

# THE CINEMA OF TO-DAY

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A PROTEST arises occasionally, intimating that American motion pictures are getting an unfair proportion of criticism. But as long as they continue to dominate the screens of the world, they will inevitably obtain the lion's share of attention—flattering or otherwise.

In Canada approximately ninety-eight per cent of the films exhibited are made in the United States; while in Great Britain last year out of seven hundred and sixty-one pictures shown all but one hundred were American, and only twenty-eight of the remainder were made in England. The influence of British thought on the Cinema is negligible, and so few continental films are in circulation in the British Commonwealth of Nations that the millions of persons who attend the theatres are absorbing the ideas of Hollywood almost exclusively. It is no exaggeration to say "millions" in referring to screen patrons. There are no exact figures available as to the attendance in Canadian theatres; but when we learn that sixty million pay to enter picture houses in the United States every week, and that eight million appear before the English box-offices during the same period, we can make a rough guess. Allowing for our scattered population and many rural communities, one may quite fairly suppose that three million people each week attend Canadian film theatres. As far as the general public is concerned, I do not think the absence of British sentiment is of much moment to them. As long as they are entertained, there is little speculation as to where the films originated. But I believe that there are certain differences in the mental outlook of the British and the Hollywood director which would prove to be in favour of the British if Canadians could see English pictures in sufficient numbers to make a fair comparison. In the films I have seen there was more simplicity, more reticence and a sounder view where crime and criminals was concerned. But the "movie-goer" demands in addition gloss and finish; swift-moving drama, mechanical perfection, youth and beauty. These must be supplied to gain the approval of the majority, and these are assets of the American film.

In the last twelve years the change in moving pictures has been very noticeable. They have altered in tone, and advanced

tremendously in technique. The Cinema has grown up, but the attitude of the public has remained practically the same. At intervals there are outbreaks of anger against some particular production or type of production. Unfortunately for both the public and the screen, these attacks are too often ill-considered and unenlightened; there usually follows a good deal of skilful and much more pointed propaganda from the film industry, designed to prove that there is a conspiracy to despoil the art of the people and deprive producers of a few hardly-won millions. After this, both sides having had a good time and "told the world", apathy seizes the public once more, and there is a truce during which the publicity bureaus of the producers continue to earn their way by disseminating cheerful and innocuous chat regarding the stars and the pictures.

I have referred to the marked change in the pictures themselves. Films once crude, halting, episodic, have become finished, smooth-flowing and closely knit. The camera now performs wonders as an aid to mood and atmosphere. In the stories there is less morbidity, but more cynicism; less dime-novel sensationalism, but more sex sophistication; less brutality, but more sensuousness. There are still the simple, bucolic tales of young love; the "westerns" flourish in a more elaborate form, with cowboys and the old stage coach and the miner who—unlike the rest of us—always finds gold at the foot of his rainbow. But the major portion of the photo-plays are very "knowing"; they are adapted from current magazines of all kinds, including the Confession group; also from books and stage plays. They deal in all the modern ideas regarding sex and social relationships, and employ all the advanced freedom of expression. Few themes are tabu, and in no other form are they so realistically presented. This tendency toward looser conventions and franker speech, and the portrayal of characters and situations which conservative people still consider dubious, seems natural when one considers the trend of the day. It is easily understood even by those who deplore it, and few people would think it just that the screen be prohibited from drawing upon current fiction for its drama. The trouble is that the stress and exaggeration common to many directors tends to vulgarize and cheapen, so that some of the stories are much more unpalatable on the screen than in any other guise.

There is nothing surprising in the sophistication and flippancy of many films and, as we all know, they cannot go back to the days and ways of "The Duchess", of Mary Jane Holmes, or E. P. Roe, if they are to cater to a clientele nourished on *True Stories*, tabloid newspapers, Elinor Glyn and Michael Arlen. We must remember,

too, that although we have not as many of the lurid magazines, and no tabloids, the films are not made primarily for us. The largest film market is in the United States. One cannot wonder at the tone of the pictures which are so smart and knowing, or deal so generously in bedroom scenes and illicit love. But there is one thing that we tolerate which seems to me preposterous. It is the tacit acceptance of the fact that children and young boys and girls have a right to patronize the picture houses regardless of the nature of the film which is being run. Regulations provide for the company of an adult, or restrict the attendance of children to hours outside those of school, or arrange to keep them away from the theatres late in the evening; but there is nothing to guide parents or guardians in the choice of film entertainment for young people, and in large numbers of film houses in Canada there are sex plays and crime plays being shown—plays of the most adult themes and ideas—with signs outside "Children 10 cents"—or possibly it is fifteen cents, but it is a lower price than that offered grown persons, and it is a direct encouragement for the patronage of juveniles. The inducement offered to children cannot be on account of their better behaviour, or because they take up less room, or remain a shorter time, and it surely cannot be in response to any demand from parents that their offspring be educated in the ways of light ladies, philandering gentlemen, and gangsters.

In our Public Libraries we have a section for juveniles, and no one under sixteen may take books from the general department; but when books in the general department are translated to the screen and made more forceful and obvious, the juveniles who might not borrow the book may see the picture for a nominal price. It is an extraordinary state of affairs, but it exists because so few people take the trouble to think about it. One may doubt if we ever before tolerated such adult amusement for the children of Canada. It seems as if Canadians considered it a little indelicate to enquire too closely into the mental and emotional reactions of their growing boys and girls.

The inclusion of juveniles among the spectators of sophisticated stories on the screen, together with official regulations providing that films must not be detrimental to children, brings about a situation absurd and unjust to all ages. Films which might be considered quite legitimate for grown persons are watered down in a futile attempt to make them obscure or innocuous to the young person; jaunty tales of easy divorce and marital infidelity, bedroom farces, juicy slices of life from the underworld, are snipped and clipped for the benefit of children and adolescents. Such themes

with their attendant atmosphere must remain unsuitable for juveniles, no matter to what extent they are diluted, and the whole proceeding is farcical. It will continue until Canadians do a little thinking on the subject, and set about finding some sensible method whereby children may be relegated to entertainment proper for their years, and adults who pay full price need not have their drama altered and weakened for the benefit of the juniors. Possibly with this stupid practice at an end the film houses would draw a more discriminating clientele which would demand a higher grade of photoplay.

The older countries are more enlightened than we. For some time they have been making a dispassionately critical survey of the possibilities and the effect of the motion picture. The question is considered of such importance abroad that discussion is led by statesmen, educators and artists. They are not arguing as to the standardized length of a kiss, the footage to be devoted to a death scene, or the moral reaction resulting from the guffaw which greets the impact of a custard pie upon the cheek of dignity. They are considering the general tone of films, the conditions under which they are shown, and their probable influence upon the mass mind of a nation. The screen is being watched and weighed as a possible aesthetic medium, a probable scientific aid, and a certain psychological weapon.

An inference drawn from some comments on the critical attitude of Great Britain and the Continent is that those countries are somehow impertinent in looking a gift horse in the mouth; as if they had received an animated present from the United States, and were rudely appraising it. This is odd and misleading, in view of the fact that they were pioneers. Europe fostered the first inventions and aided the first experiments; her early efforts may be said to have built the foundation and ground-floor upon which the present American ornate sky-scraper has been reared. Europe made and distributed the first news reels, the first coloured pictures, the first long "feature" films. I hardly think they call movies an "infant industry" over there; they are more likely to regard them as an art that was maturing hopefully and was wrecked by the World War; despoiled and thrust aside through no fault of its workers and devotees.

England, for instance, may wonder at the alleged juvenility of an art well known there, under its present name of moving picture, in the seventeenth century. Plumed and satin-breeched gallants of London gathered to marvel at it. In 1679 an Englishman named Ralph Thoresby visited the movies, "a curious piece of



art." In his diary he wrote: "The landscape looks as an ordinary picture till the clockwork behind the curtain be set at work, and then the ships move and sail distinctly upon the sea till out of sight; a coach comes out of town; the motions of the horses and wheels are very distinct, and a gentleman in the coach salutes the company; a hunter and his dogs keep the course till out of sight."

Some two hundred years later another Englishman, not content with the distinction of the beautiful name of Wordsworth Dennis-thorpe, gained further glory by inventing the first talking motion pictures consisting of a series of images on a band or strip moving in accord with a phonograph. It was known as the "kinensigraph." For quite two hundred and fifty years England has been experimenting with the mechanical and scientific possibilities of pictorial drama, but she did not devote as much attention to the artistic side as some of her continental rivals. In France the dramatic phase of the moving picture kept pace with technical development. While American films were still in the one and two reel serial and slap-stick era, some of the most noted of the French stage artists were performing before the camera for the *Film d' Art* Company making pictures of five and more reels. These would show badly lighted scenes and patchy construction if compared with most of the modern productions. But they were very pretentious for their time.

Concurrently with the English and French productions shown in America in the years before the great war were films from Germany and Scandinavian countries. For some reason—humour may be difficult to translate in silence, or comedians were not partial to the screen—the European pictures were deadly serious or intensely melodramatic. No Latin gaiety—except perhaps in one or two films made by Max Linder—laughed out from the shadows of the silver sheet. The Italian screen drama was particularly sombre; and in regard to this it is interesting to remember that when Italy sent a version of *Dante's Inferno* to the United States some fourteen years ago it was mulcted of eight reels before exhibition, one reason given being that there was too much display of nudity. About three years ago I saw a film made by an American producer on the same theme; evidently America had become broadminded: the fashions in Hell had not changed.

Possibly it was because the world was being trained to accept substitutes as a war measure that the sudden disappearance of continental films from the screens of North America and the substituting of productions made in the United States caused little comment. When the same change took place abroad, warring

nations had no time for argument on the subject. The American film met a need and filled a want at the time. Sick men, broken men, weary and reckless men on furlough, called for entertainment; anxious watchers at home longed for respite and relaxation. The new, smart, smooth-running screen stories made in the new, finely-equipped American studios brought pleasure and forgetfulness to millions of jaded souls. It was coincidence that just as the European war destroyed the manufacture of films there, the Edison and Biograph patents were thrown open to competitors in the United States, and the magnificent production made by D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, was completed. This vindicated the claims of those who believed the moving picture could provide entertainment of a high class, and appeal to more than simple curiosity. As European film companies collapsed, those in America were enabled to secure increasing support financially. But initiative and energy and acumen were the American attributes which took instant advantage of the situation, and put a celluloid girdle about the earth in an incredibly short space of time.

It is natural and reasonable that the Continent, having pioneered and lost the fruits of early effort, should now be inclined to encourage native talent and give scope to renewed commercial vigour by affording greater support to home productions than to those of an alien already established and flourishing. More than mere financial considerations have been weighed. It is one thing to see a nation adopt foreign clothing and food, but quite another and more significant thing to have a people subject to daily psychic influence from a land whose manners and policies, and sometimes moral standards, are strange and not always beneficial.

Apparently Great Britain and Europe want as many of their own productions made according to their own standards as possible, so that the recent agitation and legislation arose from that desire besides the necessity of freeing themselves from the monopoly the United States acquired during the war. At that troubled period the American producer devised a system of film renting which is vastly effective if not magnanimous. This is the much discussed "blind" or "block" booking of pictures, which makes the acquisition of one production by an exhibitor provisional upon his acceptance of a number of others. This "block-booking" was recently investigated by the United States Government and a "Cease and Desist" order issued regarding it, after which a conference took place to discuss the situation. It then appeared that exhibitors were in favour of ceasing and desisting, but producers and distributors rather fancied the continuance of booking in blocks. This is not

merely a business question; it affects the public. If an exhibitor who is intelligent and possessed of good judgment is anxious to cater to a strictly high class patronage or to the family circle, he may not want to show all the pictures offered by some one firm or group of companies; but if he has signed a contract to do so he is, in nearly every instance, obliged to pay for all films whether he puts them on his screen or not.

In England "block-booking" was the chief target at which the Film Quota Bill was aimed; during the early stages of the Bill the *Manchester Guardian* printed an editorial discussing the system, saying in part; "exhibitors are virtually compelled to buy stuff wholesale which they have not seen, may not like when they do see; which may not exist and, whether good, bad or indifferent, will keep them booked up for perhaps years ahead." The editor comments further that this is "something as powerful as the tied-house system for the prevention of new entrants into the field." Speaking of the effect of the screen on the mentality of a nation, this same editorial goes on to say: "The effects of the film upon the mind and imagination not only of our own people but of all the races of the world are beyond calculation. For better or worse, the film has become everywhere the rival and sometimes perhaps the substitute of the school. Its ways are more insidious and for that reason more penetrating than the formal method of the teacher. It moulds the mind as games do the body, all the more thoroughly for being a pastime and not an exercise." It is this firm belief in the power of the screen to influence thought which permeates the discussion of the film in European countries, and is behind the various measures being taken to oversee and encourage production indigent to the various nations, to limit the influx of foreign pictures, and to set a standard of artistic taste for future screen entertainment.

At the present time some form of regulation or restriction exists or is being considered in Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Russia, Austria, Spain, Roumania and Turkey; while in Russia the film industry is entirely Soviet-controlled. In South America and Mexico protests are being made against the importation of films from the United States which display natives of those countries as the villains of the piece, without providing any insight into the better side of the life of the nations.

Probably the most severe rule for the partial exclusion of alien films is in effect in Germany, where fifty per cent. of the pictures shown must be of home manufacture. In Italy the quota is almost negligible, amounting to the compulsory exhibition of native films

for about nine days each year; but there are other Government rulings designed for protection of culture and for propaganda. A Commission is to safeguard artistic standards; two persons on this must be competent in literary and artistic matters, and have a knowledge of Cinema technique. Propaganda films are to be made dealing with military prowess, hygiene, social welfare and scenic beauties. In fact the idea seems to be to prevent the Italian screen from being overrun with pictures not sympathetic to Fascist doctrines or in keeping with the best traditions of a dramatic and artistic race. So far few Italian films have been exported to this country, and of the few seen none were very striking. Gloom pervaded the scenes, and the death agonies were so heavingly prolonged that one was reminded of the message sent to Marshal Pilsudski by an aged Polish general: "Sir—I respectfully report that, with your kind permission, I am about to die."

This brings us to Poland. The same General Pilsudski in his capacity as premier has shown shrewd common sense in deciding to raise the tone of the movies by means of the derrick of taxation. A graduated tax is imposed on pictures, so that it touches educational and cultural productions lightly, but falls like a trip-hammer upon sex and crime films which are taxed something like thirty per cent. The New York weekly magazine, *Time*, slyly designates this as "Poland's Passion Tax."

Spain, country of romantic songs and practical people, uses taxation effectively also; but her method is to cut the tax on native productions in half. She has recently given the film world an example of the possibilities of home industry successfully supported by the people, for one Spanish picture is said to have made a profit of ninety thousand dollars without crossing the Spanish borders.

In France the virtual head of the film industry is Jean Sapene, owner of *Le Matin* and chief of the *Société des Cinéroman*. Among the directors are artists like Marco de Gastyne and Abel Gance. There is a strong movement to encourage French production, and many important films are being made of the biographical sort, largely with filmed versions of the lives of Joan of Arc, Chopin and Napoleon in the forefront. The new Napoleonic picture is reported to be a study of Napoleon's genius and to deal less with his love affairs than is usual, but *The Adventures of Casanova* can scarcely be so discreet if produced in more than one reel. With the exception of *Michael Strogoff* and *Les Misérables*, France has not been well represented on the screens of Canada. It is possible that some features have been handicapped by badly translated titles. I remember one instance where a French heroine who was bent upon

seeking a reconciliation with her lover said, "Terrible as he is, I will put myself on his feet"; and, in the same film, the bandit's lair was described as being "far away in vivifying and rigid calm of the nature." Evidently the title writer was, as he said of one of the characters, "not exempted of anxiety."

Germany, in addition to the quota pertaining to home exhibition, is making determined efforts to export her product and, though few of her films have been shown in Canada, two or three of these have been highly imaginative and technically remarkable; they excel in a certain grotesquerie and boldness of treatment. It is hinted that a number are not imported owing to gruesomeness and coarseness. As to the coarseness, the American industry knows its grosseries as well as the continental, but it is less mature in selection. There are four thousand Cinema theatres in Germany; and as fifty per cent of the pictures must be home-made, and production has not always been easy since the war, it is possible that a number of mediocre films may be turned out. But no one who has seen *Passion*, *Variety*, *Metropolis* or *The Last Laugh* can have failed to be impressed with the depth of imagination and the originality of direction possible to the Berlin studios.

Even in the perennially agitated Balkans self-determination is very active where movies are concerned. Roumania is to be congratulated upon the high stand she has taken. The Minister of Arts and Culture has jurisdiction over picture ethics there, and a regulation now in force makes it compulsory for every moving picture house to show daily "a recent film of cultural interest." A short time before his death King Ferdinand issued an edict that proprietors or operators of movie houses must be duly certified as to ability and moral character, and their buildings must be guaranteed by the Town Council.

Turkey has not allowed preoccupation with new conditions to overshadow the question of the popular screen entertainment. The Minister of Education is handling the matter, and is reported to be considering a plan to institute a Cinema and film monopoly which will guarantee that all films shown in Turkey shall be of improved moral tone and better adapted to the social and educational standards of the country.

A good many films are being made in Russia, but few reach Canada. Unfortunately—for some are of outstanding merit in direction and acting—the Soviet control colours the character of the stories; the eye of Russian art is suffering from the astigmatism of Bolshevist propaganda. The oft-quoted words of Lenin, "Of all the arts for Russia, the supreme and greatest art is the Cinema",



testify to a keen understanding of the potency of the silent drama. Films are used to instruct the peasants in proletarian ideas and new agricultural methods, hundreds of them being distributed free to workmen's clubs. Outside these clubs there are not more than sixty film theatres in Russia. The most notable director whose work has been seen outside his own land is Eisenstein, who made the story of the mutiny of the Russian fleet. "Potemkin" was remarkable for virility, photography and mass action, but brutal and—to a non-Bolshevist—strangely sentimental where the death of one mutinous sailor was concerned, and distinctly callous over the murder of many officers. There was an interview in *The New Masses* last summer which set forth the views of Eisenstein very clearly. He described himself as a Freudian and a Marxian, and told of his desire to make a film to help the Chinese revolutionary cause: "concrete agitation material is needed in China itself", he said. "Perhaps for the first time in history the film is to be as terrible a weapon as the hand grenade. There on the battlefield, where the fight is carried on, is the place of that art which stands in the front rank of battle—the art of the film. For our so-called art is only a means, an instrument, a method of struggle."

The Chinese film bomb was never made, owing to "technical difficulties", but the movies are making headway in China in spite of the revolution. They are an archaeological form of amusement there, for "shadow plays" were performed by the Chinese in 65 B. C. when, with the aid of the sun by day and fire by night, pantomimists threw shadows on a transparent silk curtain and thus told entire stories. Some time before the present upheaval took place, I read the translation of an article which appeared in a Chinese journal expressing disgust at the immodesty of dress displayed on the screen when an American picture showed a cabaret scene in which the dancers wore only breast-bands and trunks. In contrast to this it was cited that a favourite Chinese dancer was performing on the same street clad in a long satin coat buttoned up to her chin. There was a somewhat ironical sequel last April, in the accounts of the eight college-educated young women of China who paraded the streets of Hankow nude, and carrying a banner which announced that they had emancipated themselves from "Christian shame." The only Chinese film I have seen in Canada was modest and discreet beyond words. Even the vamp who was described as the daughter of "The great sinner in society; The boss of a gambling house", and was sent out by her father to "seduce young frogs", went about her shady avocation with an air so demure and even hesitant, and was so enveloped in clothes and so distantly polite, that one almost blushed to believe she was a bad young thing.



All around the world thoughtful people are watching and wondering. Students of psychology and sociology are trying to explain how this ubiquitous art of the Cinema is weaving and warping the fabric of civilization. In his book *Young Islam On Trek* Basil Matthews intimates that the combination of the modern film and the Koran is not proving a blessing to Islam by any means. Referring to the large number of movie houses in Moslem areas, he says "The movies have already had an influence the depth and range of which have not yet been assessed . . . for instance it is a conservative estimate to say that in the minds of millions of young Moslems, especially in India, the hitherto accepted idea of white women of Christian lands has been smashed by the passion films of the Bella Donna type. The whole conception of a restrained, relatively Christian civilization has received a rude shock through the passion film, reinforced by crime and wild west stories."

There is an investigation now under way in England relative to control of films in India. Great Britain has made a tentative suggestion that there might be some uniform method of regulation throughout the Empire. In England the Quota Bill now provides for seven and a half per cent British films to be shown next year, and an increasing proportion to be run after that, until in 1935 the quota will be twenty-five per cent. Block-booking is to be abolished in its present form, and a commission appointed to superintend the artistic side of films.

In spite of the monopoly now enjoyed by American pictures, it is scarcely true to say that the screen is being "Americanized." The celluloid Land of the Free is not exactly the kind of place we see when visiting across the border; it is still overrun with predatory males who have nothing to do but pursue innocent maidens, rapacious parents who sell their daughters to the highest bidder, cruel capitalists, noble workingmen, drunken and effete sons of rich citizens, and high-minded prize fighters. After seeing literally thousands of films, I have sometimes wondered that the people of the United States did not sue the producers for libel. We seldom see the ideals and normal life of America; it is more often the hectic imaginings of Hollywood—Hollywood making films for Broadway; and neither Hollywood nor Broadway is typically American. As there are some four hundred foreign actors in the film studios—a number of the most prominent being English and Canadian—and several foreign directors—English, Canadian, Irish, Scandinavian, Russian, German and French—the films from Hollywood should really be cosmopolitan. But most of the stories are from Ameri-

can sources, and the stale conventions of the movies die hard in contrast to the wonderful advancement in photography, lighting and acting.

It is a tremendous business making entertainment for millions of people of all classes, creeds, and ages and degrees of intelligence. To the lay mind the natural thing would be to make films of distinct types suitable for different groups, and endeavour to distribute them for the benefit of those groups, as we have our high class magazines of a literary order, lighter periodicals of the home variety, flossy fiction journals and magazines for young people. The producer's way, however, is to get everybody in for everything. The result does not always seem entirely satisfactory.

In discussing the Cinema one need not confine one's self to the films; and there are other things at fault besides those pictures which are banal, vulgar or objectionable. There are the patrons, the theatres, and the reviewers. The embracing lovers, the morons unable to appreciate anything but the crudest thrills, hypocritical older men and—more often—women who patronize pornography and profess not to have understood the meaning of it, and parents who see a sex play on Friday and imagine some divine dispensation makes it suitable for their children on Saturday because they can get in for a dime! The ill-ventilated theatres and those in residential districts which show pictures unfit for the family circle: the reviewers of current films who are also the solicitors of film advertising and write gushing paragraphs about Art; also the publicity writers who fill the press with propaganda to the exclusion of all candid discussion!

If we want more imagination, more truth, more beauty on the screen, we shall have to watch for the really fine things which do come along at intervals, and make them as great a sensation as the cheap trash which plays to the mob; we shall have to cease looking upon the Cinema as a childish diversion, and think more about selection than rejection. We shall have to think.