

STAGE

1 9 3 8

Propaganda

vs.

Hollywood

By

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What would happen if Hollywood took sides in today's political and industrial crises? No one knows, because Hollywood doesn't dare.

A LONG time ago—maybe three years, maybe four—there was a furious literary debate in this country. Had it been a high-school debate (and there were those who thought it was) the subject would have been announced as follows: resolved, that if it's propaganda it can't be art. Or, other side up: resolved, that all art is propaganda anyway.

What the debaters thought they were debating was the question whether the artist should take sides on social issues. Those who had already taken sides on social issues said he should. Those who hadn't said he shouldn't. Back of those who thought the artist should take sides on social issues were the citizens who believed the side the artist would take was their side. Back of those who thought the artist shouldn't take sides on social issues were those who were convinced of the contrary. Roughly speaking the pros were the radicals and the cons were the reactionaries. It was clear to the radicals that any man of intelligence and sense who thought about social issues at all would think as they did. It was clear to the reactionaries—or so one would surmise—that the radicals were right.

That debate is now dead. And for the very good reason that it was never alive. The statement that an artist should take sides on social issues is as meaningless as the statement that he should not. The only "should" applicable to any artist is the "should" which applies to his production of works of art. But, though the debate is dead, the problem which it attempted unsuccessfully to resolve is not dead. On the contrary, it is more actively alive now than it was in the days of the big talk and it is alive in terms and in a place which make it peculiarly visible. The terms are cash and the place is Hollywood.

The real problem was never the question whether the artist should take sides on social issues. The real problem was whether a form of art which ignored everything comprehended under the term "social issues" in this time could have vitality—could have the fourth dimension of life. More broadly it was the question whether a form of art, an action in art, which had no relation to the deepest emotions, the strongest convictions, the most characteristic experiences of the time, was not of necessity a kind of artistic and spiritual abortion incapable of life. The artist who lives in the emotions and experiences and convictions of his time will neces-

What would happen if Hollywood took sides?

sarily produce an art for his time, and therefore the art of his time. The artist who ignores all three will, of equal necessity, produce an art for some other time, and of no time. For the "eternal" art of which the academic critics talk so yearningly—the art for, and of, all times—is an academic fiction. Ask such a critic to cite you samples of this eternal art and he will cite you samples of an art like the best Greek, which owes its vitality in later times to the fact that it was vitally loyal to its own time. It is not the poem written about universal truths in eternal terms which endures but the poem written about known people and actual places in current speech.

All this would have passed, three or four years ago, for a matter of aesthetics or art-criticism or whatever. Today it has become a matter of practical policy in one of the most practical and least aesthetic industries in the world. Indeed it has become a problem the solution of which may quite conceivably determine whether that industry is to recover its former financial health or whether it isn't. Hollywood is in trouble at the box-office. And the reason why Hollywood is in trouble at the box-office is precisely that its pictures lack the fourth dimension of life. And the reason its pictures lack the fourth dimension of life is precisely that they do not know their own time, do not present their own time, do not belong to their own time, and therefore, quite naturally, have lost the interest of their own time. The artistic disaster foreseen by those who believed an art must know its own time or perish is in process of occurring in Hollywood, where the word "art" was never thought of before as anything but a press-agent's superlative. Hollywood, it now appears, may be engaged in art after all. It may or may not be entitled to the privileges but it is clearly subject to the obligations.

The proof of that is in the pudding. Joan Crawford and Gary Cooper and Merle Oberon and Norma Shearer and Luise Rainer and Tyrone Power are playing to the empty seats of millions of the solvent citizens of this republic because the citizens of this republic cannot work up even thirty-five cents' worth of interest in the movies Miss Rainer and the rest are asked to act in. To be invited in the autumn of 1938, with Hitler swallowing the Czechs and starving the Spaniards, with France crushing a general strike by force of arms, with England accepting the indecency of Munich, with Mexico declaring its economic independence, with Japan tearing at the gigantic carcass of China, with the Jews suffering unspeakable indignities in Germany, with reaction gaining ground everywhere as it did in the days of the Holy Alliance, with labor and liberalism everywhere on the defensive—to be invited in the fall of 1938 to sit through such films as *The Cowboy and the Lady*, *The Shining Hour*, *Marie Antoinette*, *Suez*, and *The Great Waltz* is almost an impertinence. To be asked to sit through no films except these films and others like them is pretty close to insulting.

What would happen if Hollywood took sides?

Hollywood has always thought of itself as a belt-line producer of dreams. As one of the trade papers puts it in a peculiarly limpid bit of prose: "Under fifteen or sixteen thousand marquees in these United States has stood a door which opened into a world of charm, beauty, fantasy, romance, and vicarious adventures—escape if you please from the *drang* and *sturm*, the monotony and *malaise*, the hates and hurts and fears of the world-as-it-is." . . . escape, in other words, from any reality in any language. The observation, deleting the more luxurious adjectives, is doubtless just, but it is nothing to recite with pride at any time, and least of all now. To offer the customers a straight diet of school-girl dreams and adolescent escapes at this particular moment in history is scarcely a compliment.

And the customers appreciate it. They show their appreciation by leaving plenty of room in the doors under the fifteen or sixteen thousand marquees. *Variety*, which has never been accused of idle idealism, told the industry last summer that "it is rather shocking to hear from numerous showmen the opinion that the brilliant future of the films as popular entertainment is in the past, as the Irishman said. Curve of public enthusiasm and heavy patronage is on the down swing. . . . There is currently a pronounced public apathy towards the industry and its average output of product. . . . The weakness lies largely in the refusal of Hollywood to tackle courageously the contemporary American scene." *Variety* might have added that the only movie theatres in New York now attracting noticeable crowds are the theatres with stage shows. It might also have noted, as bearing on the dream theme of the trade papers, that one of the few pictures to make real profits through this season is a revival of the old, realistic war picture, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. An ironic historian would think it amusing that the citizens of the republic were obliged, in the fall of 1938, to look at a revival of a film of the Great War to have any sense whatever of living in the actual world. actors appearing herein are purely fictional."

The explanation of the change is in large part the paradoxical explanation that Hitler has appeared in the seven years between. Hollywood may have sympathized passionately and personally with Hitler's victims but it deferred almost as meekly to the wishes of the fascist states as did the fascist movie-makers themselves. William Boehnel notes the record in the *World-Telegram*: "Hollywood deliberately cut the famous scene of the Italian retreat in *A Farewell to Arms*, mutilated *The Road Back* to such an extent that Director James Whale refused to look at the finished product, made a mess out of *Blockade*, is changing the locale of *Idiot's Delight* to a purely mythical country, glossed over the fact that Dreyfuss was a Jew in *The Life of Emile Zola*, and has shelved or is looking for an 'out' on properties like *Exiles*, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* and *It Can't Happen Here*." Moreover all this has happened, as Mr. Boehnel goes on to point out, despite the

What would happen if Hollywood took sides?

fact that only four per cent of U.S. film profits come from Continental Europe, that much less than four per cent come from fascist countries in Continental Europe, and that even that minute fraction of film profits can't be taken out of the countries where it is earned.

So far as Hollywood's surrender to the fascists is concerned, therefore, it is easy enough to put the cash gain over against the loss of customer interest (to say nothing of the loss of honor) and conclude that the balance is in the red. So far as domestic surrenders are concerned, the balance is harder to strike but even there it is clear that the loss far outweighs the gain. In ignoring the real issue in the war in Spain, for example, the movies avoid an almost certain Catholic boycott. And a Catholic boycott is something American theatres, newspapers, and broadcasting stations have every right to dread. But it is also true that, in ignoring the real issue in the war in Spain, the movies ignore one of the sharpest and most immediate and most dramatic issues of our time. It is also true that they fail thereby to take advantage of one of the keenest interests of a large part of the American population, including almost all writers and artists of any distinction, most university teachers and students, most professional men—a great part of the educated class. The same thing is true in the matter of labor issues, economic issues, industrial issues, and even such issues of obvious national concern and sharp dramatic possibility as soil erosion and floods. In all these cases the hostility of particular pressure groups would be aroused and financial loss, so far as those groups were concerned, would result. But there would be gained the immediate interest of large groups now apathetic to the movies. And the net result, if the entire industry rather than the individual picture is considered, would certainly be gain.

Against the particular hostility of particular pressure groups—a purely negative and self-seeking and therefore self-defeating force—must be balanced the restored interest and credence and confidence of the public as a whole—an affirmative and disinterested and therefore creative force. The movies, if they are vigorous and alive and truly forms of art, can outlive any pressure group. The movies, if they are cowardly and insincere and boring, cannot live at all. If they make the attempt to know their time and present it, they will be accused of propaganda and attacked accordingly—for the presentation of living issues is always propaganda to those whom living issues embarrass. But if they do not make the attempt to know their time and present it, it will not matter how blameless of propaganda they may be, for very few will go to see and fewer still will care.