.

But there is a point beyond which it is dangerous for us to follow our respect for the intentions of an artist. It is all very well to admire the worthy attempt that fails, but we must never assume the burden of success or failure. It is luxuriously easy for film-makers to blame the public when some seriously intended work excites little support. For one thing, there are always some in the public whose passion is to despise all the rest, and they will agree with any denigration of anybody but themselves. Unfortunately, many in serious film audiences, attending "art" theatres, museum showings, and film societies, seem to lose their capacity to criticize the esoteric, out of snobbishness or an exaggerated solicitude for the artist who has not had popular success.

It is interesting that this reservation of responsibility was stressed by one of Hollywood's most dedicated venturers after better films, Stanley Kramer, before one of the world's largest film societies, Cinema 16 in New York. Among Kramer's productions are *Champion*, *The Men*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Home of the Brave*, *The Sniper*, *High Noon*, *Member of the Wedding*, *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T*, *The Caine Mutiny*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *The Wild One*, and *Not as A Stranger*, which he also directed. Discussing those of his films which failed to make money, Kramer first absolved the distributors and exhibitors—although a case could be made that a few productions, like *Member of the Wedding* and *The 5000 Fingers of Doctor T*, had been unwisely handled and, for all their faults, might have reached a larger audience than they did. But Kramer took all the blame on the production end, remarking that while some of the films expressed "difficult" ideas, this had not repelled the public. Somehow, he said, the "gap" between the conception and public acceptance had not been bridged. *Member*'s costs were too high, forcing a poor try at mass acceptance in ordinary distribution; *5000 Fingers* had aimed at youngsters as well as adults, but ended up both too sophisticated and too obvious; *Cyrano*'s love story "never got off the ground," and the one in

Caine Mutiny ought to have been left out; *Salesman* needed to be a *tour de force*, but had a few performances that were inadequate: "The play was the finest piece of writing for the stage in twenty years. We muffed." Kramer, then, could be dissatisfied, just as the public had been disappointed. He closed his remarks on this point with the observation that he had come to realize, in evaluating the total of his work, that the failures made the "lucky ones" possible, and that the latter must "carry" the others. So long as he tries to make better films, we may agree.

Attempts to make better films, however, must perennially storm the walls of fortified stupidities about the nature of the movies—as business or as art. One of the silliest ideas with which movie industrialists, especially on the exhibition side, like to justify themselves is that "message" films cannot make a profit. All notions of using the force of the screen for good—or mitigating its potentialities for harm—sooner or later come up against this "fact" of movie economics. The movies, it is recited, are designed to entertain, because that is what the people want. The public pays, and the public chooses—entertainment. Moreover, say some in the industry, this attitude is not to be lightly derided as mass hunger for circuses, while martyrs everywhere perish in flames spreading to consume us all. The people, everywhere, do not like to be propagandized, and this is a wholesome feeling, something to be encouraged, even by those do-gooders who will do anything to get better movies except buy tickets to support them once they are made.

What is wrong with this argument is not its foundation on hard economic realities, as many sentimental critics of the movies seem to believe. There is no passage to any adequate understanding of cinema except by way of the box office. All discussions of aesthetic, educational, or broadly cultural considerations which do not assume and contend with the fact of the screen's industrial basis are less than meaningless. Great harm is done to the kind of discussion that is needed, discussion that treats problems of quality and intention with constant awareness of those of production, distribution, and exhibition before audiences which must be persuaded somehow to pay money to underwrite the massive costs of the whole process.

The film is an art, a medium of expression, an instrument of persuasion, a language for communication, an experience for participation—all these and yet a myriad other things, to vast anonymous masses, separate publics of concern, and each of us alone, unique in our own personhood and history. But the art of the film, the most characteristic and influential art of our age, is founded upon the techniques and logistics of industry,

from the manufacture of the raw film stock to the complex merchandising required to get finished movies into theatres where they can be seen. Merely to make a film and leave it in cans in a vault, unseen by its potential audience, requires elaborate financing, large numbers of participating craftsmen, great resources of technological processes and equipment.

When standards of artistic integrity and cinematic quality are developed for the movies with little relation to the actual nature and problems of the medium, the result is an easy snobbery or foggily aesthetic sentimentalism that does more harm than good by evading the real issues which must be faced and by antagonizing the film people themselves. But the movie industrialists, who supposedly know the problems, can be as unrealistic in their comprehension of the true nature of cinema—unrealistic, or unconscionably cynical and irresponsible.

It is true, for example, that the public prefers to be entertained rather than harangued. Hence, it is not surprising that "message" movies have failed to draw the public when their messages have been poorly delivered. There are enough examples of films which have stated their good intentions in terms of good cinema, of good art, to point the simple moral here: that what you say in films takes on its life and interest from the way you say it. A film that is merely a vehicle to transport some message, however worthy, will surely mire itself in boredom.

It is a wonder, in fact, how some messages survive their filmic petrification. We may suppose, for example, that Christianity will outlast the continuing cycle of religious films, which seem bent on making the invisible voluptuously visible—and spiritually unbelievable. But we may suspect that this survival may be in spite of the films, although there may be some who, for a generation or two, await miracles which are heralded by off-screen choirs of crooners in heavenly juke boxes, or who think that martyrs really live happily ever after in this wide-screened, multicolored world.

The public comes to the movie theatres neither to be informed nor to be indoctrinated. But the film industry cannot evade responsibility by assuming that learning or uncritical habituation does not take place simply because films are designed primarily to entertain.

The really fundamental fact of the movie business is not that the public demands to be entertained and will pay only rarely to be informed. *All* films are "message" films; *all* films make propaganda, if only for daydreaming; *all* films take sides somehow on the issue of ideological intentionality: whether the audience is to be treated as a mass, whose constituent units are assumed to have no individuality and whose anonymity

is to be seduced to move in predetermined directions, or whether it is to be treated as a group of individuals, to be persuaded to choose freely. This is the underlying issue of all the mass media of our time, defining the responsibility of those involved.

As Professor C. Hillis Kaiser of Rutgers has written in *An Essay On Method*,

> When one surveys the overall character of the press, movies, radio, and television. . . it is difficult to resist the feeling that never before in the history of Western culture has a population. . .been so completely and systematically vulgarized. What is particularly tragic is that such vulgarization results, not merely from the self-interest of these agencies themselves, but from the fact that the public is getting 'what it wants.' By means of the irresponsible policy which attempts to provide an uneducated public with what it wants, rather than what it needs, cultural depravity perpetuates itself, and we have a social situation very little different from that which produced the 'bread and circuses' of the decadent Roman Empire.

The policy of "giving the public what it wants" has been painted round with an aura of holiness, out of an originating confusion of the economic conditions of the market-place with the political requirements of democracy. The public pays—but it buys what it is offered. Every dollar may be equal to every other at the point of sale, but every idea is not equal to every other at the instant when we must choose. To be responsible in making movies is not to be undemocratic; to be irresponsible is. To "give the public what it wants" through the mass media in the bald sense of the market-place is to give the public no choice. The illusion of freedom in the creation and selection of all the manufactured experiences with which we are constantly bombarded is the truly dangerous narcotic of our times. The freedom offered by the industrialists of the movies and the other mass media is too often the freedom of addicts, choosing among brands of opium and flavors of lotus leaves.

The relation of freedom and responsibility is no less vital a matter for constant elucidation here than in any other realm of action. In the nature of this relationship, involving the technological, commercial, aesthetic, political, and moral dimensions of the movies, will be found the foundations for valid standards of filmic quality—the only standards, in fact, which will enable us to control what we do to ourselves in the theatres.

Once standards are defined and clarified, however, there remain serious problems of their application—by critics who try to talk to audiences, and audiences who make themselves heard unmistakably in the box-office ears of the industry. Moreover, the true influence of critics

is not anything to be taken on faith, if there is to be clarity in our vision of what standards audiences actually apply—and ought to apply.

A comprehensive survey of the influence of film criticism on American movie audiences was run late in 1954 by the show-business trade paper, *Variety*. Reporting the estimates of theatre operators throughout the country, the survey concluded that critics' opinions have an appreciable effect on the box office only erratically, and then principally in cases of "art" films—a generic term comprising serious or unusual foreign films, documentaries, and others outside the regular commercial categories of the industry. These are usually shown in small theatres catering to limited audiences. The great mass audience, the exhibitors said, judging from admission sales, pays little attention to film reviews, much less to serious criticism. (Almost identical conclusions were drawn from a generally unfavorable examination of French critics made in 1955 by François Truffaut, the film critic of *Les Arts*, in Paris.)

A great deal of film reviewing in magazines and newspapers, of course, is little more than an extension of the publicity and advertising apparatus of the movies. What opinions may be expressed therein are at best "service" judgments as to whether audiences will enjoy this movie or that, and rarely refer to coherent or systematic standards of taste, filmic quality, or cultural significance. At their worst, they are not opinions at all but mere summaries of plots eked out by paraphrases of publicity handouts.

The mass audience responds to movie advertising as it does to blurbs for toothpaste, cosmetics, refrigerators, and all the myriad products which are manufactured to be sold and advertised to be needed. The ordinary reviewer, then, becomes something like a quality control inspector at the end of an industrial production line. Is Miss Bosom's latest, scientifically-mixed, vacuum-sealed, fancy-packaged effort guaranteed as advertised? Insofar as the public is guided by brand names in its selection of what to patronize, it is entitled, we may suppose, to the traditionally "impartial" analyses by "independent laboratories" as to the wholesome uniformity of movie products.

But the sophisticated, discriminating movie-goers who consider critical opinions published in prestigious magazines in contemplating the current off-trail films in the "art houses"—and then, so often, do not go—may take small comfort from their vaunted independence of judgment. This manifestly pays heed above all to what someone has said, and then to what someone else has said about what the first person said, and so on and and on, opinions about opinions, ideas about ideas, in the manner of the civilized conversations over cocktails in which only book reviews, and

reviews of reviews, are discussed to endless insignificance. The exhibitors may be forgiven their cynicism regarding the importance of serious criticism, even for the "mature," perennially "lost" and occasionally found audience, so long as its primary effect seems to be the information of notions at third or fourth remove from any experience in the theatres.

The poor films—or, rather, the grandiloquently mediocre—do, however, persist in relative prosperity, supported by the mass audience which rarely depends upon what critics have to say for more than corroboration of its attitudes. Of the hundreds of new films shown each year, long lists may be drawn of those which were lacerated by reviewers and critics, yet enticed multitudes to the theatres. But, with greater significance for the encouragement of quality, there are also sadly attenuated lists of films which ought to have been seen, by people avowedly interested in filmic worth, and were not—because those very people simply did not go to the movies, despite the strongest critical encouragement.

It may be disconcerting, but it is healthily humiliating for a critic to discover how little effect his judgments are actually having upon theatre attendance. But it is an error to define the parlous state of film criticism only in terms of ticket sales. David Reisman suspects that "the difficulties in qualitative analysis of the effects of films are not unconnected with the present low state of criticism of the movies as an art form." This relation of the problems of scientific investigation of the impact of the screen upon behavior with the quality of aesthetic analysis suggests what is at stake. What is at stake is not the cultivation of greater influence upon the selection of films to be seen, although theoretically this could, in turn, influence the quality of films which are made, if its ideal of power could be realized. The astonishing domination of the American theatre by a handful of New York newspaper critics can illustrate the extreme of what can happen when criticism directly affects the box office. No matter how much people may use critical opinions as guides, critical judgment may not refer to commercial success or failure for proof of its validity. The standards of the critic of films, as those of critics of any other aspect of culture, ought to provide leadership, to be sure—but not in the sense of the celebratedly typical revolutionary demagogue, who races after the mobs to find out where they are going, in order to lead them.

Criticism is essentially a discipline of rhetoric, of persuasion; its method is analysis, and its highest function is the enrichment of the interior conversation. The significance of Reisman's disappointment with film criticism in theory, and of the exhibitors' dubiety about its effects in practice, lies in the exposure of the shallowness of understanding of

what films signify, and of what they do to us, individually and together. The reason the uncriticized life is not worth living, as Socrates maintained, may be that it really is not lived at all. The person becomes the insensible creature of forces working upon him which originated within himself. The images of the screen, in this case, envelop the thoughts and feelings of those whose desires gave them birth.

Connoisseurs of paradoxes may be especially struck by what is implied for the relationship of critics and audiences. The critics have to work as if their readers will see everything on the screen anyway (an impossibility even for the critics): as if, in effect, they are truly literate in the filmic literature, rather than merely well informed about what imputed experts have said concerning what they have not seen themselves. In fact, "the present low state of criticism of the movies" stems directly from an even lower level of concern on the part of even intelligent film-goers with the quality and meaning of what they see, when they happen to see it. The trouble, we may suspect, arises from the notion that entertainment is insignificant. For an understanding of a world dominated by popular attitudes—tyrannized, in fact, by "the revolt of the masses"—it should be obvious that the popular arts may be the most significant of all.

Movie audiences, on their part, have the problem of approaching movie criticism as if for an exchange of views, not primarily as a service to help them make occasional selections of what to see and especially not as a source of ready-made comments to be used as ammunition in counter-battery clamours among the determinedly *courant*. If being useful is easy virtue, being "pawed at and gossiped over / By the promiscuous crowd," in Auden's words, is poor practicality.

One film director has written that "a true critic is the conscience of the audience." He might have added that the critic's job, therefore, may be to feel guilty about what is done in the audience's name—even as the audience itself may disregard his agonized analyses or use them to make frivolous change in the market place. Conversely, too, he might have cautioned against the false paradise of conscientious agreement. The Jerusalem of intelligent participation in the film experience, in fact, may be built only in what Auden calls "suburbs of dissent," where critics and audiences eternally disagree, as those who see for themselves eternally must.