HERACLITUS

OR

THE FUTURE OF FILMS

TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

For a full list of this Series see the end of this Book

HERACLITUS

OR

THE FUTURE OF FILMS

BY

ERNEST BETTS

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E. B.

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TO

FRANK FENTON

OUT IN THE BLUE

HERACLITUS
OR
THE FUTURE OF FILMS

PREFATORY

§ 1

There is no future for the films until somebody believes in them: for films, that is to say, which are works of art. And this is to be, at least in part, an aesthetic or "highbrow" study concerning films which are works of art. I say this at the outset so that no person interested in the money-making side of the pictures need besmirch himself by reading anything about art and other "useless" matters, as Oscar Wilde put it. But I shall also say a word or two about the commercial film, for the benefit of those (if any) who know more about it than I do, and require to have their knowledge purged and reduced and

knocked sideways for their own good.

There is no future for the films until somebody believes in them. At present it is hard to know who believes in them or what they believe. As commerce, of course, they have as assured a future as aeroplanes or ships or newspapers or the Bank of England. Obviously, there is no future for the Bank of England. The Bank of England just continues to be the Bank of England, year in and year out, with incredible security and dullness. And if we knew the future as surely as this, it would have the solid, bricked-up appearance of the past, and cease to interest us as an adventure, as something moving perilously from point to point, as something uncertain and therefore interesting. Pictures move: that is the central and primary fact. It is this alone which makes them interesting.

As an art form, however, from which large sums of money are to be made—and it is foolish not to make money out of art if you can—as an art form, I say, the film has an incalculable future, and one that is destined to change its com-

plexion as marvellously from generation to generation as one of those slow-burning sunsets over the deserts of Samarra. It has already become a universal but possibly not the highest art form, for art does not, and cannot, appeal to everybody, whatever people may say about the Old Vic, and B.B.C. concerts and native dances in South Africa. Art is a rare and distinguished thing, and it is the massed and rather breathless production of films which is muffling and holding back their artistic development.

I once heard Mr E. M. Forster declare that Marcel Proust was a snob. Rather, let us say he was an artist. For once you begin to select you begin to set aside, and turn up your nose at this and that, and the selective process consists in art and snobbery combined, and the universal turning-up of noses, till they eventually reach a supreme discrimination in everything. I do not see how the cinema is to attain this supreme discrimination for the masses till the masses are more enlightened than they are at present, till they can set the motion picture free on rising tides of

appreciation. But the films will bring them nearer to the imperishable than they have ever been before. To-day, unfortunately, many a film exhibitor thinks that Michael Angelo is the name of a new brand of soap, and many a film-goer is ready to believe him.

§ 2

As an art, films must begin (and very soon) to have something to carry out and profess. They must have some inner necessity. They must be made for pleasure, for there is no doubt that from time to time it is absolutely necessary for mankind to be pleased, and this is the beginning and end of all creative work. It pleases: it may have other effects, but this is the first cause and also the first effect, leaving nothing else to be done. God looked upon his handiwork and saw that it was good.

Now it is difficult to write of the future of something which has very little past, though it is undoubtedly more amusing, and the only adventure that is quite safe

to write about, since no one person can be any wiser about the future than anybody else. And the reason it is difficult is because we are really, in most of our historical conjectures pinned down to the scientific method of judging what is to come by the footrule of what is past. You cannot write history readably without falsifying it, using your imagination over the facts, the facts themselves being the history, "the empty cases in which the affairs of the world are packed". Why do we prefer the imaginative historian? Simply because the bare facts of life, past, present or future, always have something disagreeable about them.

Now we have very few facts, comparatively speaking, to help us out of the past of films into the future. We have no helpful standards or "touchstones" as guides. That does not matter, for it is not history we are writing, but only a few lines of imagination and sense applied to a fragment of it.

When the first minstrel felt joyous he opened his mouth and sang. A great and dreadful moment! He must have

looked a sight. When the first artist felt a desire for expression he took dyes and feathers and shells and pretty stones, and with these beautified himself, or some other object.

There was something desperate and divine about it, and the thing had to be done. But suppose he had been given the flint and the woad and the rock and all the implements of his first artistic essay *before* experiencing the pressure of any creative impulse? These materials would have been meaningless, just as it would have been meaningless to explain what poetry was to Ella Wheeler Wilcox. He would have been unable to use this knowledge in the way he was meant to use it.

The invention of cinematography presents a parallel case in our own time. In the cinematograph we have had a means of expression presented to us before the desire to express, the orchestration before the music, the telescope before the star, with the result that we have known that uncomfortable experience, victory without a battle. The battle is

to come, it is upon us. Who will wrest an art from all these machines?

For owing to the industry's rapid, almost unheeded advance since 1895, let us say, and to the little serious interest shown in it until a few years ago, the film has no clear character that has been built up, no developed youth, no guidance from people or things, by which its coming career can be safely measured. The film is still a boy making up its mind what it is going to do, with eagerness and delight. Possibly it is a girl. At all events, a thing of passionate interest to those who are watching it rise and spread out and reach up to life.

§ 3

Whatever its character, the cinematograph was not at first an artistic discovery. It was a mechanical one, and from the days when it became a sound article of commerce, was exploited like a new soap or cheese or prima donna or political war-cry by men with cigars and limousines and no time to waste.

They knew then, as we know, that the purpose of most films is to give pleasure and refreshment, and that films succeed as they fulfil or disappoint our conception of these things. But while we have eaten deeply enough of the crust of all the other arts to know roughly, and by broad inference, what to expect of this new one, the film is utterly different from these, and examples of its art are still too few to form bases for a system of criticism. It is not criticism we want—especially as most of it is mere theorizing, or simply *not* criticism. What we want is creation itself, the moving picture, character in action, rhythm, architecture and design in motion, the pattern of humanity, drawn out into lines, gathered into forms and shadows, and hung out in splendour. Mankind moving about in order.

Heraclitus it was who first perceived that all life consisted of, and tended towards, change; and change is the first principle of all cinematography.

§ 4

In saying, a page or two ago, that the problem of the first artist confronted with a set of raw materials is one of apprenticeship, of learning a difficult technique, I do not mean that we must discard our present knowledge and go right back to the days when film stories were built up in chunks—generally chunks of pineapple or of Hepworth rock.[1] Films, it is true, are still built up in chunks, but some, again, are built up in order and proportion out of the stuff of imagination and thought, and these are roots for a future blossoming. These must be watered now. We must know just where we are going: the beginning and end of the job.

Every first-rate maker of films, in fact, is in some way a conscious evolutionist. He believes in germination, growth and change, in the rule of growth, and in the slowness and difficulty and occasional mismanagement of growth. He believes, too, in the everlasting delight of change.

[1] Vide "Comin' Thro' the Rye".

His material, cast in visual images, is the same, and his method is movement. For if the specific quality of drama is character *in action*, especially must this be so in film plays, where nothing should be shown which does not represent movement and flux, or the drama of its arrest or of its interruption or of its conflict. The film is unique among the visual arts in postulating a perpetual fluidity or becoming as the basis of the conception.

Although we have learnt a good deal in our brief experience of the film, I do not think we have yet found out how best to catch mankind in the act, how to re-create him in movement, and manipulate all living things with the same certainty, significance and beauty as a poet manipulates words. We have not fully understood the truth about movement, or if so, we have not applied it with resolution and insight.[1] Furthermore, instead

[1] The American director has an incomparable gift of knowing what he is "moving about". He hauls you into the middle of the picture at once, with both hands, so that you are thrown into a strange transport of satisfaction. He gives to movement its richest expression, so that

of having something to say in motion pictures we are having to say something—which is a very different thing. It means that ninety-nine films out of a hundred have no artistic justification. We may say of this situation what Hermann Bahr has said of other forms of expression: "Perhaps all talk, all writing, is but a wringing of hands because of our inward distress".[1]

Well, they don't wring their hands in Wardour Street, the centre of our profitable film world. Many of them would like to wring each other's necks, but they give enormous lunches instead, as being the more business-like form of entertainment. *Non est super terram potestas quae comparetur ei!*

it bursts like a sail against the wind and cannot do more. All his movements have wonderful swiftness and precision, even in commonplace films, and I believe the profound relief which this gives to the subconscious, is one reason for the American film's success. The method has its dangers. A picture made on so taut a line frequently sags, and what it gains in pace it loses in significance, but it is better than the "whiffling vexations" of a British film, which often turns round and round like a sinking ship before deciding where to go.

[1] Expressionism.—Frank Henderson.

Nevertheless, if contemporary films are not, generally speaking, works of art, they still have flashes of beauty, bursts of merriment, wit, pity and terror, and an immense good humour; and nearly always they have a background of incomparable richness. It is too rich. One's first quarrel with the meal is that so much of it is unnecessary, indigestible. The man or woman of taste who regularly sits down to it will come away feeling a little sick now and then.

Some of this meal must be taken away and destroyed.

We must uncreate. We must uncreate again and again—a process for which our Western civilization has very little relish and is not at all prepared.

For the technicians and producers in filmcraft are so far in advance of the creative artists, the scenarists, the dreamers of dreams (except where the dream and the business are the work of the same person, as in the case of Chaplin, for example) that instead of asking: How can we most simply and faithfully and economically interpret

such-and-such a theme? we ask: In how rich, costly, hair-raising, eye-watering and conventional a manner can this thing be done? [1] Can we add to the list of directors, assistant directors, title-writers, camera-men, art directors, continuity men, publicity men, and even authors, whose totally uninteresting names flash on the screen as a preliminary to all "programme" or "feature" films, and from whose multiple authorship some sort of unity is supposed to emerge? Can we present a greater Flood than the original Flood, with more water and larger arks: a mightier fall of Rome, a more "miserable" version of *Les Misérables*? And the answer is always that we can.

§ 5

I merely attempt to survey the position in the film world of 1928. Here is the soil on which to-morrow's fruit will flourish. Within the last year or two German films steeped in American production values have been succeeding. They were better

[1] Cf. "The Ten Commandments" (American) or "Moulin Rouge" (British).

when they were German and not succeeding. In Russia, Eisenstein and Pudolfkin have developed an expressionist technique which aims at making the mass and the machine say what the individual once said—the voice of Russia, of the workers, of those labouring for speech. As only one or two Russian pictures have been available for exhibition in England, and none of such importance, for example, as *Potemkin*, or *The Mother*, one is debarred from noting more than the tendency to organize the cinematograph almost entirely for political purposes—a matter to which I shall refer again. But even Russia has had to use American pictures, though she now makes her own and even has a cinema university. America has something of this kind, too, but owing to her reckless publicity methods, in which the public is beaten and bullied into acceptance of her ideas, one finds it hard to disentangle truth from fiction in these reports. "This is just an idea worth money, you guys! I reckon we're in on the ground floor!"

In France there is probably as keen

an understanding of the principles of film-making as anywhere else, but not an overwhelming amount of first-rate production. They write learnedly but fail to create. L'Herbier, the late Louis Delluc, Moussinac,[1] Jean Epstein, Birot, Delpeuch, and many others have been slowly evolving a rather heavy film aesthetic which dissolves into something newer, deepens into something more potent, as fresh technical discoveries are made. In England we are making money but not producing very many good films. A few. England was ever slow in making up her mind, and how much can she do with the one or two film directors she has who really know anything about film direction and the necessity for an artist to be himself, and to believe that something is true?

[1] Moussinac's *Naissance du Cinéma* (Paris, 1925) though abstruse, is one of the most penetrating studies yet written of films as an art form. See also Birot's *Cinéma*.

I

BEGINNING

§ 1

We have seen some of the effects upon film production of having an instrument at hand without any idea to put into it. Itself, the cinematograph runs beautifully, making a pleasant snipping noise as if you were having your hair cut. The machine is perfect,[1] and I doubt if we shall evolve a finer than that now in use—at least, not for very many years. What is wrong with the machine, and all machines (as Mr Haldane has pointed out)[2] is the man who thought of them, the idea and inspiration. These it enslaves.

[1] Mr E. G. Turner, of Walturdaw, an authority on projection apparatus, takes the view that projection is as near perfect as it can be until such time as the manufacturers can guarantee an absolutely perfect film. At present inequalities of shrinkage in the negative are apt to cause a slight movement up and down on the screen after the film has become worn in use.

[2] See *Daedalus* in this Series.

But it has enslaved only the commercial film: the thing of beauty, the finer film, is free, notwithstanding the incredible fence of mechanics it must overleap to obtain freedom, fineness and beauty. In the matter of reducing this complex body of materials to its proper form, I see no reason why Plato's idea of "multiplicity in unity" should not hold good for films as for philosophics and ideal republics.

First, however, let us examine the beginnings of this strange, moving, wonderful creature, the commercial film, and its way of coming into the world. Tristram Shandy's arrival was nothing to this.

I will confine myself to the representational, or story film, which gives pleasure to the world, and to the relations existing between this, the "perishable" type of film, and the "durable" type of film, or work of art—borrowing words from Mr Gordon Craig.[1]

[1] Perhaps I should point out that I do not refer here to Mr Gordon Craig of New Era Films, but to the artist of the theatre.

The common practice in the germination of pictures is for a film company's scenario or editorial department to read numbers of books, plays and short stories, throw most of them away, select the worst from every point of view, and produce it. If the worst is not thrown away, the best is treated in such a manner as to be no different, on the screen, from the worst.[1]

I hold no brief whatever for starting a picture this way or that so long as its values are accurately adjusted and free from any treacherous idea of what the other person, the public or the Pope, wants. But I think we must work from the image, or seed—from the thing which moves and began the whole business—forwards to the story, not backwards from the story to the image, as in adapting a novel to the film. I see a simple, individual motion-picture as the beginning of the whole work, broadening out, as it is conceived, into successions of

[1] E.g., *Tess of the D'Urbervilles, The White Monkey, The Admirable Crichton*, etc., *ad. inf., ad naus.*

supporting motion-pictures of a strict and simple cinematic value, and bound up firmly into a film unity—in short, growth and change as they occur, " multiplicity in unity ".

If on the other hand you decide to make a film from two ends at once, (your own and that of the audience), you will meet with nothing en route but success, and success, we are all aware, is intolerable to an artist.

To this double-ended type of picture there are many exceptions, because artists continue to spring from the earth, at first like cabbages and then like kings. No matter: looking at the films made by the great film companies, this is roughly speaking the process of film conception, its guiding principles and awards for virtue being defined thus:

Is the author famous? (*Yes: Full marks*)

Can the public spell his name, or hers? (*No: Fewer marks*)

Could Susan Switch, for example, "star" as Cleopatra and "swell the bank roll?"	(*Yes: prepare scenario*)
Has the story "sex appeal?"	(*Yes: prepare Susan Switch*)
Has it all the merits of a play, novel or short story, but none of the merits of a good film?	(*Yes: start production*)

It is needless to pursue these cheerful flippancies, for to do so is like attempting a serious analysis of second-rate magazine fiction in every city of Europe and America.

Alternatively, the film companies buy stocks of exotic film titles, such as *Passions for Two, Scented Passions, Passions in Pink, Pawns of Passion,* and fill them with film stories. When they are full, they brim over on to the

public, who are passionately amused.[1]

§ 2

This, then, is the seed of the commercial film. If I exaggerate, Hollywood will

[1] I append the following piece of sharp good sense on the subject:

"The film-makers and the film-showers seem to take a perverse delight in queering their own pitch. If a man makes a good picture, they cut it to bits. If a firm buys a good plot for filming, they make the film and lose the plot. They buy a book like *Anna Karenina* and put it out (in America) as *Love*. They buy a title like *Old Ironsides* and change it (in England) to *Sons of the Sea*. They give Conrad Veidt *A Man's Past* for his first starring picture in a new country. They set Lars Hansen to "support" Jackie Coogan in *Buttons*. They schedule the Swede Sjostrom to direct the American theme *The Wind*, and take Dupont all the way to Hollywood to make something of *Love Me and the World is Mine*. This is the sort of prodigality which really makes a film-lover angry, unless he has reached the happy philosophy that regards all movieland and all movie people as a tremendous joke. It weakens his defence against the kinema's opponents. It robs him of his confidence, prevents him forecasting any pleasure for himself or recommending any pleasure to his friends. We are accustomed to hearing the complaint, and, answering it, that there is no art in the motion-picture and no

understand, for Hollywood has built factories and forts of exaggeration throughout the world, in the belief, which I endorse, that the world will read a word in small letters but only understand one in capitals. The conceit of Hollywood is impregnable. Let fly, then, these gentle arrows! Mr Mencken, Mr Nathan, will receive them kindly, perhaps.

It needs no gift of prophecy to perceive that films so born will grow up and flourish with the same certainty, the same face, complexion, personality and gesture, for scores of years, assuming we are not all killed by our best inventions in the meantime. No doubt Lever Brothers will continue to turn out soap in the same way, and Mrs Edwardes her more-than-ever desiccated soup. There

artists among its disciples. But the complaint for which we can have no answer is that we do not recognize the art and artists that we have. It is true. Films like *The Chinese Parrot* prove it up to the hilt. How, in face of them, can a man be anything but a laughing-stock when he speaks of a kinema aesthetic, and prophesies a happy future for the screen?"

C.A.L. in *The Manchester Guardian*, March 24, 1928.

is no future for such certainties, but a pleasant satisfaction for all who wash and dine in finding them definitely and always round the corner. This is the certain and continuous present, the everlasting minute, the present participle of common humanity, and the commercial film will occupy a profitable rut here for generations, until it can stay here no longer, until it is kicked out by something better. And in our present state of civilization, from which it is obvious that the barbarian in us is as lively, irrational, and bellicose as ever, let us admit that the commercial film is unquestionably a blessing to the world, this being a world in which everything has to be paid for, in which everything has its audit. Be as spiritual as St Francis, it still costs money to purge the soul by art or religion or sixpenny philosophies. Only the stars, trees and sunlight are without their price and advertisement.

So let us not be too serious about the commercial film, whose extravagant efficiency brings delight and rest and a sort of beauty to this grief-struck globe,

and is a rich mantle to poor folk, now and for years uncounted. I say this with all possible prejudice to the attack I shall shortly make on that " rootless, rotten ", world-dominating production, the American moving-picture.

§ 3

Meanwhile, let us take the seed and beginnings of the " durable " film. Mr Zangwill once told us that drama should be a communion between the audience and the players. " Every actress ", he added, for the benefit of the film stars, " thinks that the part is greater than the whole ". (*Sic transit Gloria Swanson.*) Mr Zangwill's was possibly too high a seriousness for the stumbling film producer, obeying five minds simultaneously, and with loyalty to all but himself. Nevertheless, Zangwill gave the right cue for the spirit of play or film-making. He spoke as an artist. Drench yourself in the job.

Technically, it is plain, a good film

is evolved in the same manner as a bad one. It passes through the same mechanical processes. The scenario, however, is not wrenched from the story: it *is* the story. There is no conflict of ideas between the director choosing his theme, and the creator of the theme, and this harmony is vital at the beginning if the conception is to have the unity and singleness of a work of art at the end. The film of the future must accept this principle or allow itself to become a film of the past.

Side by side with this singleness of purpose is *the mind that moves*, and makes the choice; the mind that sees at once what can and cannot be rendered to perfection in the form of motion pictures. Few minds of this type exist. They will have to be evolved.

If you go to the old city of Bisitun, in Persia (the film will probably take you there for ninepence) you will see a great piece of sculpture cut into the rock high up in a cleft of the Black Rock Mountains. It is of Darius receiving the tributary kings. He stands with his handful of

the conquered marching up to him, each cut in duplication of the next, and with such astonishing art that the figures appear to be moving. The Bisitun sculptures have stood in this cleft for twenty-five centuries and the mind which conceived them and other such works embodying strong stylistic rhythms[1] was manifestly a cinematic mind. (This is a shocking word, but we must get used to it.) We are rediscovering now in a different medium the long-lost idea of the moving picture, of mankind cast not in stone, bronze, paint or print, but in fluid images. A tremendous and magical discovery which was launched like a toy for a suburban shop-window!

In this genesis, though the governing principle be motion and the subject one fit to be photographed—photogenic, that is to say—yet we must make wide reservations, since motion is the sign and breath of life altogether and to require motion

[1] E.g. Greek sculpture of the Ionic period or the Theban wall pictures of a still earlier age. The Archer Frieze from the palace at Susa (in the Louvre) is another fine example.

only of a subject is to fling life in heaps at the camera in the manner, whether on stage or screen, of kitchen-maid comedy, whereas what is needed is the laying down of rigid limitations to this luxurious business, the enforcement all round of some rule of economy, so that only that which is significant, necessary, characteristic—in short, unique—will be portrayed.[1]

Having achieved this singleness of aim at the outset, the director of the film must remain an autocrat to the end. Otherwise the film, as we so often find, will have the patched-up appearance of a

[1] "Il y a une esthétique du cinéma. Elle consiste à connaître assez les moyens du cinéma pour les bien utiliser. Or ces moyens sont extrêmement limités, et c'est à cause de cela même que l'esthétique du cinéma est si rigoureuse. Le metteur en scène ne peut se permettre ces vagabondages du romancier; ce dernier—et combien ont abusé de cette facilité—peut abondonner son récit pour se laisser aller à une digression qu'on acceptera suivant l'intérêt qu'elle présente. Au cinéma la digression serait une hérésie périleuse. Il faut tout ramener à des images et que ces images aient une valeur particulière et relative. . . . Tout traduite par des images! Toute la difficulté du cinéma gît là. . . ." André Delpeuch in *Le Cinéma*. Paris, 1927.

many-handed play or revue, nothing stamping it as an individual creation with a style and force of its own. A film should burn in absolute clearness, lit by the vision of its creator. The contention, frequently offered, that the flight of an idea past all the obstacles of the studio, human and mechanical, thus becomes less of an idea, and of minor artistic consequence in the process, has been well met by Miss Iris Barry, who writes, in *A Dialogue of Two Sober Men, as if Plato and Aristotle*".[1]

Aristotle: "And here I believe that we have come to another disadvantage; for an army of men is needed to produce a film; and this not only for the execution but for the conception itself. How then, can we expect them to play in unison—to wish to express the same thing and to be driven by the same impulse? And if one inspiration should in fact occupy all of them, how could it be other than a vague and turbid inspiration, without the purity or distinctness of

[1] *Let's go to the Pictures.* Chatto and Windus, 1927.

art? For when men object to the film that there is too much mechanism about it for art, they really mean nothing of the sort, or they would be compelled to object to the sculptor's chisel and the painter's brush, and still more to the printing of books. . . . And even if it should happen that a film should be conceived and directed and produced by one man alone, and that he should put the whole of his nature into his work . . . even in such a case we could not expect his work to have the unity that we find in a work where the expression is direct and immediate, and there is no such multiplicity of means."

Plato: "Let us not be too exacting, however; for I think that you have struck upon the method by which this medium could best serve the purposes of art, whether in itself and as a pure form it is to be considered noble or the reverse. And there is perhaps something absurd in discussing a form apart from its uses, and dismissing it from consideration because it is not the most admirable form that we can imagine . . . we have an instrument for expression which may be used up to its limita-

tions; and to grieve over its limitations instead of attempting to fulfil its capacities would be stupid in the extreme."

In short, we cannot expect to make the best of a thing immediately, whose excellence has still to be explored and defined. The vices of the film are the vices of the crowd: it is shapeless, speechless, passionate and huge, and only held together by the everlasting glue of sentiment. Sometimes it is a noble sentiment and sometimes a cheap one, but always, of course, good value for the money.

§ 4

I see no escape, in the future, from this complex incubation in the studio of the film egg. We need not exaggerate its complexity, for the staging of a play is much the same process, and does not depreciate in the scale of values because Mr Galsworthy writes it, Mr Basil Dean produces it, a third does the stage

management, a fourth the lighting, and a fifth the music. Studio-work, in fact, is a matter of routine, the means quickly and smoothly running to the end. The quickness and smoothness may not always be there, but that is the fault of the slow and the bumpy who are there instead. So that the greater our command over film technique, the more, that is to say, it is absorbed and becomes a part of us, the sounder and shapelier the resultant work of art. Once this technique is mastered and is an unconscious part of film production, the producer can see his work as a whole and cohere its many elements by the force of his imagination.

But if, in the inception of his picture, the director is not an autocrat, if he is fool enough to accept (I will not say listen to) every piece of advice given him, then his true vocation is not filming but clerk to one of our great insurance companies. In the end, an artist consults no one but himself, the authority and labourer on the job, knowing every inch of the road he is to travel, and we have yet to breed a race of directors who

will understand this without being told, without being paid. We have not a single director of films who is as English and individual in his work as Kipling or Masefield, for instance. This is partly, I suppose, because we are so desperately dull as a race and fear a reflection of ourselves in the dread magnification of the screen, partly because the old healthy English motives and ideas are inimical to our anaemic post-War condition, and partly because, having no original genius, our directors of films are forced to look to America, Germany or Timbuctoo to supply their own deficiencies.

§ 5

This, then, is three parts of the apologia. To be just, the other three parts must be admitted. We have not yet reached the point where the roads of creativeness are clear for the makers of films from the very beginning. This is essential to any future of films worth talking about. The road must be clear; and probably every

director of films, good, bad and indifferent, knows that it is not. One day—so distant, none can prophesy—an artist in films will make a picture for very little money, at very little cost, and will become a rich man. Then he will be free—or dead. Probably dead. None of our film directors is free: they are turning out the pictures they deserve, and occasionally, by accident it seems, a good one.

The trouble with films all the world over is that there is too much money in them; too much greatness and not enough obscurity, too many stars and not enough shedding of light. The entire film world is a gross exaggeration. And what are we to do with all these men of genius falling off the trees of production (see advertisement pages) like rotten apples?

II

MIDDLE

§ 1

When the Future of Hell is written in this series, a large number of pages will have to be reserved for the Americans who make films. (Our chaste, timid, honest, respectable, patriotic, provincial English film directors will of course go to Heaven.) Let us, none the less, salute the prodigal and magnificent manner in which America has been making films, her superhuman efforts to gain ascendancy, the endlessness and tenacity of her labour and the bigness of her stride. The génius of the American lies in the fact that he not only talks about things, but he does them. We talk, but alas, we 'do' nobody. O grievous folly!

The future of the film is still in American hands, in the hands of those

who are constantly exhibiting the divine gift of energy in reckless directions. In the year 2028, the whole population of America having reduced its day of dreaded labour to the decent minimum of an hour or two, will stream into a picture theatre and remain there, under drowsy American syrups, until bed-time. The future of the cinema, seen from this angle, and throwing the same comfortable blanket over the face of the world, is terrifying. Better be "connoisseur'd out of our senses" than cinematographed out of them!

For we cannot separate our vision of the future film from the transatlantic idea which has inspired and directed it for the world's use, nor conceal from ourselves that the ideas of to-morrow, multiplied to the *nth* power in film terms, and absorbed by the white, yellow and black races of the earth, are to be, for a good many years to come, mainly transatlantic ideas.

It is more important to consider the film of the future from this point of view than from that of mechanical or technical

improvements, wonderful though these may prove to be. And in confronting this task we meet a serious obstacle. *Nobody has yet enquired, on scientific lines, what effect is produced by films on the mind of the world.* There have been one or two small efforts to do so, because no stone is ever left unturned by the international gangs of film magnates if there is a possibility of finding another penny beneath one. And in this research there lay such a possibility. The Imperial Education Conference of 1926 has dallied with the subject as it affects the teaching of children, and papers have been read before the Royal Institution on the effect of films on the eyesight. Yet this is mere trifling. Nothing comprehensive or serious has been done.

§ 2

If it can be maintained that the cinema is a more potent agent for good or for evil than other forms of expression touching the multitude, then I say the mind, and therefore the behaviour of

future generations, is likely to be confused, spineless and inefficient, unless a very different quality is brought to the film as an article of commerce. Notwithstanding a universal ignorance on the subject of film psychology, it is customary for film experts to sweep aside with contempt any suggestion that the cinema is capable of exerting an unwholesome influence. On the contrary, it is held that it acts as a sort of safety-valve to the passions, as a realization of dreams rather than as an incentive to anti-social behaviour. It is, we are told, experience at second-hand, the great solvent of petty human worries and discontents.

There is, no doubt, something in this, but it is the least considerable assumption in an enquiry of vast dimensions, and it begs the question. The doctrine that the cinema is incapable of proving an influence for evil I hold to be the most complete heresy and by no means a compliment to " the pictures ". Whoever adopts this view is manifestly unable to see through films to the back of them.

The influence of the film, for good or for evil, is equal and opposite. That is proposition one in the geometry of film production. If films, like pictures, music, printing or talking, cannot exert a bad and demoralizing influence, then they can never exert a decent and inspiring one either. That is as plain as porridge.

Whether the world-film, of which the stock pattern has been produced by America and abjectly imitated by nearly every other civilized country, is not on the whole a rather unscrupulous product, with the merest veneer of conventional morality thrown on the surface as a virtuous disguise, I have not space to enquire, merely re-affirming, as a clamp to the whole situation, that if films cannot do any harm, they certainly cannot do any good.

My own belief is that films are doing both—they are doing harm, and they are doing good, and the measure of each has yet to be ascertained. It is no exaggeration to say that chiefly as a result of American films, a large part of the world, and especially the youthful world, now has a cabaret outlook, full of feeble passion,

Woolworth glitter, and trumpery heroics. It hasn't even the courage of its vice, but only of vice twice removed from its revealing sources. Perhaps the world has had such a mind always. Well, the world has also had plague and tapioca (or something like it) from the time of the Pharaohs. Let it now have something better. Let the film of the future have the courage of its morality, or of its immorality, but don't let it attempt the futile and contemptible task of trying both at once on the old dog which is ourselves.

§ 2

I have said that the American film, the great pattern of pictorial flapdoodle (saving the many lovely bits that are too hard to be broken)[1], is a marvellous entertainer. That is obvious. But there is a difference between entertaining a man by making him drink and entertaining a man by making him drunk. The American film has doped the world with rotten juices. By a strength of purpose which is staggering and its one superb

[1] *Gold Rush, Forbidden Paradise, Last Command.*

virtue, it has flung at us, year by year, in unending deluge, its parcel of borrowed stories and flashy little moralities.

It has gathered in millions of pounds from every corner of the earth—including the £30,000,000 or so a year which, with half-witted complacency, we ourselves have been paying—and it has done this with very little regard for the millions of human beings whose thoughts and emotions it has virtually annexed.[1]

But in this middle or present-day view of film history one must in justice recognize that lack of responsibility is not peculiar to America or to any one country, but applies impartially to them all. The cinema uses its power to demoralize rather

[1] For a first-hand account of American film production methods, see Mr L'Estrange Fawcett's *Films : Facts and Prophecies* (Geoffrey Bles, 1927). See also the Report of the Federal Trade Commission of the United States *v.* Famous Players Lasky, dated July, 1927 (New York). In the Petition instituting proceedings against Mr Will Hays and other named parties, it is alleged that their "unfair trade practices", "monopolization" methods and "undue restraint of trade", have led to "the great injury of every branch of said (motion picture) industry and to the substantial injury of the public."

than to build up character. It marvellously welds us together in sentiment, but in so doing it bends and rolls up the back-bone of the million to its own purpose as though they were kittens. Possibly we flatter the film in granting it such omnipotence? Yet clearly it conveys a message of terrific force, depending as it does on symbols which are universally understood. India and other countries have already offered us examples of the film falling like a rain everywhere and infecting for good or ill the whole fruit of humanity.[1] No other medium utters its message or proclaims its power on so vast a scale. Newspapers cancel each other out. Wireless is almost terrified of hearing its own voice. Leagues of Nations? We are too stupid, greedy or faithless to take them seriously. Nobody listens to authority; everybody to revolt. The good sensible Johnsonian

[1] *Vide* Mr G. A. Dawson's lecture to the Imperial Institute reported in *The Times* of Dec. 10, 1927, in which the lecturer says: "Very few of the population of India could read, and it was surprising how educational the cinema was proving to people who could not understand a single word of caption or detail."

words, phrases, promises, are worn out, and there is nothing to bind the nations together. What wonder that the cinema, magnificently sure of itself, has stepped into this world-convalescent home with irresistible prunes and powders? "Come along, world! Take this three times a week. High class moral pictorial lessons, followed by the Tiller Girls. Have one of our six-reel dream-tablets. You will soon be out of bed!"

This is the honeyed language, marvellous in its newness, sweetness and vitality, to which savage and civilized, hoboes and horn-rimmed, are listening for the first time—"American-ease".

Any vital change in this insubstantial pageant can only come about by the complete de-Americanization of the industry. (If this causes a panic, so much the better.) The business of *un*-creation, the overthrow of scented and hot-house traditions, the scrapping of this callow, plausible, pastry-cake, cotton-wool culture, without a single element of permanence in it, should be the first task of the film-makers of to-morrow. Of course it will

be the last. Producers are already entrenched in the American position. They are enormously comfortable and happy, and there is none with courage enough to strike a nail into the Sisera head of the American " movie " man.[1]

§ 3

So I turn from this fruitless, efficient, commercial future to that of the film's intellectual and mechanical development. Here, again, there is a complete chaos of ideas and intentions. There is no direction anywhere. Nobody has the faintest idea where the cinema is going. In Russia alone does there seem to be any intention of giving the film its national character, of letting go the golden fleece of cosmopolitan or " international " film-

[1] " As regards the artistic future of the film it would not matter—provided that Chaplin were saved—if all Hollywood were swallowed up in an earthquake. . . . I have never—Chaplin's work apart—seen a good American film. I have rarely seen one that was not artistically revolting. Not one of the American directors has left a permanent mark on film history, or produced anything that would not deeply grieve the judicious.—Mr Arnold Bennett, in " Close Up ", December, 1927.

production—the "please everybody" school—and moving forward with set purpose to some independent goal of its own. And in Russia, too, the film is a symbol of that gigantic gamble for money and power which is the most conspicuous feature of the world's film history, of the world altogether. Here again the motion picture has become part of the "skilful blandishments" and "confusing entertainments" of the Western world which Mr Wyndham Lewis has been so strenuously attacking.

In its mechanical aspects the film of the future is not likely to undergo any highly significant changes that are not already the subject of experiment, though we are constantly hearing of new "revolutions" in technique. But the film mechanism is too good as it is. Like the steam engine, the dynamo, or the aeroplane, its underlying principles remain unchanged, and we can only hope to find new and deeper and more splendid uses for them, some of which I shall try to foreshadow.

I will take the most obvious possibility first, the development of the cinema or

picture palace itself, and by steps less and less concrete I shall work down to the idea for which this theatre was built. If I put the cart before the horse, that is because there are so many carts, and as yet no horse ; no inspiration.

It is not essential that the film should be housed in its present huge mansion. That is all part of the flap-doodle, the dope, the dream-tonic, " the hospitality of circumstance " which has taken the world in. The theatre has become more important than the picture theatre.

In Spain and other countries with too much central heating, many of the picture shows are given *al fresco* in courtyards and in open spaces. India's experiment we have noted. During the war, owing to the war, we had the same natural background, and when the film is boiled down to its durable minimum we may return to the freshness and reality and virtue of that habit. I do not know. We are such tender little creatures now-a-days, the proprietors of open-air cinemas would have to give away umbrellas on the wet days and sunshades on the fine.

Before the arrival of the prosperous motion picture, we would as soon have thought of settling down in Buckingham Palace as in Picture Palace, and the latter has now reached such a pitch of paternal concern for the poor, luxury-starved, friendless, resourceless public, that the film masters have only to pay our rates and taxes and put the milk outside the door and we will settle down in the plush seats for ever. " Don't move, madam ! We will boil the kettle, and make the tea. Don't worry, Mrs Jones, your baby is in the hands of our maternity expert ! " Why not ? Is this " storing " of the public before the show in vast lounges, or the keeping them happy in vast ballrooms and bars, so far removed from one further consummation ? And isn't it time we realized to what lengths we have been taken in order that, body and soul, we may be handed over to the religion of picture-going ?

§ 4

The complexity of the film's background is its danger, not its strength. Shake these palaces to their foundations, and

what remains? Well, that is for the future to decide. The only way, indeed, for us to assess the permanent qualities of the film is to see it alone, stark-naked, by itself, shorn of the hypnotic trappings, hot air, gluey music, and pretty lights comprising the average picture-theatre. In fact, by a return to simplicity. Throw away the bright dust-cover on your novel, and you still have a book. Throw away the theatre, and have you still a film? For myself, I would gladly fling a few nice, bright, fire-proof theatres into the Thames and chance it. We have, in fact, formed not the moving-picture habit, but the moving-picture-theatre habit, and this is a romantic city habit, cunningly jammed into the middle of our ugly industrial life. Imagine the sensation if some bristling young amateur producer, preferably with an "itch" to his name, and audacious enough to produce a film cheaply, and having filled up the hundred necessary forms, told the police, warned the Borough Council, the Sanitary Inspector, the Fire Brigade, soothed the Film Censor and gagged the Watch Committee—imagine if he were to

show his picture on Hampstead Heath one fine afternoon—or Margate Sands, with only a linen sheet to help him. Would not all the poor of Hampstead, all the intelligentsia of Margate, pour forth to see him? And would not their opinion of the performance be a truer one than that of a crowd of people, boosted and hypnotized into appreciation before the show, and flattered in all their senses while it proceeds?

It is, of course, unlikely that films will ever attain any complete simplicity of presentation, unless we reach that stabilization of the community which (again quoting Mr Haldane) is only to be secured by an all-round devotion to agricultural pursuits. The gentlemen of Wardour Street are safe. But it is conceivable—and the future of the films as an art lies in such a possibility—that one man having started a rudely-constructed, happy-go-lucky penny gaff with his own self-made film, others will do the same out of devotion to the job, and a sort of community film drama will grow up, as vigorous and promising as that which has asserted itself in the place of drama proper. As

usual, everyone will say it is impossible, and as usual someone will do it—likely enough within the next twenty-five years.

Whether this comes to pass or not, it is hard to see how any general improvement in the quality of films is to occur until all the glitter and "high light" nonsense which encumbers them has been drawn off, and the clean body of the picture is left standing by itself. It is not a question of simplifying the apparatus of film manufacture, for at its simplest it is appallingly complex. It is so complex that no one man believes that anybody else knows very much about it. And this is partly true. Big men doing big business in big theatres, and tossing about corporations and production units like Cinquevalli his billiard balls, come over to England from America and modestly tell us that they have heaps to learn. Nothing to unlearn, mind. But heaps to learn, chiefly about the public, who change so rapidly from day to day that you can never stop learning what they want. . . . "I am giving a little Press party at the Carlton." "I am coming over to make an adventure

serial of the Bible." And so on and so on.

The public did not originally want vast, million-candle-power theatres. They enormously enjoyed the pictures in quite indifferent buildings and barns. But on the Wordsworthian principle that you must create the taste by which you are to be enjoyed, the luxury-theatre notion was started, all the patrons of the drama who sat until recently in pit seats about as luxurious as Stonehenge, and in quite insufferable balconies with a gradient of one in four, left the stale, flat and unprofitable drama for the new comfort offered them, and there they sit now, bemused, overjoyed, uproarious, ecstatic, amid the colossal spider's web of entertainment into which they have flown.

§ 5

And at this point it may be as well to glance at the influence of the film upon the theatre. Mr Ashley Dukes has no fear of any serious danger from this quarter "if only because his (the stage actor's) emotional art possesses the freshness of an original momentary creation,

while the art of photography reproduces an emotional impression at some moment in the past. The dramatic need is always for the first-hand impression. The magic of the theatre consists in seeing actual people play imaginary parts." [1]

In fact, the theatre offers you one kind of magic, and the cinema another. Each has its own excellence and appeal. In so far as it has failed to make its audiences comfortable, the theatre is behind-hand. But this consideration obviously has nothing to do with the artistic relations of the two arts, which rest on quite separate foundations. The point of view of the theatre is confined to the " Fourth Wall ", and its scope for action to the limitations of the stage itself. The point of view of the film, on the other hand, leaps to all ends of the compass, and in range of action is as free as the wind. Indeed, it can present two or three points of view at once. Its primary disadvantages are that it has no *voice* or *body*, none of the personal realism of the living actor ; it lacks the texture of humanity.

[1] *Drama*. Home University Library, p. 221.

But it is profitless to pursue a comparison which the further it is pressed, the more it reveals differences rather than resemblances. The safety of both arts lies in this fact. Their fruit is different. There is no reason why the apple should be jealous of the pear.

The magnificent cinema theatre is the counterpart of the magnificent film, and its inevitable heir. I do not deny that magnificence is a paying proposition, as always it has been, from the days of Queen Shirin of Persia to King Zukor, of Hollywood, Cal. And it is at this point that the confusion between the artistic film and the commercial film must be cleared up and divided clean, for good films have nothing to do with big business.

I say that we must have a film which is *only* film. The middle period in film history which we are now considering must bring about this transition. And when I refer to the film-in-itself, stark and with nothing added, I mean something which is as simple and un-self-conscious as the song of the first minstrel opening his remarkable mouth. That was no doubt hideous, but

it was true, it did ring freely and unmistakably, like a song, and our mouths are cleverer since that day. We are elocutionists. There is a roundness in our words.

Only by some great simplifying process —only when a single touch can put all the film machinery in motion, like a press— can we have a film literature with a tradition and blood of its own. I am not asking Griffith or Fairbanks to produce Beowulf or the Faërie Queene. Those dragons and princesses have already been destroyed a thousand times over, and it is clear that Spenser never adequately worked out his sex appeal, the scurvy knave! But, above all, we need a patient boiling down and refinement of the riches we now possess. In the theatre itself (the building) this process cannot go ahead without a furious and revolutionary programme of destruction, and I do not see the gorgeous tastes of the film kings reverting to a less sensational diet. Possibly I overstress the necessity for a quieter, more dignified cinema. While disliking the colossal decorative scheme of the Roxy Theatre in New York, I would be the first

to protest if a fairly luxurious cinema could not be found in London. Only don't let us be killed by comfort before we have seen the picture.

In the studios too, any drastic reduction of means is bound to prove a *reductio ad absurdum*. The marvellous studio machinery, the lighting apparatus, the laboratories and so forth, are fine components in a delicate mechanism which, as we have seen, will always be costly and complex, so that even experienced visitors to film studios are astonished that anything beautiful can emerge from such a chaos. Astonishment, however, is one of the commonplaces of film production.

Studio and theatre, then, are doomed to extravagance for years to come, the first, because of the expense of scientific apparatus, and the second, until those who are obsessed with the passion for luxury and largeness and multiplication of everything, are dead. These soldiers of the cinema never die, never fade away, and their tradition of rococo splendour is the only one that stands up by itself, firm and complete and undeniable.

§ 6

What, then, is left? Only the film itself and the music or noise which accompanies it. That is to say, everything. We have been hanging about the superfluous porches of the film potentates all this time, attempting (and failing) to shake ourselves free from the house they have built; and now, thank Heaven, we have said good-bye and are alone. Oh, the gregariousness, the popularity, the "all-together-ness" of the film business! How on earth has the creature journeyed so far and so featly at times, with its thousand drivers and sky-high baggage!

Well, the music has had much to do with it. It has put the public into sentimental handcuffs. I do not say this is wrong. On the contrary, we are so clever and hard now, we seem to have forgotten what a good thing sentiment is. But the music of the cinema, though much attention and money have been bestowed on it, is necessarily in the same tradition as the majority of films themselves—extravagant and sweet. It is taken too much for granted.

It is a fine fragment of " the show ", but its part therein has not been rightly related to the other parts. I can still recall the hideous music we heard in a cinema in Euston Road in 1907, when the film was a more English thing, and my only point in recovering this memory is that I am certain the entertainment we saw in those days would have been just as entertaining *without* the music. The film itself was so new and wonderful, nothing could really make it newer or more wonderful. But now, for many years, we have been crooned and trumpeted into the habit of hearing music with our pictures—*always*, though it has not yet been established whether music is an integral part of a good film or not, for often it has the effect of over-stressing or running counter to its emotional rhythm in ways which do an injustice to the film's intention.

We must therefore make a distinction between films which require music and films which no not. And the necessity for this will the more clearly be seen when it is realized that musical directors are often set the task of rescuing a film from

mediocrity by giving it a fine musical accompaniment. Artistically speaking, this is like putting on the gramophone while you read a bad novel. If we had an experimental theatre—and there cannot be any doubt that the future will give us one—the whole question of music and its relation to the film could be resolved in practice, with other important questions. Every film critic has, of course, seen films exhibited " cold ", as they say in America, that is, without any musical accompaniment, but I think it was the London Film Society[1] which first gave the public an opportunity of seeing silent drama that was really silent when they showed " Raskalnikov " without music in their 1926 season. I do not know how far that experiment was a success, but it is something that it was an experiment, that it broke free from custom, introduced a new idea, and left the eye free to take in the story by itself.

It is said that the better the music provided for a picture the less it will be

[1] The Film Society has perhaps done more than any other person or organization in this country to advance the cause of good films.

noticed by the audience. It has its effect, but the effect is sub-conscious. This theory, however plausible, is not likely to encourage musicians of repute to write for the screen. In effect, it says to the composer: "Your score was an immense success. It was so good that not a single person in the audience was aware that anything was being played." For myself, I reject the theory while appreciating its subtlety, for I believe that the heads of most of us are full of the tunes, good and bad, we have all heard at the pictures, and that, musically speaking, we are far better educated in consequence, even if we do not know what is being played. We have been awakened in some additional way and put into harmony with ourselves.

If it is admitted that music is indispensable to a film, then every director of films should also be a musician, for he alone knows in what proportion and by what means his effects are to be produced. What one feels so strongly is that the power of the moving-picture is not given full credit—that it is, in fact, perfectly capable of standing by itself—and that

the fusion of two arts into one, while increasing the difficulties of composition, builds up a structure altogether too big for most of the ideas it contains. I resent the suggestion, for instance, that in order to appreciate the disaster of a shipwreck, I must have all the crescendo passages from *The Valkyries* dinned into my ears until the ship has sunk. I resent the suggestion that no love scene can move me without the support of the *Moonlight Sonata*, or *Softly Awakes My Heart*, or some turbulent lyric from the latest revue. The whole of my argument here, as elsewhere, is directed towards proving that the film can never be fully effective until it has learned to dispense with some of its materials instead of adding to them.

Travel or " interest " films, it is obvious, do not always need music. It is better, perhaps, to have an informed person talking about them, or to let the story tell itself. The representational film is a harder problem, not so much because of the difficulty of fusing music and story, but because there is no one, as yet, either competent or inclined to undertake such

a task—not unless the picture as well as the music is his original creation, as in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. And we cannot blame musicians for this. Ninety per cent. of the pictures which are shown get just the music they deserve—a thousand little pieces from a thousand composers of all statures "fitted" to the action, the emotion, the humour, or the sadness of the story. Well may the exhibitor exclaim, as he turns over the leaves of his box-office Keats, "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter! Don't let us fling any money away on this, gentlemen!"

And he doesn't. Film audiences are only too grateful for the music given to them. They are tired and puzzled about life, and down comes this warm, paradisical harmony about their ears, giving ease to all the senses, and lighting up the small puddle of existence in fire and iridescence.

While people's minds are slack and uncritical and their emotions responsive only to abnormal stimuli, this average box-office excellence of music and picture must continue. But if we have peace for

a hundred years or so, the strength and solidity of peace will penetrate all the arts in turn, and the cinema, which is at present attracting all the mediocre and brilliant people anxious to be in the swim, and is waiting for the sincere and reckless ones (most of them abroad), will gradually disengage itself from unreality, from its suicidal absorption of novelties and trivialities, and draw up into itself the clean, incorruptible sap of creative energy like an oak standing large in perfection.

Then we shall have a film which in " fable and decoration " is the wonder of the world. The music and the theme will be one, or perhaps the film will have made up its mind to do without music, to destroy a part of itself in order to find purity and soundness. Let the other arts, with their superb traditions, their marvellous seasonal freshness, and all the features of immortality, give something away to the cinema, and in music, above all things, let us discover by what secret or artifice melody can be wedded to the motion picture in a true orchestration of sound and movement.

III

END

§ 1

I now leap forward to the year 2028—with very little prospect, I fear, of landing on my feet. Whether we shall be actually living in cinemas then instead of paying them innumerable visits by train and 'bus, really depends on the continued solicitude of America in helping the Englishman to be thoroughly comfortable and not to waste time at home. Presumably, there will be some limit to the American lordship over our screen lives; there must come a time when, if we have any self-respect at all, we shall decline to allow the dollar to alter the face of London to please New York; and this transition, I believe, is coming about now, with the first serious attempts of the European industry to escape the suffocating provincialism which has held it in check for so long. Europe as a whole is waking up, and may yet become the predominating film centre.

If America has led the world so far in film enterprise, it is because she has deserved to do so by being more sagacious in projecting her plans than we are and less scrupulous in carrying them out than we are, and, in two words (also American), "getting away" with it. If America, as the home of luxury, has a war within the next hundred years, she will easily win it by her film propaganda and her staggering gifts of self-advertisement.

But assuming that film interests the world over become more evenly distributed, we may, for the time being, turn aside from the American scene and examine the impartial contributions of science towards the progress of the cinema. We have heard much of television, or rather, in its present application, of tele-cinematography. Tele-cinematography is far from perfect yet, and much nonsense is talked of its accomplishments. Nevertheless, it opens up the prospect of being able to see instantaneous news pictures of current events instead of being forced to wait as long as two hours, say, before we can watch

the Mayor of Puckminster (himself) laying the new church hall foundation-stone.

This device of long-distance sight should prove a distinct contribution to the soullessness of modern life, in which, in Mr D. H. Lawrence's phrase, we "circle the void of our own emptiness". Only one further development is required whereby we can be shown events happening before they happen, for the cinema to achieve its apotheosis as a scientific marvel.

§ 2

Tele-cinematography, then, in the immediate years, is not likely to make much difference to the film, as drama and entertainment. It will partially augment the ordinary programme by taking the place of the news reel, or "gazette", and it opens up the possibility of a new kind of community film drama in which the local players can participate in a story of their own to be photographed televisually. The story will be relayed for reproduction at various cinemas, or in the home. All the cinemas in the

district, and all the home cinema " sets ", tele-visually connected, will " pick up " the picture on their own aerials as it is transmitted, and put it on their own screens.

The commercialized pictorial news service will be organized in a similar way, but it is pretty certain that the Government will monopolize television as a going concern in the same manner as the B.B.C. has been controlled. There will be a British Television Corporation, with magnificent premises and publicity, and loud lamentations from the populace on the subject of programmes. But the Corporation will go on firmly and importantly with its work, sending its portable transmitter, for example, to the Boat Race, or the Test Match in Australia, and so broadcast these events by " telefilm ". Any cinema which wants the picture will pick it up and pay a royalty for doing so to the Government. But for the benefit of those who are unable to be present at the actual broadcasting of events, these will have to be screened a second time in the usual way, and in the usual way everyone will be pleased.

§ 3

When we consider the future of the cinema in relation to politics we perceive how exceedingly convenient it will be for the government in power to have command of " telefilms " as an instrument of propaganda. We shall not only be able to listen-in to the Prime Minister speaking at Bristol—of course, on some nice, motherly, undebatable subject such as geometry, or the charm of the Cotswolds—something, in short, beyond argument—but we shall also be able to see him! Elections may yet be won on good looks rather than fine words, and no doubt we shall be quite as well off.

It is said that once the cinema is used as propaganda, political, scientific or educational, it will lose its power. But that depends on the manner in which various points of view are presented. In Russia, as we have seen, the cinema is predominantly and powerfully political. I do not say that we should imitate Russia, but simply that the cinema can utter a message in trappings of beauty and

by an appeal to the imagination in the same way as *The Adding Machine* utters its denunciation of wage-slavery, *Jude the Obscure* of sex-slavery, or *Loyalties* its message of slavery to class ideas.

The poverty of the cinema as an art is that it doesn't say anything, or care about anything. It has no convictions—that is to say, no scruples. It may well be that the politicians, not of England, for they are too gentlemanly, but of Germany or Russia or America, will be the first to show our artists the significance of the medium that has bewitched them. How many times have we heard Coolidge on the Phonofilm? What was *Metropolis*—maimed and warped though it became in the hands of the showmen—if not a call to revolution? True, a sentimental, Christmas-card revolution, lacking in personality and explosiveness; but it had a burning centre somewhere; it suggested, crudely, a creed.

In contending that the cinema may show its most serious side as a sort of Government chronicler, I am aware of uttering heresy; that in the hands of the

politicians the cinema would become a thing of incalculable danger.

It is dangerous enough in its present hands. As one infinitely distrustful of the political machine except "as a pattern laid up in heaven", I intensely dislike the idea of a cinema impregnated with political doctrine. But the public itself is a sufficient safeguard against any such event, for it is not greatly interested in politics except as a sort of permanent circus, whose figures offer a target for every-day criticism, for working off personal resentments and discontents.

The film of course has already been utilized for political ends in this country[1]—as spokesman for our Dominions overseas—and one of the most cogent arguments in the endless Parliamentary debates preceding the Films Bill was that the cinema had been insufficiently exploited as a national advertiser. So

[1] Under the heading: "Mr. Baldwin Reproduced", the *Evening Standard* of April 23, 1928, prints the following:

"A phonofilm, by means of which Mr. Baldwin will be heard and seen making a speech, is a feature of a £3000 cinema van which Conservative headquarters have had constructed to tour the country."

that we need not deceive ourselves as to the part films will play in the national and international jobberies of the future. They will play a very big part. They will give us "more matter and less art" and pictures of the peoples of the earth will be issued with the label "subtle propaganda".

What chance will the political idealists have with these films? In this country, none, for we do not appreciate fanatics, and one must, in a sense, be mad in order to preach, pray, or create effectively, and use public opinion as a horn to blow upon. In short, this giant, the film, which might lessen the chances of war if we could bear to see real war films, is too powerful for its purpose and will probably never proclaim itself partisan in the bold manner of a reformer, a teacher, or a revolutionary. It is still too entertaining to undertake anything seriously.

§ 4

In education, on the other hand, the cinema has a tremendous field to plough. It is waiting, of course, until money

can be made out of education, when it can be sure of providing the wrong education for the money. There are so few disinterested persons in the film business; and for teachers, as for directors, to make the best use of moving pictures they must have moving minds. No doubt such people exist with degrees and other academic equipment, but I have never seen them: certainly, with a single exception, I have never been taught by them. All my schoolmasters were half dead, except on the cricket-field!

The film, if our educationists chose to adopt it, and the Imperial Education Conference of 1926 declared that it "should be . . . recognized as part of the normal equipment of educational institutions"—could be a splendid and inspiring teacher. For it brings the word to life. Everything moves and grows and takes on memorable shapes beneath its touch. In history, natural science, literature and the arts—in all but languages—it could wonderfully reinforce the spoken word. After all, you never learn anything which is taught duti-

fully or dully. You learn nothing in the real sense, unless in some way the subject lights up the soul, is absorbed into the system, and can be given out again. The only danger of the cinema as an educator is that it would teach too attractively. Children would run all the way to school and fall under 'buses.

How exactly the motion-picture will be correlated to the normal educational curriculum is an expert problem which must be left to the experts, but to say that it will become a powerful influence in the class-rooms of the world is to run very little risk as a prophet. In our misdirected, incomplete way, educational films have already attacked the unsuspecting brain-cells of the public. In France and Italy State aid on the most generous scale is afforded to films in the schools; in Germany, local school boards have a standing arrangement with Ufa for this purpose. In England—no. No official encouragement whatever. Such an idea would disturb everybody, including the Board of Education. In America the film is

generally accepted as an integral part of the educational scheme.[1] Yet educational films have been shown here with great success. I have seen an audience held breathless for ten minutes by the life history of the lion ant and the fight for existence of common grasses. Mr Bernard Shaw says that such pictures must not be called "educational", or they will frighten people away. They must be called something else—a romantic suggestion from such a realist. Can we honestly begin to educate people, even in a cinema, under a pretence of entertaining them? Why not appeal, without fuss, to their intellectual vanity and declare flatly that the next item on the programme offers them their best and cheapest opportunity outside the Universities of acquiring a superiority complex? The enlightened showman will tear down his sex-appealing poster and substitute something like this: "Newton may have had a headache, but there is no reason why you should have one.

[1] I am indebted to British Instructional Films for this information.

Laws of Gravity now showing. Also next Thursday's Revolution in Mexico, relayed pre-televisually from Vera Cruz". (The theory of relativity, by the way, has already been demonstrated in amateurish fashion on the screen.)

§5

In the widest sense, however, every film is an important educational influence, a complete drawing-room and backyard of the world's manners. Very often one learns far more from a film which has no didactic motive than from one which has, and this unconscious education, notwithstanding its distortions, is one of the great achievements of the cinema. The coming generations will probably owe more to films than to books simply because the visual impression is more powerful than print or speech and is intelligible to everybody, and because, as a contemporary critic observed, "people of to-day prefer rather to look than to listen". More than this, films are better organized and wider-

spread than any other known means to knowledge. "You can estimate," said Colonel A. C. Bromhead, of the Gaumont British Corporation, "that every day good films are seen by 100,000,000 people throughout the world[1]".

In what sense these films are good is a matter of opinion, but there can be no two opinions as to their influence on ideas, on the things of the mind, on the common stuff of progress—our beliefs, principles, aspirations and desires. Colonel Bromhead is worth quoting again on this point:

"Penetration by film is certainly peaceful penetration; it is subtle, sure and sweeping. It embraces not trade issues alone, but exerts a ceaseless pressure on the thoughts and emotions, riveting the attention of so many countless millions day by day. Earth's thousand races of all languages, creeds and colours, are deriving impressions—acquiring ideas, formulating judgments, drawing conclusions from what they see upon the screen."

But at the same time, he insists on the fact that the film business is "popular

[1] Speech to the Author's Club, London, vide *Daily Telegraph* report, Feb. 28, 1928.

entertainment . . ." all the time. What a fate, then, awaits our "judgments and conclusions" upon life! Can any line be drawn between what is consciously educative and what is not?

This is a very complicated question. The type of educational film issued, let us say, by British Instructional Films or Fox's of America, is a product apart from the dramas, comedies and so on of the ordinary programme, in whose margin it writes a comparatively brief note; and it is obvious that however widely distributed, it cannot have the same formative influence, the same effect upon public opinion as a picture dealing with war, marriage, or religion—subjects in which instruction is far more urgently needed than in quadratic equations or Cæsar's Gallic Wars.

It is, in fact, the film *entertainment* which completely educates and the professedly didactic film which only partially does so. And this complete education is an education without masters, of Rousseauesque freedoms and hilarities, of amazing glibness and looseness.

Possibly it will end with every country having a Ministry of Films, or some central controlling authority to irritate democracy by the distribution of departmental wisdom—an ugly prospect, from which, however, we may yet be saved.

For conceivably (it is not yet proved) films are not more inflammable as doctrine than literature or art; possibly they are too amusing to do more than wrap the public in happy and insignificant security while the rest of the world gets on with its wars and quarrels. Anatole France seems to regard it as a rather harmful toy and denies the name of art altogether to films, contending that the function of art is "the revelation of a supernatural world", and that in this the cinema miserably fails. But it is not, unfortunately, the arts which sway the world—not truth by itself, revealed by the imagination, but half-truth, or opinion, and in the forming of opinion insufficient note seems to have been taken of the strange, hypnotic, unanalysed power of the film to sink its message into the minds and memories

of people in a way that has no parallel among the recognised arts.

It is very unlikely that this new and fatal gun-powder will be left alone when the merest touch from mankind can make it dangerous; for as one armed nation forces arms upon another, so one country has only to utilize "the pictures" for propaganda and its neighbour must do likewise. For this reason, leaving out of account the film's separate responsibilities, it is of immense importance that it should be in the right hands, in the control of people who realize that they are under some obligation to civilization to serve it decently and intelligently—always, of course, putting the interests of the shareholders first.

§ 6

The film of the future will not only be as it is now, the national advertiser: it may even become our camouflaged artillery and armour, a political entertainment on the grandest scale. Already governments have solemnly quarrelled

over incidents in a film ; ambassadors and Foreign Secretaries have spoken, the newspapers after them, to put everything right, and finally ourselves. We must remember, too, the interest which the League of Nations and Rome have taken in films. Films already have a political root though the tree is yet to grow. Perhaps it is only the puerilities of governments, magnified on the screen to adult proportions, which will ever induce *homo sapiens* to become a fully conscious element in the body politic, in which case the politicians of 1978 will have to reckon seriously with the " fan " vote.

In medicine the cinema has already played an important part. The Society for Experimental Biology has made films which throw new light on cancer, and enable the scientist actually to see in a continuous manner what is happening in malignant growths " when subjected to beta and gamma rays from radium emanation ".[1] The Film Society in London have shown in their Bionomics

[1] *Manchester Guardian* report, Dec. 23, 1927.

Series, some wonderful examples of X-Ray cinematography undertaken by British Instructional Films as well as films showing the circulation of the blood,[1] respiration, and the movements of limbs.[2] The medical student of the future, then, whose infinitely laborious studies it is amazing that anyone has the courage to undertake, will have his work lightened at least a degree by moving pictures of surgical operations which can be repeated over and over again for his (and we hope our) benefit. Illnesses will be scrupulously cinematographed and "demonstrated". We will be able to see mumps in slow-motion! What would not the great surgeons of the past have given in their student days for such opportunities!

§ 7

We have still to consider the possibility of a film of the future which talks.

[1] Undertaken, by Dr Comandon for Pathé Consortium (Paris).

[2] A British Instructional Film made by F. Melville.

Personally, I am convinced that films should be seen and not heard. The business of the film is to depict action, not to reproduce sound. It is not that one is opposed to something which is new, for the film itself is new and we would not be without it. But the spoken word, mechanically introduced, is not proper to the film medium, and tends to destroy the illusion which the film is trying to build up. Let us not deny anything to the new art which is necessary to give it life and actuality, but do not let us reward it with unnecessary gifts. There is something monstrous about a speaking film. At once the entire mechanism of the studio seems to be put on the screen with the picture, and there is no room for wonder. The imagination cannot work any longer, there is no mystery for it to work upon.

Action can be perfectly reproduced and can create a complete illusion, but sound added in the form of words or echoes of action can only produce *dis*illusion. The two effects, marching out of step, carry the mind and senses different ways, and leave

the spectator in conflict with himself.

Moreover, it is axiomatic that the less said in a film by way of dialogue or explanation, the better. The immense magnification of people and things on the screen gives them a power which takes the place of speech, and in fact, nearly always results in too much being said. When a thing is larger than life, something must be taken away from it to give it proportion, and in the case of the screen, this thing is speech. The whole technique of film acting is based on an acceptance of this limitation. "We have to ask ourselves", said a writer in *The Times*[1] . . . "upon what principles film-acting is to be judged and what new conventions are necessary to it. Here the ruling condition is the condition of silence, and we have to remember that silence, far from being a negative thing, a mere absence of words, is a positive accentuation of the other means —gesture, timing, facial expression and grouping—by which an actor's intentions are expressed. Most film-actors and film-

[1] January 4, 1925.

producers have taken no account of this."

The film of a hundred years hence, if it is true to itself, will still be silent, but it will be saying more than ever.

§ 8

In whatever direction one looks—medical, scientific, industrial or artistic—the film is making headway, gathering power, developing and perfecting itself in ways that are not only astonishing but terrifying. And also puzzling. One never knows what this great creature, nosing about, will dig up next, for it does not know itself. But we do know that when we see a picture such as *The Scarlet Letter*, or *The Student Prince*, or *Joyless Street*, or *The Gold Rush*, we have been spiritually enriched, we have had an artistic experience. And that is all we want to know. However severely we may criticize this or that picture in one or other of its aspects, it does, at moments, transform us, it does illumine life in some way and reconcile us to the wounding world without. Even the

worst picture has enchanting passages, fragmentary beauties, consoling jokes, which lift one into joyful surprise, into a glow of pleasure, and hammer down one's belief in the movies for ever.

But films are still held back by professional catchwords, which, unlike most catchwords, still possess a meaning, for they are young and have not had time to wear out. Thus, there is the catchword of the international or cosmopolitan film, which will please everybody at once, though such an idea can never seriously have entered the heads of any of our best film directors (until put there by somebody else) any more than it entered the head of Joan of Arc to wave an international sword, or of Tolstoy to write an international novel, or of Keats to write an international sonnet. You cannot have an international baby or plant a cosmopolitan tulip. This idea of a world-appealing film (which has nothing to do with the universal values in a work of art, though it is often confused with it) is derived from the well-known film aphorism,

that all art (that is, money), is international. It also has its root in the theory, sound up to a point, that films have no barrier in language. Therefore everybody can see and understand them. Therefore, every film can be international in its appeal and should be seen by everybody.

But I believe that although the film *may* be seen by everybody, this will more often be because it was made in defiance of the international canon, not in obedience to it. A time will come when the executives of film companies will no more dream of ordering their film-directors to produce a picture which will please England, France, America, Germany, Italy, and half-a-dozen other countries, than a publisher would dream of imposing the same condition on a novelist. After all, the only tradition that can be built up on such a foundation, is one that will look like an expensive *hors-d'oeuvre*. And how long will such a meal last?

The international film is one that seeks not to give you anything but to get

something out of you. Not only out of *you*, but out of everybody. Films are so costly, say the producers, that unless we get a world market for them, we can only make a net profit (taking a certain company) of about eight million dollars a year. You see, it wouldn't pay simply to be ourselves, because we should only be appreciated by our own people, who are rather stingy for our particular purpose. Films must go round the world. Trade follows the film. Rule Britannia! And so on, and so on, as Chehov says.

§ 9

The international film made as an unabashed advertisement is of course an admirable idea, and some very good pictures have already been made on these lines. The hundred per cent. salesman of the future will no doubt utilize the full power of the cinema to exploit his goods in the markets of the world. On the airships and aeroplanes of fifty years hence there will be a complete projection

theatre exhibiting "pepful" advertisements. Everything which we are now persuaded to wear or eat or smoke by posters or newspaper advertisements, will be thrust upon us in the form of motion pictures. As we whizz through the air, these cinematograph advertisements will be projected on to passing clouds, and passengers who respond too eagerly to the stimulus will leap out of their seats into the sky in their anxiety to reach the shop and get the right sort of boots at once. In England and the Tropics, where there are no clouds, clouds will be specially manufactured. The film of the future will not be all entertainment.

But for most of us it will still be, first of all, entertainment. It is not possible to say how long this amazing show will last. There are those who declare that the public will one day sicken of the pictures and turn to something else. But although it would do the film world a great deal of good if this were to happen, if only for the briefest spell, I do not think any such prospect is likely. At

present there is not the slightest indication of any revulsion of public taste, and despite the continuous talk of over-production of pictures and over-building of cinemas, the whole industry rests on a solid foundation of public approval which would be as hard now to break down as it has been to build up. The film, moreover, has lately become a more substantial and respected thing, and is absorbing the best intellects of many countries. It is moving towards greater all-round intelligence and durability. It is realizing that its purpose is not merely to give pleasure, but to give quality to pleasure, and to spread ideas, to nourish the mind, to refresh the senses and stimulate the imagination.

If films are to have any future as an art, there must be something serious behind them, some wisdom and pity, some passion and grandeur, above the mere story-telling capacity. At present, the maker of films is not allowed to have any artistic integrity. Like the film star, he hands over his personality to

someone else. He is stuffed with ulterior motives. He talks of his work like no other artist upon the face of the earth, and as he talks, you have a faint, disconcerting feeling, akin to Mr Forster's feeling about lecturers, that he is talking about something else. The film eludes you, and so does the artist.

I suppose this is inevitable in an art which depends for its expression on an entire museum of mechanical and human instruments, and which is still overladen with a fantastic technical jargon. In much of our film criticism it is impossible to get past the terrible words to the ideas they are meant to express. In conversation you cannot get to the centre of your subject. It refuses to be stated concisely. Films are still in an extraordinarily unpieced condition, and we can find nothing in them which corresponds to the wholeness of literature or music. The great business ahead of us is to give films this wholeness and nourish them with the wine of tradition, so that every well-made film can to some extent be taken for granted, and we can

get at what its author is saying as well as his manner of saying it.

§ 10

And as we approach this more *experienced* film, whose beauty and sincerity we perceive instantly, so, at last, the greatest minds of the age will be drawn to the service of an art which is worthy of them. The artists, poets and philosophers, the historians of the future, now unborn, looking with freshness and untrammelled vision at the moving picture, will pour their thoughts into its mainstream " like swimmers into cleanness leaping ".

The film is waiting for this consummation. It is waiting for all those of urgent speech. In France, Germany and America at least (as to other countries I cannot say) experiments in film poems have been made. In many ways the film is peculiarly fitted to express the poet's song, since " poetry puts a spirit of life and motion into the universe. It describes the flowing, not the fixed ".

There is a vast region to explore here of infinite richness and nobility and we may yet find a man of genius who can utter in pictures:

> "The feathers in a fan
> Are not so frail as man",

or

> "All living things, having completed their circle of sorrow, are extinct"

as simply and majestically as they were written. Many film stories, it is clear, have a rich poetic quality.

But whatever experiments are made, in whatever direction they are made, they will only reach perfection as films where the artist-director grips at his medium as though it were his life, where the film is the first and final article of his faith, and he can find utterance in this and in no other way.

He will not say: "I believe in this or in that or in any one thing", but he will make films, and we shall know what he believes.

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