

FILM AND CATHOLIC ACTION

IN a letter to Canon Brohée, President of the *Centre Catholique d'Action Cinématographique*, His Holiness Pope Pius XI wrote, April 25th, 1934:

'The discoveries of Science are also the gifts of God which we must use for His glory and the extension of His kingdom.

'Catholics of all countries of the world ought to consider it a duty in conscience to busy themselves with this question which is growing in importance. The cinema is going to become the greatest and most efficacious means of influence, more efficacious even than the Press, for some films are seen by millions of people. It is therefore highly desirable that organized Catholics should occupy themselves constantly with the Cinema in their meetings to promote Catholic Action and in their programmes of study.'

On reading this letter the loyal Catholic might excusably heave a sigh of relief. Owing to the American Boycott much has been said for and against the Cinema. Some people have deplored its influence and condemned it as a medium; others have accepted it, but entirely misunderstood its power and therefore its danger; some of us have even ventured to make films . . . But amid this mass of conflicting opinion, one thing is now clear, that the Holy Father not only encourages the use of the Cinema, but considers that it is our duty to use it in the Apostolate. This in itself is a great step forward, and will relieve many a dubious conscience.

What form should this use of the Cinema take? That is the question which here concerns us; and before we suggest an answer a few words of introduction are necessary.

Roughly speaking, the Cinema or the moving picture is either portrayal or creation; *i.e.*, it either reflects something that we can see and know, or it creates a situation or unfolds a plot which existed previously only in the mind of the film-director.

The division, however, is not quite so simple. The screen portrays in two ways: it can be a faithful ciné-photograph—say, of a procession; or it can be the same procession as witnessed and described by the film-director.

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This sub-division is of profound importance. A simple portrayal of life is unbiassed, but immediately the director's personality comes into play, aided by the flexible and easily manipulated ciné-camera, he becomes almost in spite of himself an interpreter of life. This in itself may hardly seem alarming until we calculate the enormous perceptive range of the ciné-camera in the hands of a skilled technician. This instrument can retard, accelerate, reverse movement; it can select the viewpoint from which the movement is seen, search out details and give them an undue emphasis. Pudovkin even maintains that as many of us view the world through some prevailing emotional condition, the film director, by skilful use of the camera, can, by creating a mood, determine what shall be seen.

Film manipulation does not end here. The director can take his film to the cutting room and juggle with the strips of celluloid to his heart's content. He can arrange his sequences, build up his climaxes, underline, alter the *tempo*, superimpose and a hundred other things. The point I wish to make is this: Of all mediums of expression the film is at once the most powerful and the easiest to misuse. By what norm, then, shall the finished picture be judged? By its success (*i.e.*, its box-office receipts) or by its truthfulness? *Jamais public ne se livra plus docilement que le public de cinéma*, once said Lucien Romier. But what defence has this public against the director who twists and distorts truth to suit his producer's pocket? Film censorship might conceivably be tightened up to deal with immoral and suggestive pictures; but this is not enough. A relentless war must be waged in defence of truth. The unscrupulous and irresponsible Jewish financiers who exploit the art of film must be dragged into the open and exposed. This is the first objective of Catholic Film Action; and how else can it be attained except by a courageous and concerted offensive on the part of a free Catholic Press?

Examples of this wilful misinterpretation are legion. For instance, *Man of Aran* is generally acclaimed a great picture, sexually clean, and brilliantly photographed. If the

film had described an imaginary island it would have remained a magnificent spectacle, a symphony of the sea. But unfortunately it attempts to portray the Isle of Aran, and yet manages to leave out all mention of the influence of the Catholic Church. Truth is sacrificed to make a picture.

More convincing as an example is *Queen Christina* with Greta Garbo in the title rôle. Historically Queen Christina vacated the Swedish throne to become a Catholic. But how could Hollywood hope to deal with such a situation? So Hollywood re-writes history to suit the producers, and Queen Christina has a disgraceful affair with the Spanish Ambassador, and for love of him and not the Almighty relinquishes the throne in favour of her cousin.

'The misconstruction and wilful misinterpretation of motives,' writes Paul Dehn, referring to this picture, in the Summer number of *Young People*, 'is not only an insult to the dead but an injury to the living. It militates very violently against all the canons of artistic integrity.'

Let us therefore add our voice to the growing chorus and repeat that the chief danger of film is not sex, but the opportunity it provides for the deliberate and wholesale distortion of truth; and let us insist that the only safeguard against this is Catholic Action through a united Catholic Press.

'Would the cinema be so evil, so morally depraved,' remarked the Holy Father in an audience given to the International Federation of the Cinema Press, August, 1934, 'if the Press had set its face resolutely against immoral films?'

This concerted policy of the Catholic Press has yet to mature. In the meantime the campaign to boycott immoral films is gathering momentum. Already there has been considerable success in America; Catholics at home are bravely supporting the Hierarchy; the movement has penetrated as far afield as India: there are signs of victory. But in our enthusiasm let us not lose touch with reality. In America Film Boycott is replacing repealed Prohibition; the move-

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ment is not wholly Catholic. In England we are a small if influential minority . . . But speaking generally is Film Boycott enough; can this alone ever hope to succeed? Does it not seem a mistake to confine ourselves to a negative policy at a time when the future of film is being decided? *On ne supprime que l'on remplace.* It is not enough to condemn bad films; we must make good films.

Catholic Action demands, then, further co-operation in the making of films. How shall we start? The Holy Father again points the way. In the interview to the International Federation of the Cinema Press, he said:

'It is not a question of producing religious films . . . It is necessary instead that the whole cinema should be moral and educative.'

In other words, our present need is not Catholic films but films made by Catholics. We need Catholic film artists, Catholic scenario-writers, Catholic directors, producers, camera-men, critics . . . Catholics, in fine, who understand film and who are prepared to earn their livelihood in this medium.

With this in view the Ichthys Films Company has been formed in France, and its first film, *Golgotha*, will be made in Algeria in the autumn. Many celebrated artists are taking part, including Jean Gabin, Charles Vanel and André Bacque. The scenario has been prepared by Chanoine J. Reymond, and the production is in the capable hands of M. Julien Duvivier. Already the sales of this film have more than covered the cost of production; and in the opinion of eminent critics who have read the shooting-script, it will be the feature of the coming winter.

To ensure the success of *Golgotha* and subsequent I.F. productions National Centres are to be established to organise the financial interests of the Company. The movement is Catholic and international. Films will not be confined to any one country or group of countries but circulated throughout the world. Eventually they will be given to charitable organisations, and, after reduction, preserved in Catholic substandard film libraries,

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Similar associations are being formed in Belgium, such as *Le Bureau International de Productions* of Brussels and *L'Office Catholique International de Cinématographie* under Canon Brohée.

This, all will admit, is splendid work, constructive and according to the mind of the Holy Father. But is it complete, even in its conception of film? As we must not identify printing with the best seller, neither must we think of film only in terms of cinema. Whether Lubitsch and his experts are shooting some great production or John Smith of Poplar is shooting the family with his 37 shilling Coronet, both are equally film. Film is a medium for the home, club, parochial gathering, lecture-room, class-room. It is not a specialised medium; it is a popular medium.

Fifty years ago when many people were learning to read and write they had a strange reverence for the printed word. Elementary education has diminished this. Must not a similar change take place with the film-medium. The more the public understands film-technique the more it will despise film-propaganda; and there is no better way of understanding film than by making it. That is why some of us are convinced that an important branch of Catholic Film Action concerns the amateur. By all means must the Catholic Press voice Catholic opinion and defend Truth, and the Catholic commercial organizations employ Catholic artists and technicians in making wholesome entertainments for the million; but the sanest safeguard surely is not to leave the film in the hands of the experts but to bring it familiarly into the lives of the people. When a man has grown familiar with his own close-up and that of his wife and children on a screen in the kitchen or can attend with his family a convivial gathering with a song and a laugh, and a few 'pictures' in the Parochial Hall after Benediction,—this will do more than anything else to break down the influence and monopoly of the commercial Cinema.

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