

The Art of the Movies in American Life

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AN appraisal of recent significant developments in the art of the movies, and a statement of the implications of these developments, as requested by the editors of this Journal, offer some difficulties which are not present where the more traditional arts are concerned. As compared with these older arts—painting, architecture, music and so on—one can hardly speak of recent developments, for the whole craft of movie-making is comparatively new; and there is still some question with many whether we may properly call it an art, rather than the portent of an art.

The difficulty, in any serious discussion of the movies, arises mainly from the fact that the field has grown so vast, and certain obtrusive complications make it almost impossible to localize clearly the aspects which will come under discussion. Ordinarily, generalizations about the films rest on what is seen at random at the corner theatre. Yet even so, these generalizations fail to distinguish between what is valid for the photoplay, and what for the drawn film or the occasional "abstract" film; they fail to recognize that another set of generalizations is required for the newsreel and other forms of "informational" pictures. Some generalizations, again, may be apropos with regards to adult criteria, but inadequate in relation to children.

However that may be, it should be evident that the movies cannot be shrugged off by students of society or of the arts. The familiar easy patronage, the smug and snobbish indulgence, have become boring (a vestige of the ancient Menckonian contempt for the "boobocracy"); and far from revealing a cultural or intellectual superiority, may show merely a basic stupidity or a regrettable ignorance. For, to put it briefly, the motion picture is one of the greatest of social actualities today, and an artistic promise whose greatness and scope are at present only glimpsed. Self-righteous contempt may be regarded as knowledgeable in some quarters, but more often it is only a comic and dated affectation.

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The motion pictures are a form of artistic expression, say what you will; they are "big business", in every sense of that term; they are a powerful educational force, despite their avowed function of entertainment; they mold public thought and form behavior patterns; and they are the happy land for millions upon millions. More directly and immediately than the other forms of artistic expression, the movies are a social phenomenon, closely reflecting, and conditioned by, the events, whims, and particularities of everyday living. Their origin is purely mercenary, their function almost purely distraction, their character determined by mass approval.

While sometimes details or whole sequences are of an artistic excellence so great as to be breath-taking, it is no news to anybody (except some zealots within the industry) that a major proportion of movies turn out to be pretty simple-minded, when considered as artistic totalities. With a perversity that smacks of genius the machines turn out trivialities, no matter how glorious the material, or how great the talent, which is fed into the hoppers.

Nevertheless, easy categorical judgments are not warranted. The Hollywood movie industry has an enormously important function in the American scene, and this function, all things considered, it performs creditably. If fault is to be found, it lies not with any one isolated component of the American economy, such as the movie industry, but with our civilization itself; Hollywood films cannot be discussed outside that context. Evidently these films minister to a great need in our people; for that matter, the common man everywhere. Millions go to see pictures every week, not merely because they have nothing else to do, but because the movies satisfy, in many ways, needs and yearnings which appear to border on the obsessional. If our time induced other needs, or offered other satisfactions to present needs, it is possible that people would not swarm to the box-offices; or, at the very least, they would demand other kinds of movie attraction.

The movie industry consistently maintains that its major function is to entertain; it prides itself especially upon the fact that it supplies, and has supplied, what it calls "dreams", to millions.* However contemptuous sophisticates may be, millions the world over apparently

* See Will H. Hays, *See and Hear*, 1929; and his annual reports.

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crave these "dreams"; and we can hardly quarrel with this, for these "dreams" are exactly those which are the stuff of countless legends, fables, fairy-tales, and much folk-lore: the cinderella story, the innumerable homilies dealing with honesty and personal integrity, the story of the little man pitted against towering forces, and the prince who wins his true love; as in these, virtue and wit always triumph (though the way is often rocky), evil always (or almost always) gets it in the neck and the poor but honest son of toil reaps his rewards, here as well as, presumably, elsewhere. In this day, materialistic and opportunistic as it is, brutal under the contradictions caused by great knowledge and small ambitions—in this day, of all times, we should not expect that "dreams" should have lost their fascination. Where else can the little man find respite from the scepticism of our age, from all the frustration, pettiness, demagoguery, to which he is subjected?

The movies must be understood as an important commodity of everyday life, satisfying a clearly defined need. They are supplied by enormous manufacturing establishments in much the same way as any other commodity: we speak of "the motion picture industry". It was inevitable in the 20th century pattern of civilization that the movies should have become big business; and since great financial risks are taken, they must be made to pay off handsomely. Each picture, therefore, must prove attractive to millions, with something for young and old, for the fool and for the not-so-foolish, funny at times and then consummately heart-breaking, never difficult or obscure, and ranging the full gamut of vicarious gratification.

Whenever a need is sensed, a product is developed which will meet that need; "educational" campaigns will be launched to create an almost neurotic desire for the newest variety of the product; and the product will be "improved" from time to time, so that complete satiation is never had. Thus the various manufacturers of movies have the same basic intentions and the same surrounding circumstances. Like all established and "reputable" manufacturers, they supply as good a product as they can (within certain judicious limits), constantly seeking for improvements of the sort which make their product seem more desirable than that of their competitors, yet seldom venturing out of the well-worn grooves of public cognizance. But primarily, the product must yield profits.

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Another consequence which follows relates to distribution and exhibition. The big studios, through ownership of vast chains of theatres, film-booking arrangements, ownership of patents, and interests in the manufacture of the raw materials of the craft, have made it extremely difficult for small unaffiliated producers to achieve the slick standards of the industry's movies, to which we have grown accustomed, and all but impossible to exhibit their films commercially. Venturesome spirits who dare these realities are usually sadder, if not always wiser, after the encounter. And the situation may very well become even tighter after the war, for giant combines are now under discussion to produce for "the markets of the world"; and the film industry is said to be planning "its own diplomatic representation" in foreign capitals.*

The implications of all this emerge when the production of movies is compared with production in the other arts. The creators of painting, poetry, and music, generally speaking, regard their art as the outward manifestation of the impulsions of their own intuitions and imaginations, and the interplay of these with a greater or lesser degree of intellectual discipline, and the discipline of the materials which they use. Architects and dramatists are perhaps less exclusively motivated by inner promptings: they are more subject to the requirements of patron, materials, codes, and regulations. Nevertheless, in the traditional arts (one assumes) the artistic eye is not cocked primarily on the jackpot. The artist creates something, and hopes, consciously or unconsciously, that approbation in some form will be forthcoming from some quarter at some time. Whether he would create or not if he were certain that nobody would ever see or hear his efforts is a question; possibly he would not. But it is probable that the original conscious impulsion to create works of art in our time is not solely, or primarily, to be found in the awareness that a given work will be seen, or heard. The artist seems tacitly to assume that some of his works will be seen—somehow, by somebody—but this is not ordinarily the immediate or foremost reason, in his consideration of the work, for having produced it.

In the movies, however, the primary determining circumstance is the market. Does the thing have possibilities? Which means, can we make a presentable picture—which will show a nice profit? What will

* The Hollywood Reporter, March 2, 1944.

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the public want to see some months hence (since a good deal of time necessarily elapses between the decision to make a picture, and its appearance on the screens of the nation)? Will the thing suit the stars, writers, directors, technicians under contract? What will censorship, headline-hunting congressmen, and various hawk-eyed pressure groups have to say? And so on.* All further activity rests on the answer to these questions.

There is no need to be ungenerous: some producers have been genuinely concerned with bringing socially desirable messages to the screen, or works of unquestionable artistic merit, or in providing entertainment on something like an adult level. Still, common sense dictates that investments running into hundreds of thousands of dollars be safeguarded; whatever else the producer has in mind, he must show a profit, and he must not put the welfare of the industry in jeopardy. These considerations have undisputed primacy. No other art suffers such throttling restrictions. This is the situation from which arises the over-all similarity in the product of the Hollywood studios.

In the art of painting, by contrast, there are thousands of individual producers, their work "slanted" towards highly selective audiences; and while they readily fall into certain groupings due to psychological, aesthetic, ideological, environmental, or other circumstances, there is not a comparable over-all uniformity of product. But in the movies, for all that a director like Hitchcock differs from some obscure director of quickies, and the productions of MGM from some fly-by-night adventurer, there is less fundamental difference between their final productions on the screen than there is, say, between surrealist and abstract painters, or, in poetry, between E. E. Cummings and Edgar Guest.

The movies are not, in the sense that the other arts are, a "free" art; any discussion of them which fails to take this into account is unsound. Other patronage and other circumstances of production

* Albert Lewin, who brought to the screen "The Guardsman", "Mutiny on the Bounty", "Moon and Sixpence" and now directing "The Picture of Dorian Gray", entertainingly details the woes of the producer in his article, "Peccavi: The True Confessions of a Movie Producer", in *Theatre Arts Magazine*, September, 1941. See also Leo Rosten's burlesque in *Hollywood: The Movie Makers, The Movie Colony*, Harcourt, Brace, 1941.

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would yield other types of movies. Or, put in another way: the present familiar form and character of the movies must be seen as only provisional.

Now, most adult Americans have seen only Hollywood films. They have seen relatively few films which have radically different artistic intentions than the familiar commercial movie (e.g., documentaries, educational, avant-garde, or experimental films), or at least have seen them so infrequently that they seem mere novelties; and they have seen few films of any sort, of non-Hollywood origin. *The movies* means Hollywood's popular commercial product; for years—ever since our very first experiences with films—our notions of what movies are have been formed by the movie fare upon which we have been nourished. There is no question here, at the moment, of better or worse than something else, but merely an emphasis upon the fact that our knowledge of the film—and therefore our judgments of film value—spring in the main from the only sort of films most of us have ever known. We forget, or (never having seen any) ignore, that there are other kinds of movies, and other possibilities.

The main stream of movie-making is, of course, the Hollywood tradition. To be realistic we must speak primarily of it; we speak of what actually happens in a great majority of cases; then of what happens occasionally, or of what happens outside the main stream; and then of what might happen.

The motion picture is the only vehicle for artistic expression developed by our age. Its short history has been frantic, tawdry, and fitful. At first the mere fact of animated images, true to the life, was so fascinating that the camera was pointed at anything and everything, as though to affirm that the miracle was really here to stay. The spirit of the peep-show and the penny arcade prevailed, and at the very outset this earned for the moving picture the contempt of all save those who were satisfied to find their recreation in the carnival.

But while the camera was tastelessly yielding up this modern book of wonders, there were a few who began to exploit the potentialities of the craft. Edwin Porter and others began to develop planned activities; George Méliés, in France, and Robert W. Paul, in England, experimented (and how brilliantly) with fantastic goings-on in fantastic settings; D. W. Griffith worked out some crucial techniques; and count-

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less films appeared which were built around some newly discovered technical peculiarity or quirk.

The early days—say, before the end of the World War I—may be regarded as mainly exploratory: what is the craft capable of? Purely, and excessively, physical action was the major type of motion picture subject matter, and many an otherwise stupid picture was a fascinating play of almost pure (in the sense of unadulterated by “meaning”) movement, in much the same way as the cubists, sometimes the futurists, and later the neo-plasticist and constructivist painters presented us with canvases ostensibly stripped of all “meaning” save that conveyed by the rapport of shapes and the play of colors and textures. They were, in short, completely visual arrangements; accordingly, action was entirely pantomime.

But soon enough the narrational function of the new craft predominated all else, partly because the movies came to be regarded as the rival of the legitimate stage, but mainly because everybody craves fictions of some sort. The movies became primarily a new way of telling stories, and it is with the stage and the novel that the popular commercial film has come to have its greatest affinities, in its essential aims. The *per se* value, as pictorial imagery, is only incidental. The pictures must never leave in doubt what is happening on the screen (save in those instances where a suspension of clarity is willingly granted in order to heighten the mystery of a plot). But it is nevertheless a development of plot in terms which can be—with some loss, to be sure—transposed into the field of writing. This point may be sharpened by reference to a new book, “20 Best Film Plays”, edited by John Gassner and Dudley Nichols. In his introductory essay, Mr. Gassner frankly states that only those scripts which could be read as literature were amongst the candidates for inclusion in the book, and that consideration of documentaries was necessarily limited because the scripts were unsatisfactory reading; similarly, the animated and other pictures were eliminated altogether, since they existed only visually, and would not make even a good hodge-podge in words.

The fact is that this new art-form is completely *sui generis*. And yet it may be regarded as fitting nicely into the long history of image-making. Other times and other places have given predominance to the dance, the spectacle, the fetish; to pictography, continuous narrative

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images, or the single still picture; to stone, stained glass, mosaic, fresco, oil painting, as principal medium. The motion picture, in this view, is merely the most recent stage of, and newest technique for, imparting information, inducing states of feeling, or beguiling the eye, through the use of images and visual symbols. One root goes back to the basis of all communication, where gestures, movements, and objects, directly confronted, were used to convey meaning or to induce states of feeling; and another goes straight back to the beginnings of writing and the pictorial arts—to pictography and ideography.

Though visual-arts-in-time have existed before, they have been most rudimentary as compared with the movies; and indeed, offer no genuine parallel. Amongst them may be mentioned oriental scroll painting, continuous narrative frescoes and bas-relief, shadow plays, colored puppets of the East, and assorted novelties; related in various ways are the dance, stage and spectacle, the music-drama. But it remained for modern technology to provide the vehicle for this new art-form; and for the first time in history a true and full-bodied visual-art-in-time is possible. Moreover, the work is recorded in such a way that identical repetitions of the artist's intentions may be had at any time.

At the risk of oversimplifying, it may be said that the crux of the art of the motion picture lies in the unprecedented flexibility of the movie camera as a graphic instrument, and in the potentialities inherent in the juxtaposition of strips of images. From these two factors—the nature of the drawn or photographed images (their identity, lighting, action, composition, position relative to the camera, and so on), and their assemblage in series, arises the artistic form of the movies. Through these the motion picture takes its place as one of the greatest and most sensitive of mediums for artistic expression.

Hollywood has pioneered in many of the developments of technique which make it possible to speak of a motion picture art. The industry has supplied us with the close-up, the various transitional devices—fade, wipe, dissolve, etc., and with an amazing development in the drawn film (often exemplifying the purest of movie form in the unadulterated synchronization of sound and image patterns), and many others. On the mechanical side, the improvements and innovations are sheer genius. In the realms of trick photography (which has an ancient lineage in

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the annals of the movie), and of so-called special effects—both categories inherent in movie technique—the industry has been inventive to an astonishing degree.

However, as has already been pointed out, this arsenal of artistic means finds only a partial and circumscribed use. We have the paradox of a great art in search of the artist. Again, let me emphasize that there is no intention here to belittle the Hollywood output. Of necessity it is directed to the audience which finds satisfaction in the literature appearing in our weekly magazines and pulps. And so the movies employ all the wily arts of that other agency of appeal to the mass-mind, advertising: the same slick but artistically valueless lighting; the chic and “allure”; the glib and smart-alec manners; the monotonous prettiness; color that is strident and relentless; and (especially in the cartoon film) an abortive “cuteness”; above all, the notion that entertainment means a constant din and frantic fidgeting about in the belief that this constitutes action, and that without physical action there is only monotony. “The films”, said Alfred Hitchcock, “suffer from their own power of appealing to millions. They could often be subtler than they are, but their popularity won't let them . . . on the whole nowadays I try to tell a story in the simplest possible way, so that I can feel sure it will hold the attention of any audience and won't puzzle them.”

Yet it can hardly be denied that the better-than-average Hollywood film is much better than the type of literature just mentioned. As a matter of fact, the industry's output compares very favorably with the production in any of the arts in recent years, if one excludes the top artists. This may sound like a careless statement; yet one has but to recall the acres of routine and uninspired canvases we see in exhibitions, the dreary symphonic compositions, the hackneyed yarns, and the fatuous plays.

If the form of the average commercial film is determined by strictly narrational needs alone, developing the story only within the limits of obvious physical action, amply reinforced expository dialogue; if it follows too often the manner of a stage presentation; if it has also exploited many a uniquely cinematic procedure. Hollywood has evolved a polished syntax, smoothly carrying us along from sequence to sequence; a direct frontal attack which moves speedily forward to the final resolution—a kiss, a shot of hero and heroine against the sky, or some

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sanctimonious situation, complete with celestial chorus. The fast cutting on action keeps us on the *qui vive* throughout the picture. Just to make sure, the momentum of the picture is periodically interrupted to present fashion shows, specialty acts, Tschaikovsky's music, ladies undressing, and yet other wonders.

One laments the infrequency of great images or image-sequences, arising from great use of a magnificent artistic vehicle: great use of camera, lighting, composition, to make of the shot a veritable ideograph; apt and expressive image-material, no matter what its identity; a feeling for development of screen pattern in time; dialogue, music, and sound closely integrated with the image patterns; color expressive, determined primarily by the needs of the film rather than by pedestrian actualities. There have been many patches of greatness in Hollywood photoplays, moments when fulness of medium and greatness of conception coalesce. But it has been more often in certain European films, in some independently produced and experimental films, in numerous documentaries, and in the cartoon film occasionally, that we get something of the real stature of the movies.

One looks for the maturation of this art in the works of smaller producers who somehow will escape the thralldom to big business. There is a growing movement in Hollywood itself toward independent production: the producer makes only a few pictures a year, perhaps one or two, and chooses only such stories as interest him;* his films are released through the larger companies. He recruits his staff and workers from the field, and since he has not a tremendous overhead in the form of plant, contracts with stars, and so on, he is not constrained to keep the wheels turning merely to exploit his costly properties. But beyond this, it seems certain that in the early post-war period we will see the emergence of small producers completely independent of Hollywood and the industry.

In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for pictures on an adult level. While the industry has tried to offer something for everybody, too often our expectations have been bitterly frustrated: stories are bowdlerized, characters cheapened and softened, tinselled

* The "Voice in the Wind", by Arthur Ripley and Rudolph Monter, announced for early release as this goes to press, is an example.

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bits of business are introduced, plots "jazzed up", and the potentialities of the medium ignored.

But a growing section of the film-going public is asking for better films, and in this way, for further development of the art. The present movies themselves are obliquely responsible, in part, for this. When Hollywood films a literary classic, libraries all over the country are swamped with requests for the original. The movies thus serve to stimulate good reading (which is exactly the opposite of what its detractors assert); at the same time it cannot be lost upon all readers how far short the film has fallen (as they unfortunately persist in doing) of the true spirit and meaning of the books. Reports indicate that many of our soldiers in far places have become fed up with Hollywood's renderings of the problems of life. There is a growing attendance at showings of historic films, of films of unusual quality or style, and of films showing a fresh approach to familiar material. But perhaps the best sign is the growing body of craftsmen and technicians within the industry itself, who feel that their capabilities and enthusiasm are deliberately spurned in favor of the easy and the proven.*

Many of the foremost workers in the field have received a pretty free hand from the Government and the armed services in the making of films for training, indoctrination, and propaganda. They have had totally new problems and aims; they are having valuable experience with new techniques and methods. There can be little question that this will lead to great enrichment of their work in the post-war period, and to dissatisfaction with routine picture-making. At the same time, plans are now being made in various quarters for what might be described as a "little theatre movement" for films: a chain of small houses which will offer select programs of films old and new, but primarily of new films, designed for a mature audience. We will probably see further specialization in other respects: the time seems to have arrived when films especially for children will be made, perhaps for two or three broad age-groupings. Distribution of these may be made through existing theatres, on special children's programs; but more likely we shall see their use in schools, churches, libraries, museums, and in the home.

* For example, see Rosten, *op. cit.*

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There cannot be much doubt that facilities for sound movie projection—embodied perhaps in a unit which will serve also for radio, television, and phonograph—will be a common feature in the home of the not-too-distant future. When this materializes, a new opportunity will have arisen for the movie-artist, for then he will have a mass market for his work. Another cause for optimism in this respect lies in the fact that a few public library systems have begun to collect films for lending purposes, and public school systems are doing likewise; we may expect that soon it will be as easy to borrow films as it now is to borrow books.

We may expect other developments: the short film, akin to the one-act play or the short story, has been long overdue. The vapid type of newsreel material which hounds us will have to make room for interpretive film essays (the "March of Time" may be cited as one example). We may expect also some remarkable technical developments, in color photography, and in stereoscopic cinematography. Color, as we know, is still far from luminous, and it constantly tends towards the chromo; we are told that great advances in fidelity have been made, but that they are still "military secrets". The stereoscopic film, when it materializes, may completely revolutionize our conception of the movies, the method of projection, and even the design of movie auditoriums. And, of course, comparable changes in sound will result.

Other favorable trends may be noted: We are witnessing the emergence of the screen play as another form of literature. Books on art and aesthetics now include references to, and sections on, the movies; there is a gradually growing body of critical speculation on the nature of the art; and recently, several books on the history of the movies have enjoyed a good sale. Courses in movie appreciation are now being given in many schools and colleges, and after the war we will surely see many full-fledged and independent motion picture departments in our universities. Art and craft schools will offer courses in their various departments, related to the needs of the film. On its side, the movie industry is making increasing use of outstanding artists in all fields; it already is one of the greatest patrons of the arts.

There will unquestionably be a much greater use of film in educa-

* Gassner and Nichols' book has already been mentioned.

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tion generally. The armed services have demonstrated with complete finality the tremendous efficacy of the film as a means of instruction. It has long been known that moving pictures are very effective in the classroom, but we have never had so broad an application on so vast a scale. Perhaps the advocates of the movies as an educational means tend to confuse the passive taking-on of information with learning through reasoning and judging; nevertheless, there can be no question any longer of the efficacy of the film for imparting information, or for purposes of demonstration.* On the younger age-levels, the motion picture seems an ideal core around which to assemble study units: the production of a film involves research in the particular field which will be treated; it involves the epitomizing of the material in writing, organizing its presentation in a logical manner, and the further writing of dialogue or commentary; it demands an ability to visualize, and hence stimulates developments of visual perception; art-work is necessary in the design of sets or props, or in the planning of the shooting on location; there is the photography itself, and all its ramifications in chemistry, optics, and other fields; perhaps music is to be chosen or written; and so on, bringing to a focus, in a finished and tangible shape which has its own independent value as a creation, many talents and interests. It is an ideal collaborative sort of project.

However, I feel that the use of Hollywood films, or of excerpts from them, for teaching, is a questionable procedure (except for the study of movie methods, or, judiciously, for costumes, decor, and the like). Reasons for this point of view have already been given: the values, judgments, interpretations, given by the commercial screen are in general falsely romanticized, cheaply chauvinistic, loaded with

* As this is being written, the December issue of the "Motion Picture Letter" comes to hand, quoting a Mr. T. Y. Lo, president of the China Motion Picture Corporation, of Chungking. He says, in part, "As an international medium of education the motion picture has a wider appeal than literature, a more emotional appeal than radio, and provides the easiest and speediest method of instructing the masses." Because films have great power, they will be ". . . a great factor in shaping the future . . ."; they will be used in imparting general scientific knowledge, for visual education and training purposes, and to ". . . acquaint 450 millions of [Chinese] people with the political, economic, cultural, and social affairs of the rest of the world".

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questionable social attitudes, in order not to offend any large pressure group, no matter how spurious or flatulent its doctrines.

Indeed, the very effectiveness of the screen in conveying information and shaping attitudes makes it an ideal medium for misinformation and questionable attitudes, as well as for the reverse. We have ample evidence of the ill effects which our films have had on the international scene. American pictures have been used to show that we ridicule other nationalities, that we mock our minorities, that we are addleheaded and puerile in our conception of life. The Japanese have been using our movies in the Far East to demonstrate the degeneration of democracies and the vulgarity of our ideas of what is desirable in life.

Since our movies will undoubtedly have an even greater world market after this war than ever, and since we know how influential they are in the formation of attitudes, it seems to follow that either the industry will have to exert elaborate self-regulation in this regard, or the Government will have to do so. And there we are again in the realm of censorship which, in principle, is so repugnant to most of us. Still, the right to speak for an entire nation cannot be taken lightly. Fortunately, when films are made for distribution in many nations, their makers will have to be mindful of where they tread, else they will step right on the box-office.

Business has learned the value of the film for purposes of exploitation, and from activities now being planned, we may expect to be bludgeoned into accepting all kinds of prejudiced viewpoints, and into craving more of the "amenities" than we will know how to handle. The prospect becomes the more dismaying when we dwell on the marriage of movies and television, which certainly will not be long in coming.

The motion pictures will pervade our life as never before. Its wonders make it a medium with infinite possibilities in employment, and for artistic purposes. A great flowering cannot be far away.