

THE CENSORSHIP OF MOVING PICTURES

A CENSOR

THE movies have called many a new thing into existence, and not the least curious product is the new profession of "picture censor". Certain men have to sit day by day trying "candidate films" at a private view, to decide which may be allowed as it stands, which must be cut and where the cuts must be made, which should be forbidden altogether as unfit to appear in any form. The job assigned to these judges has its own interest, its own tiresomeness, its own difficulty, and—above all—its own acid critics. The present writer has had some experience on a court of appeal in such cases, seeing from time to time the convicted film criminals whose screen life has been held forfeit by the court below, and which come up again with a plea for at least commutation of sentence. This article may be called "A Censor's Self-defence". Something ought to be said, by one who knows it from inside, about the task that has to be carried out, and about the abundant good advice which candid friends outside offer through the mediumship of the daily newspaper.

Those who think the present censorship unpardonably lax will perhaps be surprised to learn that there are others who apparently think there is no need for a censorship at all. They tell us that "public opinion" is a sufficient guarantee against any evil influence from the movies, for a really depraved film would be boycotted, and the dwindling receipts would soon compel its withdrawal. Others, whose belief in public opinion is not quite so radiant, urge that the ordinary criminal law furnishes ample protection, and that there is no need for a new sort of official to supplement the police. This was the judgment of the late Mayor Gaynor when he vetoed the proposed municipal censorship for New York. Mayor Gaynor quoted some historic parallels by which, he thought, such an innovation should be condemned. He reminded us that freedom of speech and freedom of the press used to be restricted by those few who "set themselves up as censors or guardians over the bulk of their fellow-men." He dwelt upon the vetoes to which every Christian denomination has been subjected in turn by those who presumed to decide what others might publish or even believe.

To revive this, argued the mayor, would be to restore autocracy or oligarchy. "The centre of thought was then among the few, and they were very anxious to keep it there. But in the course of time, in spite of all opposition, the centre of thought began to pass from the few to the many, where it is to-day." In the same mood newspaper critics often tell us that we are like those Puritan moralists who forbade the playing of cards or the dance round a Maypole. And those who just now feel inflamed against Prohibition contend that censorship of the movies is just another case of that thin end of the wedge which—unless its progress is sharply halted—will crush out all right of choosing for oneself the enjoyments and relaxations that make life pleasant.

Another kind of objection comes from those who glory in their ideal of "Art for Art's sake". The picture, they say, is not intended to be a form of preaching, but rather to hold the mirror up to nature. It shows us things as they are. If we make it subordinate to a purpose, and appoint directors to fix what the purpose shall be, it will quickly become as poor a thing as the "novel with a purpose". They ask, is not the only democratic method here as elsewhere to trust the judgment of the people as a whole, to place upon the onlookers the responsibility of approving or condemning, to let them see all sides of pictorial life, sure that in the end not only will taste be thus better educated but even moral reactions will become far more sensitive than if people were controlled like children by grandmotherly officials?

Now, those who argue thus forget a good many things. They forget, in the first place, how experience has shown that the degrading type of picture will draw a certain type of crowd, quite numerous enough to make it a "paying proposition" for the management. They forget that, although in the end—if the picture were bad enough—a storm of disapproval among decent folk would stop it, yet these storms take time to develop, and the moral nerves of even an excellent public can be roused to such action only occasionally or for the very gross case. They forget in speaking of "the adequacy of the ordinary criminal law" that the law's delays are a byword, that each film case would have to be fought through the court on its own merits and demerits, and that the policeman, with all his good qualities, is not well qualified for delicate discrimination on pictures above or below the line of propriety. Most surprising of all, they forget that a cardinal purpose of the censorship is the moral protection of childhood.

Many persons seem not yet to appreciate the vast range of influence wielded by the movies. The multitude that watches a

film is not just being amused or entertained, like the multitude that looks on at a baseball match. There is perhaps no other medium of advertisement quite so far-reaching as the screen, and we know well how advertisement can sway the public mind. These shows differ from the advertising placard in that they are on view in a theatre to which only those resort who like to see them, so that the noxious picture is by no means exposed, like the placard on the street, to the full play of criticism by everyone. Nor is there real force in the plea about liberty of the press. Not every kind of book or newspaper would be allowed to circulate without prosecution, and some are from time to time suppressed. During the war the films were an invaluable means of patriotic propaganda. No one, surely, would suggest that they should have been allowed to advertise the interests of the enemy at will, even if film companies had been ready to display such pictures and some theatre-goers to pay for them. Is the guardianship of public morals not as vital as the promotion of patriotism? And, while it is true that a people cannot be moralised by laws, it is no less true that it can be *demoralised* by the want of them.

Nothing commends a picture so much to a certain sort of the curious as the news that it was stopped by censors elsewhere, but that "here it is to be exhibited quite unchanged". The confidence of such optimists as Mayor Gaynor will be noticed with a smile by every man who has sat on a censorship board, nor has public opinion in New York theatres quite justified the high claims which the ex-mayor made for it. It would often pay the movie company well to bribe the censor into first objecting and then yielding, if this fact could be advertised beforehand. The present writer has been reproached by those who told him that they had taken a chance of seeing a film in some other city where no one of his censorious narrowness had been allowed to "spoil" it. The remark made him feel that his own office had not been exercised in vain.

By far the greater number of pictures set no moral task at all. The pictorial presentation of the plot in great novels, scenes of travel and adventure, new triumphs of engineering skill by sea or by land or in the air, pageants and displays of public events—from these, as from many other types, immense profit combined with breathless entertainment may be derived. What gives real trouble is the "problem" film, and of this there are at least five main varieties. These are, (1) pictures of crime, (2) pictures of vice, not amounting to crime, but often still more demoralising, (3) pictures of horror, (4) pictures relating to the "brain-storm" and the "unwritten law", (5) pictures that pretend to be "educational," but in which

the educational pretence is mere camouflage for other and quite degrading suggestiveness.

Crimes are in high favour, and criminals are extremely interesting for some spectators. Just as Satan has been called the real hero of *Paradise Lost*, the burglar who is smart and the hooligan who dodges the police and the swindler who gets rich quick inspire a sort of admiration. Every news boy knows that it will make his paper go to shout "Murder in the East End; Horrible Details", and the film artist has the sure instinct of the fat boy in *Pickwick* whose function it was to "make your flesh creep". Gambling dens, saloons, life in the wild and woolly west where the revolver is the law, may be trusted to make some audiences stare with open-mouthed intentness. A prime favorite is the "brain-storm", where some good fellow gets great provocation and becomes his own avenger, or where the slow foot of ordinary justice is hastened by the quick application for oneself of a law that is "unwritten".

It is not the censor's function to consult his personal likes or dislikes, nor even to reject what is nothing worse than mere slop. He will let a great deal pass that he feels to be as far from genuine art as a comic picture is from a Raphael, wondering only that anyone can watch it without intolerable boredom. His one question is whether a film may be expected to have bad moral effect on the sort of people who will see it, and he has specially in mind that very many of them are of immature age. It is futile to say that this is a matter on which opinions differ, and that different people have different ideas of "bad moral effect". True, but somebody must judge. The censor may make mistakes, as all men may. But the remedy is not to abolish his office. Choose him with care, but, if he is to be of any use at all, you must leave a great deal to his discretion.

The latest, and in some respects the most troublesome, difficulty is with the film that announces itself as "educational," and comes with a great flourish of advertising trumpets as "a delicate handling of an urgent social evil". This means that it has to do with divorce, or with "free love," or with venereal disease. A moving address is delivered to the censors by the film manager, in which he points out that the time for prudishness has gone by, that we need to make people realise the horrible pest that is among them, and that, while every care has been taken lest sensitive folk should be unduly shocked, it is inevitable that "a spade should now be called a spade".

The present writer, who knows this speech almost by heart, makes a practice of cutting the film manager short, and telling him

to put on the spool. Sometimes it is clear that the case for the film was genuine. At other times it is equally clear that the moral at the close is nothing more than vapid, watery stuff to stop criticism, and that the whole drawing force of the picture belongs to the exhibition of evil by which the so-called "moral" is preceded. The setting is almost always in scenes of high society, changing at intervals to the slum and the doss house. Now, whether the movies, with their very juvenile audience, should be chosen to convey lessons of this sort even when they are genuine, may well be disputed. But that they become utterly abominable when the lesson is only a thin disguise, and the real appeal is to the prurient, does not admit of any debate whatever.

The need for a censorship of the movies is like the need for a public abattoir, and to interfere with free trade in diseased meat is not more important to the public interest than interference with free trade in diseased films. A certain kind of butcher is very violent in his objections to the one sort of control, very sure that people are no fools and should be left alone to judge meat for themselves when they have to pay for it themselves, very sanguine that in this way public taste will be educated and that the law of supply and demand will settle such things "in the end" better far than they would be settled by "officialdom". But most of us think that a man should *not* be free either to buy or to sell tubercular meat, even if he is too thrifty to pay a higher price for what is wholesome, or too philanthropic to withhold what is unwholesome at a cheap rate from the poor. We think, too, that many persons are "fools" in judging the carcasses of animals on a stall, and that though experience might perhaps educate their discernment "in the end"—if there was time—another sort of end would often prematurely break off the process of their learning. In short, as Mr. H. G. Wells has neatly put it, the state abattoir testifies to our distrust of the adequacy of the private conscience in this matter. Will any one who knows the movie films deny that similar official assistance is in place there? Just as only the type of butcher that is a public peril objects to restraint in the one case, only the type of film company that we should be much better without will object in the other.

The interesting suggestion has been advanced that many difficulties of the censorship would disappear if a special theatre for pictures suited to children were opened in each large city. Beyond doubt nothing else troubles the censor quite so much at present as the mixed character of the audience by which films are seen. But it is pointed out that, just as the risk from automobiles

passing a public school is to be met by supervising playgrounds rather than by abolishing cars, so the harm to children from some sorts of otherwise legitimate film is to be guarded against by having a theatre for the young and keeping them away from shows that are not for them.

There are both attractions and difficulties in this proposal. It has been calculated that on the average there are more women than men present at each play, and that about twenty per cent. are children under sixteen years of age. One of the reasons for expecting the movie to last as an institution for entertainment is that—as the advertising placards of a patent medicine often say—“the kiddies love it”. What the kiddies love is perhaps the surest of all to endure, as the undying vogue of the Christmas pantomime is enough to remind us.

That many of the present shows are unsuited to them no one will think of doubting. It has even been alleged that burglary scenes have so turned the heads of some boys as to send them away with the resolve to try their fortune as amateur cracksmen, and that stores have been broken and entered by some youngster of fourteen, fired by the sensational movie with the ambition to imitate Raffles. No doubt these tales lose nothing in the telling, and they must not be taken too seriously. But, though the tracing of juvenile crime to the influence of pictures has been overdone, every censor has had before him films that seemed almost designed to play havoc with the imagination of nervous youth. Shows which may be innocent enough in their effect upon the grown up may be very undesirable to bring before children. The problem play about divorce is not, indeed, in this class, for its moral—whether good or bad—is mercifully beyond the understanding of all little ones who have been decently brought up at home. Whether it is equally innocuous to boys and girls of sixteen to twenty is a different matter. But what shall we say about the blood and thunder pieces, the murder or suicide pictures, the touches of horror and of wilful cruelty which are so often in evidence and are looked upon apparently with such interest by some adult audiences? That these are appropriate to children no one will suggest. Perhaps they are unedifying to anyone. But the censorship—like all governing authorities—must not too far outrun public opinion in its rigour. So a great deal is passed, with some misgiving. There is often no objection to it, except that it is a sad waste of time, and that the so-called “Art” is often of the feeblest. We let it go, not because we think it wholesome, but because we think it not gross enough to be worth forbidding to those who should be

able to look after their own morals to that extent. And we must pass a great deal at a glance, for there is much of another sort which a glance shows us that we must scrutinise with care.

Foremost among these last, for all who are solicitous about childhood, is the "instructive" film. Social reform can, indeed, be splendidly stimulated by a vivid picture presenting some ghastly state of the slums, or some brutality that remains yet unchecked. Even the misfortunes of domestic discord may be shown with profit, if they are shown with judgment and restraint. But all this, and much more like it, will educate the mature adult only. The family quarrel, the gambling den, the saloon, the whole doings of the underworld, are not for the eye of childhood either in real life or on the screen.

What, then, shall we devise to protect those who most need our care, without rousing the anger of those who, as they themselves put it, "refuse to be put back by censors into the nursery"? We might insist on a notice that no one under sixteen years of age shall be admitted. But every censor knows that this would in itself stimulate the rush of a certain class of the grown up, who would come for no educational purpose. This is a sad fact, but it is true. So, if the piece is to be allowed at all, we have to prescribe excisions here and there, knowing that children will come, and we thus often spoil the sequence of the picture. It occasionally happens that a film which would be not only harmless but even valuable for older people has to be rejected because we know that younger people, for whom the effect would be the reverse, are sure to see it.

The project of a special house for children looks well-conceived, until some practical impediments are pointed out. Some idealists have it in mind that here is a unique instrument for supplementing the work of the school by combining pleasure with learning. Geography, they tell us, could thus be taught with a vividness that is absent from the school lesson, and history could be made to live with a distinctness that the ordinary school teacher cannot command. Contemporary social progress, in a measure even science, can thus be brought home to multitudes who will not read books. There is so much truth in this idea as applied to the needs of children that a good deal has already been done to carry it out on a modest scale. A list of films prepared for this purpose lies before me as I write. Some of them deal with such geographical subjects as "Wonders of Alaska", "China and the Chinese", "How wheat is harvested in California", "Railroad Ties from Uncle Sam's Forests", and "The Undying Story of Captain

Scott". Some are nature studies, like "My friend, the Ant", "Where the Clouds come from", "The Birth of a Tornado", and "The Deep Sea Anglers". Some are astronomical, such as "Comets", "Eclipse of the Sun", or "An Astronomer's Workshop". Some are concerned with inventions,— "The Electric Bell", or "Aeroplane in Business". Some are happy in the blend of patriotism with science, like "Safeguarding the City's Health" or "Putting Rivers to Work". And there is already a large range of Biblical pictures, whose use is still in its infancy, but whose promise for the Sunday School can easily be discerned. Where shall the teacher of geography, of zoology, of science in general, find such another reinforcement? And the children will be learning when they fancy they are being merely entertained.

But it is one thing to sketch an ideal plan, quite another to make it practically workable. There are centres in which the project of a children's theatre has already been tried with admirable results. There are others in which it has been given a chance and has conspicuously failed. It seems as if only in the exceptional place—in the great city, and by no means in *all* great cities—has experience shown it to be a success. Nor is the reason far to seek. As every manager will tell you, films are very expensive, and, if eighty per cent. of the patronage comes at present from adults, it is too much to ask that any house should risk limiting its appeal to the twenty per cent. of children. If the adult film is unsuitable for the one-fifth, the child film will be unattractive to the four-fifths. What would happen if a theatre tried running pantomime and nothing else all the year round?

The film man is no philanthropist, nor is the movie show a philanthropic institution. Companies are quick to give any considerable section of the public what it asks for. The shareholders look for handsome returns for their money, and the management there, as in other business enterprises, has the single goal of maximum receipts for minimum expenditure. Let him who runs his own business on any higher principle cast the first stone; let others forbear. The manager has a shrewd eye for the way in which business can be got, and, though he gets it at the cost of public morality, he will often with perfect calmness see the public paying this price for his own advantage. At present there is a good deal of chafing under the restraints of the censorship as unwarrantable interference with trade. Ask the film company to aim at educational results alone, and it will prove as obdurate as a mill or a shipyard that we expect to sacrifice profits in the interest of some lofty moral purpose.

Thus we may abandon at once the idea that a theatre devoted exclusively to shows for children could be made to pay in most of our cities. As an occasional venture it might be safe enough, and might even be quite good advertising. But the staple business of the concern must be catering for the taste of adults, unless and until enthusiasm for the welfare of childhood rises to a pitch that is certainly not yet in sight. Short of such a scheme, however, a quite valuable means of avoiding the present disadvantages is well within our power to use. Why not have at least one theatre in each section of a city that will devote one evening per week, or one evening per fortnight, to the children? It will be said that this would disorganize the schedule by breaking in upon the "run of the picture" from Monday to Saturday, and that this run is essential, at present prices of films, to the profit of the management. But we are accustomed to the "three-day run" in certain cases, and we may assume that this is not being practised at a loss. It would be no more than a matter of rearranging, and a bargain for the systematic transfer of pictures from a theatre in one section to a theatre in another should not be beyond the skill of those concerned.

A far more formidable question arises about the hygienic aspect of the proposal, and of this the present writer does not feel competent to speak with authority. It would be the task of our public health experts to lay down rules, and these would have to be somewhat severe. Ventilation would have to be assured beyond a doubt. The possible spread of disease germs among so many children crowded together is, one may suppose, no small risk. But sound ventilation is now among our manageable affairs, and the issue of movie tickets through the public schools could surely be made effective for restricting the attendance to those in satisfactory health. Some strictness in refusing permits would be all the better, for it is clearly by no means desirable that any child, needing so much open air life, should resort to the movies as more than an occasional treat.

Whether these and other difficulties shall be surmounted or not depends to no slight extent just on the *will of the public*. Good will cannot achieve the impossible, but it can take a great deal out of the "impossible" class. The question is whether we are sufficiently in earnest about the children, sufficiently alive to their needs, sufficiently anxious about their dangers,—in short, sufficiently eager to do the best for them both by way of provision and by way of restraint. If we have this spirit as we should have it, and seriously make up our minds that the "children's day" shall be a

regular feature of the movies, every obstacle can be made to bend. Are there not yet enough films of the kind we want? Let the demand become strong enough, and the supply will soon be multiplied. Will the theatres make trouble, and invent objections against passing the reels round to one another? Patronise the shows that can find a way to thus co-operate, and the others will before long follow suit. It is not necessary that *all* of them should do so. They are now so numerous that a modest proportion of them would suffice, at least for a beginning. Will the receipts once a week not be enough to pay for the change? This will be because not enough children will be there, and does anyone doubt that there are enough available if the parents rise to the advantage of sending or bringing them? The one thing needful is public appreciation of the risks for childhood that belong to the movie as it is at present operated, and of the chances of immense benefit if it were specialised for our purpose. The complaint of "things as they are" in this field is perhaps sometimes excessive, but it rests on a real basis of unpleasant fact. And the remedy is in our own hands.