

## CENSORSHIP AND CRITICISM

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, Father Martindale, writing on "The Movies" in the very first number of BLACKFRIARS, decided that "the thing can be used as well as misused, like thyroid or theology". Since he wrote, the situation has changed: it can no longer be said that in the cinema "voice-anxiety is eliminated", and we are usually spared "Bishops wearing their mitres at the tea-table and Abbesses giving absolution". The "hundreds of thousands" who visit the pictures weekly in this country have become as many millions. But the need for a solid basis of criticism is as urgent as ever. The vast technical development of the cinema, its tremendous commercial growth and social importance, have not been matched—at least not among Catholics—by much discrimination.

It is of little use any longer to deplore the existence of the cinema. It is firmly established as the most popular form of entertainment, and one supposes that Catholics are to be found in their proportion to the population as a whole among the weekly millions. There are many features of the cinemas as an *industry* which are certainly deplorable, but these should not prejudice an objective examination of the cinema as a *medium*, though in fact "what is wrong with the films?" can usually be traced back to "what is wrong with the Big Business behind them?" But it is difficult to envisage much change in the commercial side of the cinema: the tendency is all towards more mergers, more mammoth corporations spreading their tentacles from the studio right down to the local Ritz. For the cinema is not strictly an art; it is an industry which—among many other people—employs artists. Like any other commercial undertaking, the question it ultimately asks is: "Will it pay?" From the factory (the studio) to the shop-counter (the box-office) this is the real preoccupation; and the millions queuing nightly from Barnstaple to Bogota, they are the people who decide.

This of course is only true of feature films produced under a capitalist system. "The cinema in the hands of the Soviet power represents a great force", says Stalin, and in Russia—as lately in Nazi Germany—the cinema is primarily an instrument of propaganda: its entertainment-value is the hypnotic setting for its social and political usefulness. Again the documentary films, produced in England under government or semi-government auspices, do not depend on box-office returns. And admirable as is the work of such directors as Grierson or Cavalcanti, it is swamped by the vast ramifications of the Industry—in fact by Hollywood.

It may be asked whether it is of the slightest use hoping for any improvement from an industry catering for a potentially infinite market, providing a Lowest Common Denominator of entertainment

for illiterate—or nearly illiterate—millions whose wants seem to be of the simplest: escape, warmth, three hours of release from the conveyor-belt of a civilised existence, 1945 model. One remembers the medical student's reply in *The Wind and the Rain*: "Was the film any good?" "I wouldn't know about that: but I had a bob's worth of dark".

With other forms of entertainment it is possible to turn from the commercial article and start doing some entertaining on one's own account. With films that is scarcely possible. The amateur shots of the wedding-breakfast or the vicarage fête are amusing enough for friends to recognise on Christmas night, but they are scarcely a substitute for the burning city or the torpedoed liner or the expensive romances of Mr. Gable and Miss Lamarr. For the Industry has created an insatiable appetite for the large and the loud and the ultra-expensive. Five hundred thousand dollars is little enough to spend when you think of those millions all over the world filing past the box-office to give back to M.G.M. those thousands of dollars and many thousands more. And this, more than anything else, is the menace of the Cinema as an Industry: by its colossal scope it has made the abnormally rich and socially irresponsible life of American big business the normal—indeed for vast numbers the *only*—world where the imagination can work, where fancy can be free. There are many honourable exceptions—one has only to think of *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Citizen Kane*—but they are peaks in a vast plain of slick mediocrity.

The primary remedy would certainly seem to be concerned with the industry as such. The baleful influence of monopolies is never so plain as in the sphere of alleged entertainment: the fantastic costs of production and the elaborately watched system of distribution prevent a minority view from being seen and heard. The ordinary cinema-goer can do little, if anything, about the organisation of the industry. Yet he is far from powerless. He is the ultimate arbiter of what happens at Hollywood, and it is his shilling that ultimately pays for studio-space—quite apart from villas at Beverley Hills and expensive divorces. The real remedy lies with criticism, with the power to discriminate, to reject and choose.

And here it is necessary to distinguish between censorship and criticism. Censorship—whether through the Hays Office in America or the British Board of Censors—is, within its limits, effective. But it is essentially negative. Limits are assessed as to what may be included without offence to public morals, religious susceptibilities, and so on. Up to now Catholic activity has concentrated on censorship, and, as in the Legion of Decency in America, often very tellingly. The industry cannot afford to ignore a vast part of its

clientele, and the pressure imposed by the Legion has meant, as Pope Pius XI remarked in his Encyclical on the Films, that "crime and vice are portrayed less frequently, sin is no longer so openly approved and acclaimed, false ideals of life are no longer presented in so flagrant a manner to the impressionable minds of youth".

But, apart from the basic work of ensuring that films are free from overtly objectionable matter, there remains the work of criticism, of applying to all films standards of appreciation which reach deeper than the extrinsic fixing of categories of a Board of Censors—whether established by the Industry itself or by Catholic Bishops. The film is by this a serious medium: perhaps it can never deserve the name of an autonomous art. Its range is vast; it can borrow from the stage, from ballet, from the novel; it can employ the most elaborate mechanical means to ensure a realism impossible anywhere else; music, colour, movement—all are its servants; no popular entertainment can compete with its powers of suggestion, aided as they are by the hypnotic setting of darkness, comfort and (usually) warmth. But the education of public taste, the fostering of criticism, is a difficult task. It is so easy to accept, so hard to pause—and maybe to reject—when thousands of others feel no need to think twice but settle gently down to the hypnotic dose, the mixture as before.

Catholics, however, are accustomed to the notion that there are in fact some fixed standards: however dimly, they are aware that nothing they do or see or hear is without its importance, its moral importance, just because anything at all that involves a man has its moral colour. And to them, though they would very likely not think of it just like that, the Pope's words are obvious when he says, "The essential purpose of art . . . is to assist in the perfection of the moral personality, which is man, and for this reason it must itself be moral". Unfortunately the full implications of art as "moral" are not often stressed, and Catholics will perhaps assume that a film which doesn't attack the faith and in which virtue is rewarded (no doubt after a long tussle in which vice appeared to be winning) is quite all right. So it may be from the angle of censorship: criticism may be said to begin when censorship is done. The healthiest film, as it might seem, with even a shot or two taken of a convent or of a bishop in his car, may be fundamentally false. Is the reward of virtue a concession to Mr. Hays rather than the inescapable end the thing demands? Sincerity, an integrated honesty of motive, a purity that is much more than the avoidance of the flagrantly suggestive—these are rarer qualities than a "U" certificate secures.

It is over-optimistic, no doubt, to suppose that we can look for-

ward at all soon to a large body of cinema-gowers equipped with the critical powers which will reject the false values—easy riches, the ice-box and the coupé, the unfortunate poor, the regulation divorce and the faked happy ending—which, much more than any crude appeal to sensuality, mark the Hollywood item. But it is surely not too soon to start helping the process. More than all else, immediately, there is needed sound film criticism in the Press. The admirable work of the Misses Lejeune and Powell and the writers in the weeklies scarcely touches the general film-going public. As for criticism in Catholic papers, apart from the notes in the *Catholic Herald* and the admirable bulletin of the Catholic Film Society (which should be far better known), it can scarcely be said to exist. An occasional reference to a film of ostensibly Catholic appeal (with a still of the convent garden) is useless. America is better served in this respect. The excellent criticism by Philip Hartung, which appears weekly in *Commonweal*, is a model of clear writing, informative and wholly constructive. Criticism should be much more than a list of films to avoid.

Up to now the use of films in schools has been almost wholly devoted to instructional purposes. Whether or not the right use of recreation should have a place in the school syllabus, it ought to be possible to use the film more widely for its own sake. On the most pragmatic level, it has to be recognised that the great majority of children are going to be (if they are not already) regular filmgoers. It seems a pity that advantage is not taken of the chance to encourage children to use films intelligently. Film societies, run in connection with schools and clubs, could show a good repertory of such films as the English documentaries, the simpler French films, and classic English and American pieces. Around the actual enjoyment of such shows there could be built up a valuable basis for discussion and appreciation, of the history of the cinema, of the actual photography (methods, cutting, lighting, etc.), of the sound-track, acting, plot, and so on. Training of this sort for children, and indeed for anyone else, is valuable and far more effective when the material at hand is one that is familiar and liked. No doubt film appreciation is no substitute for purely aesthetic criticism of the arts, but at least it is appreciation of *something*, and, dealing as it does with the most widespread and potent of all forms of entertainment, it has a vital social importance. In Catholic schools and clubs, film appreciation will naturally take account of the basic moral factors without which any amount of technical skill and good acting can be pernicious.

The growing cinematic literacy of filmgoers has already made its influence felt on the barons who control the industry's destinies.

With the increase of a discriminating public, and the use of a steady pressure locally on the managers to book good films, much more can be hoped for. Catholics have a particularly valuable part to play. They stand for fixed moral values, for a proper recognition of the nature of man and the fact of his redemption. These are not irrelevant moral "extras". But on the other hand, the Catholic view of man by no means involves a contempt for his joys and pleasures. Indeed it is only a frank recognition of man as he is, broken by sin and restored by grace, that can give any sort of meaning to pleasure—or to pain, for that matter. It is true enough that a whole view of man's nature does not necessarily produce an exact aesthetic discernment, or the sounds and sights in some of our churches would be rather different from what we know. But criticism in any field is in the last resort a moral business, because it is a man's business, and man is a moral sort of being.

Art, the right making of things, is certainly not in itself a moral affair: the goodness of the artist as such does not depend on his orthodoxy or his moral perfection. But the *use* of art, the relation of the thing made to the needs of men—here at once we are in the realm of responsibility: and the critical faculty is none other than that of judgment, and judgment considers the means in relation to an end that is fixed and final. Hence it is that St. Thomas argues that the good of art is in itself only the integrity of the thing made, but "in order that a man may make good *use* of that art that is his, there is required good will, which is perfected by moral virtue". (I-II.57.3 ad ii).

This principle must be the key-stone of criticism. The thing *as made* has its own goodness: the assessment of that owes nothing to moral considerations. The thing *as used* is at once the subject of a moral judgment. And nowadays, with the hopeless muddle of aesthetic, no less than moral, standards, Catholics have a high responsibility. That does not mean censoriousness, but it does mean a serious realisation that a moral judgment is not just an extrinsic label of "U" or "A": it means the relating of everything that a man can use to the ultimate end of everything. So it is that with regard to films, as to all else, the Catholic function is a moral one. But once established on that foundation the Catholic critic is freer than most to look for what is beautiful because he already knows what is true.

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