

The English Review: May, 1922

The "Movies"

WITH that sure instinct for nomenclature which distinguishes the world "that is never bored," the public has plumped for the "Movies." The play is no longer the thing. Hamlet's Ghost is a poor "mole." To-day we respond to the film—the picture or screen, a "Movie."

This new form of illusion cannot be called an art. Without the magic of the human voice, without the reality of the human form, lacking in colour, sound and poetry, the film is a purely ocular illusion, an effect of light. At its worst it is a kind of eye-frenzy; at its best it is apt to cause a headache. Yet this eye-titillation has it. To see "Dug." Fairbanks climb a telephone-pole, though any acrobat can climb infinitely better; to see "Charlie" play school-boy pranks on his betters, though any music-hall knock-about is really far funnier; to enjoy Mary Pickford "saving" a millionaire, though any pretty girl in the flesh must be more attractive than the picture of the prettiest of girls—this is what the public wants. The illusion of illusion. The film of a man making a face, the colourless sight of a girl with her hair down, in tears, the play re-enacted without sound or reality. This to-day is the "draw." The twinkle show is the modern world's delight. "It sort of brings it home like." It hypnotises. It seems to opiate the imagination. And—it is cheap.

And so to-day with the gallant exception of Gogol's masterpiece, *The Government Inspector*, superbly played by Maurice Moscovitch, theatre-land is a stage without plays; the real play is passing to the "pictures," with the novel and the high-paid actor. Why speak when, by posturing and cutting faces, you can treble your salary? Why write when, by a few indications and directions, you can pocket in a week as much as an author can net by a successful run in six months? It is imitation of imitation that succeeds. Also this, which is the secret of the Movie's fascination. As the expression of brutality, vulgarity, and sheer stupidity, the film easily outpoints the play, the player, and the poet.

This we have recently seen in *Broken Blossoms*, a really high-class film. Unquestionably it was a thing of beauty, in its light effects a revelation. But that was not its "charm." The mob flocked to it because of its low brutality; they revelled in the picture of a prize-fighter beating a girl to death; they "loved" his face when he saw red; they "lived" this horrible physical spectacle.

Here the screen has a "pull" over the stage. You can do on the film what the legitimate stage dare not attempt. Look at the *Auction of Souls'* bestiality. One scene depicted a row of crucified girls. Of course, the thing was done in America. The maidens were chosen; men went to see their comeliness. To anyone who knows Armenia, these beautiful, white-skinned American models were a "scream," for in Armenia such is not the breed. But it served—as propaganda. The whole gamut of life was presented, short of actual rape, which the police cut out. Now, on the stage such scenes cannot be done, unless we return to the customs of the Empress Theodora, who was publicly ravished by soldiers on the stage nightly (see Gibbon's "Decline and Fall" for details). The Movie has an unfair advantage in this matter of brutality. Blows are not heard. Somehow, the effects are not so physical. Real murder on the film is not so exciting as it would be on the stage—with real blood. It is noteworthy that the *Auction of Souls* was presented to the public on behalf of "Christianity."

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This new power has certainly come to stay. It is perhaps the greatest propagandist power ever invented. It practically brought America into the war. Its effects in the hands of unscrupulous politicians could be prodigious. For the power of the film is its appeal to physical passion, hate and prejudice in which, as an instrument of blood-kindling, it completely outclasses the Press.

It knocks out the old Adelphi melodrama, which the modern servant-girl, who has worn a "Wren" or "Waac" uniform, would heartily despise. All the time it depicts action, incident, emotion. There are no intervals, no silences, no pending moments. "All the time" is the slogan. A good film hits from start to finish, and the book reads like a soap advertisement. Thus, "The poor girl is now terribly afraid." Then comes the picture of a girl making excruciating grimaces. What price Shakespeare? What is Falstaff pitted against the antics of "Charlie"? What can the Devil himself in *Faust* do to equal the flashing picturisation of the picture of a picture rendered by "Dug." jumping over house-tops, or "Hart" leaping on his horse, or the world's heroine, Mary Pickford, sniffing at a bunch of marigolds? Nothing, of course. The essence is the make-believe. All the emotions for a "bob." In an hour, from Sadism to salvation. "Walk up." The mob—the film is the mob. It is democracy undressing itself, tasting life, living for an hour or so in the boots of a thief, a murderer, a princess, a highwayman, or hero, a harlot or a Dr. Crippen. For the film has broken down respect. It pictures all men, all acts, all forms of death and kisses. The Prince of Darkness and the Queen of Joy, they have no privileges on the film. It is a communistic interpretation, and the little boys in the audience hiss the villain and applaud the hero, and the "flappers" convoy their boys.

Democracy. The film is a great socialising or democratic force, opening all doors, piercing all secrets, respecting none. Its power for evil is preposterous. Whither will it lead? What will be its evolution?

It can make wars more "necessary" than ever any king could, or any doctrine. Its allure is intoxication of mind and the senses. It makes what used to be called "art" easy, within the arithmetic of all. It obliterates art for artistry. The stage has become a photograph shop, all-atwinkle, like "winkles." And the "leads" in the photographic bring-me-down-to-the-level-of-a-picture business are to-day world heroes and heroines better known than was even Napoleon, better paid than any man who ever saved his country ten times over.

Complain! Good heavens, no! Of what use is criticism in a world which is its own critic? A world which raves over "Charlie" and "Mary" has no use for tears out of which all art blossoms. This is a democratic age, and the screen is its fitting expression. There are plenty of subjects it has not yet done. The gladiatorial show, for instance, the lions and the early Christians, Bedlam gone mad, a crocodile eating a baby, etc., etc. Thrills, more thrills.

Well, Ibsen foresaw it all in the *Master-builder*. The world moves. Aptly, the world's theatre is to-day styled the "Movie."

S. O.