AN AMERICAN VIEW OF MOTION PICTURES

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SOME months ago a leading producer of photo-plays predicted that the motion picture industry might in time be suppressed like the liquor trade, if the movement for censorship was permitted to proceed unchecked. Perhaps so. Who can tell what will be the result if other interests defy public opinion and public welfare as did the dealer in liquors? For years the saloon keeper and the wholesaler marketed inferior and adulterated goods, and were in a hard and fast alliance with the worst elements in the community. If the photo-play managers cater to the base and meretricious, give their audiences inferior and adulterated plays, and pander to the baser rather than the better elements, can there be any doubt as to what the American public will do?

New York has joined the small group of states providing for a censorship of motion pictures. Its commission is given power to eliminate a film or part of a film which is "obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, sacrilegious, or of such a character that its exhibition would tend to corrupt morals or incite to crime." Surely the photo-play producer can have no valid objection to such a law if he has no intention to produce pictures which offend in those directions. Ah! but, he asks, who is to be the judge of morals or obscenity? The natural inference from his question is that he is himself as well qualified as any one else, but he overlooks the very pertinent fact that he has a personal, pecuniary interest,—a most disconcerting and diverting factor in the human equation.

I grant that this question of applied morality is a difficult one, about which there is much honest difference of opinion among serious minded people. This was illustrated recently in the discussion of the "watermelon incident" in Charles Ray's *The Old Swimmin' Hole*, an incident that has excited much comment in all parts of the country since the first appearance of this picture felicitously described as "a very amusing comedy," and one which "strikes many responsive chords in so many hearts of both sexes" The consensus of expressed opinion, says the publicity agent of the producer, "was that in purloining the melon Ezra committed no crime, that he

proved himself a natural, human, red-blooded youngster, even as you and I (once were), and that the picturing of the act was not 'harmful.'"

From a mass of similar reports one was selected from the Cincinnati *Post* because it related the action of a "Committee recently appointed by the Federation of Churches to study movies for the Russell Sage Foundation of New York". The publicity agent declares that the "jury" was of a quasi-official character, at all events selected by the Federation of Churches, so that it could hardly be suspected of a predisposition toward anything of a morally harmful nature. "Though the jury 'disagreed' says the *Post* "we are glad to say those who approve of the watermelon incident were in the majority."

It so happened that the Minneapolis *Tribune* was one of the papers that took exception to the incident, holding that it encouraged other boys to go and do likewise. This led the publicity agent to write to the Editor of the *Tribune*, after quoting these facts:—

> You will observe that among those who found no harm in Ezra's act was the pastor of a Methodist church, who, having been brought up on a farm, well knows that no unguarded watermelon ever was sacred to a boy, whether in its natural state or in an ice-box, or anywhere it might be unattended, and that a former superintendent of schools could find no fault with Charley (Ezra), and voted to acquit him, so to speak, when a vote was taken as to whether the theft of the watermelon ought to be deleted from the picture.
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> In your editorial you referred also to the case of several boys who had been haled into the juvenile court in Minneapolis for taking pies from the window of a bakeshop, and, linking this incident with that of the watermelon, you observed 'whether their conception of the exploit was gained from a motion picture they had seen is conjectural, but the picturing of the taking of the melon in this instance is one of the influences that help to put into boys' minds the false idea that a thing of this kind is to be looked upon as 'smart' rather than sinful and unlawful.'

Then the publicity agent attempts to turn the tables on Mr. Editor, pointing out that in the issue of the *Tribune* in which this editorial was published there appeared a cartoon, stretched across a page, in which a youngster, having been cautioned by his mother against touching her freshly baked cookies, proceeded to raid the cookie bowl when her back was turned. "May it not truthfully be stated", he asks, "that, unlike the case of the pies, 'whether your youthful readers conception of this exploit was gained from a motion

picture' is not conjectural? Whatever their conception may have been, it was gained from a series of pictures in your own esteemed newspaper". This is the old, old retort of *tu quoque* which has never yet settled a moral question, and it is doubtful whether it ever will. He who used it in this instance to vindicate the motion picture pointed out with a considerable degree of pertinency that that "reg'lar feller" in the cartoon knew quite as well as Ezra in Mr. Ray's that "he was doing a wrong and forbidden thing." It would be for lawyers, he declared, to decide the relative flagrancy of the purloining of a watermelon or of pies, on the one hand, and that of cookies on the other. But, he asks with seeming finality:–

> Is the public to conclude that an act which is 'sinful and unlawful' when committed on the screen becomes merely mischievous and 'smart' when the youthful offender steps from the film to the pages of a newspaper? The implied admission that an act which tends to 'poison children's minds' in motion pictures is innocent of evil effects when depicted in a newspaper cartoon is a tribute to the greater influence of 'the movies' which we should be ungrateful to pass by without an expression of acknowledgment and appreciation.

Here we have the retort courteous, but not an answer which satisfies those who are really concerned about the future (as well as the present) morals of our citizenship.

The publicity agent was unquestionably well within the facts when he spoke of the greater potency of the screen as compared with the printed page. The picture, through the eye of the camera, is well nigh as real as the life it visualizes. In a way it improves on life, because it portrays not only physical objects, but the evolution of thought, the play of conscience; and oft times it can be made to lay bare the hidden moral forces which control the lives of men. Nine-tenths of our knowledge, our impressions of life, come through the sense of sight. As an instrument of visualization the motion picture must rank even above the printing press. Its messages to the brain are simpler and more direct than those of the printed or spoken word, no matter how eloquent. All this Paul Smith has adduced as an argument that the motion picture must be made an instrument for teaching the truths of the Bible. Its power for good is just as great, he maintains, as its power for harm. That its first use was in the exploitation of human weaknesses should not blind us to its value in the extension of the truths of life and religion.

> "Guided and directed by Christian minds" he says "the motion picture is destined to become a powerful influence in the cause of Christianity and righteousness. It knows no language

and needs none. A film can reach a Laplander as easily as an African; the antics of Charley Chaplin are applauded in every land by peoples who cannot even read a newspaper."

The motion picture, he believes, will find its logical place in the church as a servant of the spoken Gospel. The deep, heartfelt, sympathetically inspired sermon with its power to sway, will always be indispensable, but its lessons and moral truths need to be supplemented, usually, just as music supplements the religious spirit of the service.

To return to our publicity agent:– he closes his argument by saying that he respectfully submits

> That not only was the majority 'verdict' of the Russell Sage Foundation committee, in giving 'a vote of confidence to the well known principle, to wit, that boys will be boys', in keeping with the best traditions of red-blooded Americanism, but that we who are the fathers of boys would be ashamed if, under similar circumstances, they failed to act exactly as did Ezra in the film and the 'reg'lar feller' in your excellent newspaper.

Mr. Editor retorts in good spirit, after frankly refusing to defend the comics that have appeared in his columns, that

> "One is moved to wonder if these censors did not rest their verdict on their own personal reactions to the stealing of the melon rather than on what they tried to conceive would be the impression on boys of 'Ezra's' age under the same circumstances. Memories of other days may have risen to influence the conclusion arrived at.....The cartoon referred to by our correspondent in his letter was not so bad, however, as he paints it. The boy who took the cookies from mother's larder 'owned up' instantly when put to it. Something inside him, he said, told him they were so good that he ought to try them. The lad may have been disobedient, but he was not furtive or deceptive about it. Perhaps the code of ethics that governed these Russell Sage censors is the unwritten one that 'finders is keepers' in the case of watermelons and umbrellas. That being true, they couldn't very well tell 'Ezra' that he was a bad boy."

It may seem that we have been spending quite a lot of time on a rather narrow question, but when one takes into consideration that hundreds of thousands of young people watched Ezra steal the watermelon from the front of a grocery store and "get away with it", then one realizes that the question becomes one of prime importance.

Our young people are being influenced by the movies—so for that matter are the adults—and we must stop, look, and take account of our situation before it is too late. There are not wanting those

who connect the recent crime wave with them. As the Editor of *Minnesota Municipalities* said a few months since in commenting on this phase of the subject:—

> One thing needs attention: the disrespect for the law frequently shown on the movie screen. The other day we saw a dashing film drama having for its central figure a bootlegger. The hero's breath-taking exploits were performed in the interest of the violation of the federal law. There were no mitigating facts. What respect for the law can be expected from our youth who have morals such as these thrust upon them? It is the youth who are committing the crimes. It is the youth who are the largest patrons of the film. We are no sanctimonious protagonist of the 'Blue Laws,' nor do we want the statue of Venus clothed in a pillow case, but the subtle pernicious influence which deliberately or carelessly undermines respect for the public law ought to be stamped out. Whether we are favorable to national prohibition or any other law is not the question. As long as a law is upon the statute books every citizen, every public officer, ought to lend his full support to its enforcement. If we believe the statute in error, let us work for its repeal; but so long as it has not been repealed, so long as it is recognized and enforced by the courts, it must have the utmost support of citizens and officers alike.

There is abundant evidence to be found in the police courts and in the jails and penitentiaries that boys have had mischievous ideas suggested to them by seeing detective and crime stories in the picture theatres. Not long ago some lads were caught breaking into a store by climbing over the roof of an adjacent house and getting in by a skylight. The boys confessed that they had got the idea from a picture they had seen in the "movies." In this connection it is interesting to note that in the laws governing the censorship of moving picture films in the Provinces of Manitoba and British Columbia in the Dominion of Canada there is a clause dealing specifically with such themes and giving the censors power to refuse licenses to such films. The clause reads that the censor may refuse a license for the exhibition of pictures of an immoral or obscene nature, the representation of crime, or pictures reproducing any brutalizing spectacle, or which indicate or suggest lewdness or indecency, or the unfaithfulness of husband and wife, or any other such pictures as he may consider injurious to the morals of the city, or any citizens thereof, *or which may offer evil suggestions to the minds of children or against the public, or which may be likely to offend the public.* This is a much wider grant of power than our American censors have as yet had given them, although the need would seem to be as great, if not greater.

Roman Catholic agencies are very much alive to the evil influences of the movies (and for that matter to their usefulness). Quite the most effective indictment is that of Charles A. MacMahon the director of the Motion Picture Bureau, which the Roman Catholic Welfare Council maintains. His indictment is broadly social and aesthetic. He avers with force that they are extravagantly and loosely managed, generally unstable in their business policies, over-starred, inartistic, dull and too frequently unwholesome in their dramatic expressions, highly commercialized and superlatively exploited in their advertising and publicity—all of which is inspired and much of which is alleged to be dishonest. This gigantic business of the "movies" he declares, is daily influencing the masses of our people to an extent not even approached by all our schools, our churches and our ethical organizations combined. One person in every five in the United States, or one-fifth of our 110,000,000 population, attends the motion picture theatre every day. This is a startling fact, for it means that over 20,000,000 persons are being regularly and continuously influenced for good or evil by "the most powerful medium of expression and impression so far invented."

"And what is the result?" asks Mr. McMahon. Are the artistic and entertainment values satisfactory in any pronounced degree? Are the standards of life, of adventure, of business dealing, of love, set forth in themes of the plays, edifying or satisfactory even to the easily satisfied? Are the morals of the young and impressionable being improved by the lurid scenes, the unwholesome sex appeals, and the debasing animations of crime and immorality to be found in so many of the widely exploited photo-plays? The comments in our public press by our leading editors, clergymen, educators, sociologists, judges, and other competent authorities, answer these questions, he declares, with a positive "NO".

We are therefore forced to conclude, Mr. McMahon asserts, "that the cinema cockle has long since outgrown the wheat, with the result that the film harvest of to-day is a failure when judged from every angle except that of the box office; and even from the angle of the box office the results are not always satisfactory to the motion picture magnates, who, with a few honorable exceptions, have prostituted a noble, useful and marvellous art before the money-god of the films."

It cannot be said that clean, wholesome subjects, with the human interest appeal and the old-fashioned pulls on our heart strings, do not pay financially. They do. Mr. McMahon points to the success of Frank Bacon's homely portrayal of *Lightnin'*, now in its third year on Broadway, and the delightfully refreshing

and everywhere applauded photo-play *Humoresque* proves in his judgment that wholesome entertainment, both on the legitimate stage and on the screen, can be converted into bigger dividends than any other.

Are the producers surrendering to a public demand for the kind of product now being put out by the motion picture authorities? Those who seek to explain away their salacious features will say so. Such apologists are deluding themselves in the belief that they can "fool all the people all of the time." The truth of the matter is that the public—"the slow-to-action, let-the-other-fellow-do-it public, the public which does not rise up in angry protest until things get as bad as they possibly can, is dissatisfied with the present-day downward drift of the films; it is indignant that its long-cherished ideals of common decency and plain morality have been insolently flaunted by the motion pictures directors; and it is determined to call a halt in the flagrant misuse of what should be the most entertaining, useful, and beneficial influence in our American social life."

This view received startling corroboration at the Atlantic City conference of the Motion Picture Theatre owners when anything but a roseate view of the business was given, and the members were besought to cultivate the co-operation of patrons to the end that their counsel and help might be secured in bringing about an improvement in the quality of pictures shown. Governor Miller, who signed the New York Censorship bill, frankly admits that he does not like the idea of movie censorship, but "the thing has gone too far." The sex interest in his view "is being made more and more prominent until it is a menace to the youth."

Indeed the demand for better films is world-wide, and an international federation known as the Saniga Cinema has been organized, its purpose being somewhat grandiloquently described in this fashion:—

> "We cannot yet grasp the future significance of the film for mankind's progress. It presents the biggest task ever yet presented, but it must be tackled, and America will lead. For this purpose the Committee of the Film Light Crusade is being organized. It aims, not at promoting better films in the theaters (like the National Committee for Better Films), nor to introduce films in school (like the Society for Visual Education), nor to produce Bible films (like the International Church Film Corporation). It will use the film as a means of spreading the light of Love and Tolerance and Knowledge to fight famine of body and soul, racial and class hatred, in theatres, schools, churches, parks—everywhere this light shedding machine will shine forth the message of the New Age."

Personally I believe in the censorship of photo-plays for precisely the same reasons that I believe in food inspection, in legislation for proper sanitation and for the control of contagious disease, in the regulations of the Board of Health. I believe that the health of the mind and spirit should be safe-guarded as carefully as the health of the body, that the morals of men and especially children should be protected from the infection of noxious influences as assiduously as we quarantine to prevent the spread of infectious disease. Pure, wholesome food must be furnished the mind to keep it healthy, just as the body must be nourished by pure food if it is to be maintained in sound condition.

It may be laid down as a fundamental principle that in matters that affect public morality individual freedom must yield to the common good. Democracy rests on the principle that all men were created free and equal, but give every man absolute *freedom* of action and the state becomes anarchy and human society chaos. No one denies that the motion picture is a potent factor in our present day life, that the film powerfully affects public morality, both because of the method of presentation and because of the size and universal character of the audiences. In the words of the report of the Social Service Commission of the Diocese of Pennsylvania: "The moving pictures are not a minor but a major influence in the mental and spiritual growth of our children. They are also a major influence in the lives of many who are adult—at least in years. The picture supplants the book, the theatre, the out-of-door sport, quiet family gatherings at home, as a compeller of emotion in the development of many a child. Youthful ideals are modified almost at will by the moving picture producer, if we do not first modify his own ideals."

Pictorial representation, because of its direct appeal to our most sensitive and most accurate of senses, produces an impression more striking than that effected by the printed or spoken word. Take the same story, print it in a magazine, recite it as a lecture, and present it on the film, and you have the effect of the story in positive, comparative, and superlative degrees. As a rule what we see is more real to us than what we hear or read. Furnish the eye with harmful or suggestive scenes, and the imagination can stimulate the emotions to evil desire. Vivid impressions arouse curiosity. Even the film whose last reel shows the triumph of virtue, which aims as so many now do at imparting a moral lesson, has done harm to those who have viewed its earlier reels picturing vice and crime as incidental to the story. As Professor Poffenberger has pointed out in his discussion of the psychological questions

involved, these incidental details of excitement and bravado colour the imagination of children while the moral goes unheeded. An audience in a darkened picture-house, its attention fixed upon the screen, is in a state of high susceptibility to receive suggestive impulses from the film. The intensity with which the photo-play takes hold of its audience demands that special care be taken in the selection of the subjects which are to be so effectively presented, and necessitates supervision of the manner of that presentation.

It is not particularly gratifying to an American to read that in a recent year 120,000 feet were edited out of American films by the Japanese Censor, and yet that is the fact according to Adachi Kinnosùke. It is true that many feet of these films portrayed osculation in its varying forms, and kissing in the Japanese view is a "primitive, uncouth way of translating the very poetry of sentiment in the magic moment of life's May time." At the same time the unlimited portrayal of kissing cannot be regarded as especially elevating even according to American standards.

Moving picture men, like all men in business, are not working primarily for educational purposes, to contribute to the intellectual and moral uplift of their audiences. They are working for commercial reasons. I have no quarrel with them for this, any more than I have with the butcher for being in business to make money. I do not expect him to open his shop in order to teach me the anatomy of animals. The moving picture man will produce what it pays to give. Unfortunately for our incomplete human nature, the sensational, the risqué, is very attractive at least up to a certain point, and the manager who can promise a thrill, especially in the treatment of a sex question, will crowd his theatre. The bogus actors in *Huckelberry Finn* knew human nature when they appended to the handbills advertising their worthless show, "Ladies and children not admitted." As one of them remarked "If that line don't fetch them, I don't know Arkansas." The manager who produces an unsavory photo-play under the respectable pretence of teaching a great moral lesson, reminds us of good old Richard III clothing his villainy with odds and ends stolen from Holy Writ so that he may seem a saint when most he plays the devil.

One of the puzzling phases of the present situation is the attitude of some of the social leaders in New York who openly opposed censorship, mostly on the plea of the principle of the freedom of speech. Indeed one of the press bureaus, maintained by a group of men and women who are constantly advocating new laws to protect and advance standards of living, sent out a story: "To the legislators, reformers and social workers who are trying to find some

method of film control, which will not be open to the objection which is made to censorship, the Eden bill before the California State Senate should be instructive." It is difficult to make Americans accept censorship, they declare, and there are numerous reasons why control of the press or of the screen by a small group of people is feared. But, quite apart from the value or wisdom of thoroughgoing censorship, they think this bill should be considered on its merits. It would put the reviewing of films in the hands of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and a board nominated by the State Board of Education. Submission of the films would be compulsory, but the board would have no power to condemn. It would rather attempt to smother with silent disfavour all objectionable films. Films that have been approved would be required to advertise the fact. The board would notify the local authorities of the exhibition of a picture which they might wish to suppress—presumably only on existing legal grounds. The board would also conduct a campaign of education and publicity on behalf of the best films, and give exhibitors information how to secure them.

A word in passing as to the objection that has been frequently urged, and especially of late, that there is no censorship of plays, books, newspapers, and songs, and that there would be an unjust discrimination against the photo-plays in censoring them. It is not entirely true that there is no censorship of these other forms of amusement, though such censorship as there is comes largely after the act. The objectionable play is suppressed, and the bad book is prosecuted under the postal laws. That it is a violation of the principle of free speech seems to me to be far fetched, for the photo-play is something very different from speech, something far more dangerous, something far more insidious. If for no other reason, it is so because it reaches the young in such large numbers. Moreover we have no less authority than that of the Supreme Court of the United States for saying that motion pictures are not in any manner governed by the same laws as affect the press and free speech.

Even were censorship restricted to the moving picture, it surely would be a blessing to have one form of amusement which could be relied upon as unobjectionable, one form of pleasure which could be depended upon as healthy, one place of entertainment which could be recommended to all alike, women and children, the religious minded and the sensitive people, as sure to furnish a clean show. The photo-play, as DeMille points out, has come to be recognized as a new art, although *The Outlook* insists that it is only an industry.

It is no longer merely a cheap substitute for the theatre. It is an art, or industry as you will, as distinct from the art of the theatre as the art of the sculptor is distinct from the art of the painter. Wonderful has been the development since the days of the World Fair when one peeped into the slot of Edison's kinetoscope and saw the half minute reel of the dancing girl. Few realized what a great factor in the amusement and education of the American public it would become in less than a generation. Today it affects 20% of the American people daily. It represents the fifth industry in the point of capitalization; who can measure its influence or its future?