

## CLOSE UP

elaborated by yet another combination. Since all capacities of the screenplay—*colour, size, motion, duration*, and so on—should be wholly in sympathy with one another (accentuating, harmonising or contrasting), as well as singularly apt, the quality of depth in the subject could respond sympathetically to a design of colour in the subject, or *vice versa*; the design of motion could impose a limitation on the design of depth, or *vice versa*; and accordingly with all other capacities in the photoplay including sound, if you wish), to an extent far beyond the possibility of tabulation here.

ERIC ELLIOTT.

## ALL-TALKING, ALL-SINGING, ALL-NOTHING

I suppose it would not be denied that one of the essential gifts of the daily paper film critic of popular standing is to be able to write voluminously about nothing. However asinine the subject-matter, there is always plenty to be said about it. And we know in any case that the best journalists are very often those who can give an air of importance to things which really do not matter at all. I have done it myself. I have interviewed film stars and "executive heads" (it might just as well be their feet) as if the whole world depended upon it.

Magnification, the virtue of the screen, is also its vice. It glorifies the trivial, trumpets the inane.

And therefore, after nearly two years of talkie experiment, in which astounding advances have been made in technique, we are confronted with an intellectual progress whose summit of achievement is the production of *The King of Jazz*, conducted by Paul Whiteman—something meaningless but verbally provocative. I have no doubt it will be entertaining. I have enjoyed many such films. I have read columns of learned discourse on the adroitness of directors in producing a sort of nourishing wine beneath the froth of movement to which they had committed themselves. Consider the dynamic rhythm of a hundred legs, the gathering-up of girls into significant form. It is stupendous! Never mind what the film is about. It is about a Yank who was always doing "small time," until he met his cutie, who knew that he was cut out for Broadway, and then he did Big Time. Over here he would have just done time, and that would have ended it.

In short, the all-talking, all-singing era, so far as the realm of ideas is concerned, has given us absolutely nothing. It is almost painful to see the good technique thrown away on stagey rubbish whose centre whirls round and round in spurious spirals until it becomes a circumference, an outline of nothing. When is the cinema of ideas going to penetrate this country? Every month one sees stills and articles in *Close Up* that hint of the profound intellectual disturbance that is agitating the Continent, the passionate desire to prove and establish the cinema as a cultural force. But over here can you point to one film, talking or silent, which really

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represents a point of view, an aim, an experience, genuinely reflecting the religion or paganism of the time?

It is impossible. *Blackmail* is a good story, but it tells us nothing, except that if pretty girls will get involved with artists in Chelsea they may get seduced. But this is exactly the type of film of which I complain. What was the great focal point of all the critics over this particular film? It was admiration and analysis of its technique. Good heavens, to think of the stuff I have written, or attempted to write, about Hitchcock's technique! I look at the stuff and I say: "This is awful! What on earth are you talking about? Where did you get hold of it all?" And at once I am reminded of the dreary university lectures I used to attend on the textual sublimities of Chaucer, the alliterative fancies of Piers Ploughman, and so on. But the vital spark of Chaucer and Langland I never got. And nobody reads either of them now except as an academic exercise. For the truth is, these studies were concerned with the *makings* of literature, not with the thing made, which you can hold up to the light and judge as a living texture. It is as if you bought a clock for the works instead of the time.

Now let us take *Journey's End*. To begin with we had to borrow it from the stage. It was not an original piece of work. It is not really a piece of film-craft at all, and everyone knows it. But it conveys an idea which occasionally touches sublimity, the quite simple idea, so hard to convey, that war is futile. And by implication it conveys the idea that those who served during the war lived a life that is richer, more wonderful, more terrible, and indeed, more real than it is now. During a war you notice the hollyhocks if you see them. They

have the scent of an experience. After the war you see them but don't notice them. You can see them all your life, so why bother?

Now I say that this particular idea, quite accidental to the main theme, is of tremendous significance to our age, whose ideas are chaotic, mean, spiritless and depressing. It embodies the thought expressed by Walter de la Mare in the line: "Look your last on all things lovely," a sense of the precious and the fugitive which can make a cup of tea a communion and a field of grass a philosophy. But if you look through the schedule of films for the year, silent or talking, you will be lucky to find one subject in a hundred which will waken you to a sense of what is going on in the world. The world is living and loving precisely as it did before the war, except that it wears less and drinks more and is more gorgeously arrayed in the stuffs of self-deceit than of olden time. A very pleasant world of types, of marionettes who sin punctually to time, who thieve, make good, hate each other, embrace each other, forgive and curse each other without one glance at the real springs of existence.

All this I despise and reject, and so does nearly every other critic in his spare time. And why? Not for the dubious pleasures of intolerance, but simply because, until we do, we shall never get a cinema which is a compelling force, which is a real influence upon the time, a consolation in the mad world in which we find ourselves. And many are looking for this.

I doubt whether one of the problems confronting the post-war generation have been seriously tackled by British film directors. The astonishing upheavals of sex which Mr. Miles

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Malleson had the courage to face in "The Fanatics," the passing of the balance of power in the family from the parents to the children, the profound dislocations caused by the surplus of women, the economic wounds of unemployment, the changed philosophy of the woman in business, all these have left the intelligence of Elstree and Shepherd's Bush blandly contemplating the merits of star value and sex appeal. It is a very different thing abroad. *Une Femme Qui Tombe*, Ozep's stimulating but not brilliant picture which I saw in Paris a little while ago, *Bed and Sofa*, the earlier films of Pabst (for I think *Pandora's Box* shows a decline) not to mention the tremendous themes of the Russians, definitely confront the social order (or disorder) and align it with current intellectual ideas. Or better still, they bring imagination to a plain statement of fact, and leave us to our thoughts.

This is the job of the cinéastes as it is for the workers in other art forms. Have we not all talked, sung, and danced enough? Is it not the most glaring of facts that our technique is far ahead of our ideas and only waiting to be charged with thought to re-emerge a hundred-fold more powerfully? We have yet to find an Ibsen, a Brieux, even a Brighouse or a Somerset Maugham, of the screen. They are waiting for the screen to attain intellectual self-respect. The film world in which we live seethes with the brains of clever men and women who hover on the borders of the screen without ever casting their shadow upon it. Of course, they are too brisk, serious, cultivated. They desire speech. It would never do to open the door to them and risk a positive renaissance of film drama. And so that is where we are—stranded in endless spools of third-rate, spineless, uninspired, rootless, brainless

celluloid which can only "get over" by intensive boosting and a violent stressing of the wrong valves. We have been at it for over thirty years—a mere moment in the life of an art form, but not so trifling in one which moves fifty times as fast as any other. And I suppose the real fact of the matter is that nobody cares about anything enough to introduce it into the cinema as a sort of mission, as something desperately important which must be prosecuted and advanced and proclaimed with eloquence. It is this frightful, sagging habit of indifference, of death at the centre of things, of utter sophistication and pose. It is the disintegrating softness and niceness of the Englishman that D. H. Lawrence has written about. We are prouder of the cinema for what it can do than for what it does, because we don't particularly want it to do anything. And that, in my belief, is the fatal error. All talking, all singing, all dancing. Yes. *Et praeterea nihil*. Let films describe a devitalised existence in terms sufficiently *avant garde* and we are satisfied. Well, that is the death of the cinema, when all it can indulge in is a criticism of itself rather than its subject. It has been talking incessantly all this time, but who will give it speech? And with speech the passion of conviction? It is this we are waiting for and must have, and until we get it we shall be endlessly discussing a technique which means nothing, lacking the living substance within, a mass of terms to describe a corpse. Criticism at present is compelled to write as if every film were made in the British Museum.

ERNEST BETTS.