

# *from* CINEMA *to* CINERAMA

*By Milton Klonsky*



THE French poet Nerval once imagined that Time, in the shape of a giant wolf, would someday pounce upon the Cathedral of Notre Dame and bear it away by the nave, its organ bellowing and its buttresses flying, to be devoured like a fat capon. Notre Dame, of course, is still standing in the center of Paris. But only a short while ago it seemed that this fate would befall, instead, our own American movie palaces — the Alhambras, Majestics, and Taj Mahals across the country. The public was getting bored. Even Hollywood believed the day was coming when all her gaudy temples would either be razed or else condemned to serve meanly as warehouses, garages and supermarkets.

The cry of "wolf," however, was premature. As everybody knows by now, a new technique called Cinerama has arrived, and the whole situation is changed. Cinerama projects an illusion of such depth, a luminous space in which images seem carved out of solid light, that the old "silver screen" is dim and

flat in comparison. The barrier between the real and the unreal, the screen itself, seems dissolved. During one scene, especially, showing a roller-coaster ride, audiences hold on to their seats as though to resist being drawn into the depths. There is a continual giggle of surprise and excitement in the theatre, oohs and ahs, and eyes interviewing other eyes for confirmation of what they have seen.

From the reaction of the first audiences, we can expect that conventional movies will seem as antiquated in a few years as the silent films of a generation past. The gap between them is just as wide. There are other tri-dimensional screen techniques now being demonstrated, but these require patrons to put on large, colored plastic goggles to achieve the stereoscopic effect. Such a bug-eyed audience, wearing these contraptions, like a swarm of science-fiction insects, will be as spectacular as anything on the screen. Cinerama, however, does the work all by itself.

The new process employs three

crisscrossing projectors, rather than one, and three screens joined and curved in an arc 146 degrees wide and 55 degrees high, in place of the standard rectangle. Since the human eyes can cover about 180 degrees from side to side and 90 degrees up at a single glance, seeing from the front as well as from the corners of the retina, this semicircular screen encompasses almost the entire field of vision. And, as Cinerama improves, the area may be extended even farther until the concave screen of the theatre and the convex dome of the eye can form a complete circle of consciousness. Of course, this is a fantastic speculation. But, even under the present setup, the illusion of reality is sometimes strong enough to suspend any disbelief, willing or unwilling, on the part of the audience. In "presence," Cinerama can be compared to the Elizabethan theatre where the gentlemen patrons sat in chairs on the stage itself, chatting among themselves and eating chicken pie and cherries, close enough to spew the bones and pits at the villain.

ACCOMPANYING the images as they move back and forth across the screen in depth, are free and moving sounds as well, escaped from their usual confinement in a single box. There are eight speakers in the Cinerama theatre, five placed behind the screen, one on each side wall, and another in the rear to reproduce the off-set noises as they approach and

leave the scene from all directions. The effect is of a stereophonic sound articulated in depth as clearly as the images themselves. Thus, the arrival of a motor boat can be heard first dimly in the rear, then somewhat louder from the side, and, as the image reaches the screen and grows larger, the sound rises with it to a roar until both sound and image fade out of the picture at the same time.

The program of Cinerama presented at the Broadway Theatre in New York was designed as a virtuosic display of the new medium. After a long preface by Lowell Thomas, tracing the history of moving pictures on an ordinary screen, the curtains were drawn back and Cinerama began, symbolically, with a headlong plunge down the chutes and around the curves of a Coney Island rollercoaster. Then followed a ballet performance in which the potentialities of the great screen — 51 feet long and 25 feet high — were cramped to fit the size of a stage; also, scenes of Venice showing the piazzas and wide vistas of the Grand Canal adequately spread out; a bullfight in Spain; a march down a field by hundreds of Scotch bagpipe players all blowing at the same time; the Triumphal Scene from Act II of *Aida* at La Scala Milan; a travelogish sequence of motor boating and water-ski acrobatics (with the bathing beauties in 3 dimensions, naturally) at Cypress Gardens in Florida. It closed with a transcontinental flight through canyons

and gorges and over the plains and mountains of the United States. The only word to describe this colossal compound of Art and Nature, this Pelleas and Melisande heaped on Ossa, is, figuratively speaking, "pellossal." But let's not be carried away.

The most effective scenes were those in which the new sights and sounds were exhibited in a natural environment. If Nijinsky had been shown making one of his fantastic leaps across the stage; Caruso in a duet with Jenny Lind; or John Barrymore in his prime reciting a soliloquy from "Hamlet" — it could not have been as impressive as the pictures of the Grand Canal and the bullfight, or the regiments of bagpipe players marching down the field with each squeal and foof of their crazy instruments heard distinctly. They appeared transformed, as though seen and heard for the first time.

IT MAY be curious to compare the program of Cinerama with one presented in 1896 at Koster & Bial's Music Hall in New York, on the site of Macy's department store, when "Thomas A. Edison's Latest Marvel — The Vitascope" was the attraction. In addition to vaudeville on the stage, there were shown pictures in motion in a gray and streaky light like the view through an unwashed window. The subjects were "Sea Waves," "The Umbrella Dance," "The Barber Shop," "The Skirt

Dance," "Burlesque Boxing," etc. — which may still be seen, perhaps, in Penny Arcades throughout America. According to the reports written at that time, the spectators stared at each other with a wild surprise. But, then or now, the program didn't really matter — for what the audience at the first movies as well as at Cinerama both came to witness was the thing itself, the latest prize from the forge of Vulcan.

Cinerama, of course, is the heir apparent of the movies; but it is also a distinctly new medium with traits and features of its own. As it develops and finds the nerve of its own style, the differences between the two media will become more apparent.

The earliest movies, shown in dimly lit tents and stores with a crude screen hung in the back, were little more than agitated dumbshows or photographic imitations of vaudeville acts and stage plays. But after a while the camera learned to move itself and to participate in the action. From this discovery emerged the great motif of *The Chase*, which is dominant in Chaplin's early comedies, Westerns, cops and robbers melodramas, etc., and which in one way or another figures in almost every kind of film. Then the rise of the star system in Hollywood, coinciding with the development of the close-up, gave those enormous and radiant faces on the screen an almost hypnotic power. Like modern demigods and god-

desses, the images of the stars today are as well known as those of Zeus, Astarte or Osiris were in pagan times. And finally — to bring the circle round — there was the advent of talking pictures in the late Twenties which enabled these dumb idols to speak with a human (sometimes all too human) voice. But sound also tempted Hollywood to revert to its Ur-days, when the flicks really flickered, by again imitating stage plays and vaudeville. Everyone has sat through movies which never move from the scene of a bed or a courtroom or even a lifeboat; and has had to endure cycles in *saeculo saeculorum* of jazz operas and musical comedies, like being trapped inside the neon tubes of a juke box.

CINERAMA will probably begin its own career by imitating the techniques of the movies. Inevitably, however, a new way of looking will find new things to look at. Just as the movies broke away from the single-set location of the play, so Cinerama has now freed itself from the framed and two-dimensional picture of the movies. Scenes can be shot not only from different angles but from various depths, the camera can move *around* and reflect the scene from as many angles and points of view as a diamond. The spectacular shots of crowds, battlefields, landscapes, etc., in "The Birth of a Nation" or "Gone With The Wind," can easily be surpassed by the great range and depth of its cameras.

Moreover, the new screen is too large to be dominated by a single image, such as the close-up. And without these close-ups of the stars, on which much of their glamour depended, the Cinerama theatre (and our eyes) will no longer be darkened or brightened by their hypnotic approaches and withdrawals. Human figures seem more familiar and life-size, less godlike, on the wide arc of Cinerama. There is such a large area to watch that the unfixed eyes of the spectator can range around at will; and the sound, issuing from various parts of the theatre, also serves to distract and unfreeze attention. Consequently, that old movie trance we all know may be considerably diminished, the charm unwound.

But the essential difference between them, perhaps, is this: While Cinerama is a spectacle, something to witness, the movies have always been a kind of communion. The hush and darkness of the movie theatre, the modulations of light on the screen like a preacher's raising and lowering of his voice, and the use of music to cover up sounds of talking, coughing, foot scraping — all are ancient ritual devices.

Darkness in churches congregates  
the sight,

Devotion strays in open daring light,  
as the poet Randolph observed in the seventeenth century. In such an atmosphere, the shadows of the movies flicker between the black-and-white world of positive fact and

the chrome world of fantasy, unreeling both on a single beam of light. Such matter-of-fact events shown in the newsreels as atomic bombs exploding, floods and famines in China or India, Senators speaking, etc., are somehow transformed to the same illusory plane as the double feature itself, and, conversely, the most incredible plots and scenes can be projected deadpan, with such gravity of emphasis, that the fantastic is accepted at face value.

THE movies have thus been able to influence the most intimate phases of American life — ways of love and codes of courtship, social manners and mannerisms, goals of success, standards of sexual beauty, and even the “looks” of good and evil — for millions. The love affairs of the stars among themselves and sometimes with favored mortals outside the movies, how they were made and remade, exchanged in trade,

parlayed and relayed, played, recounted years later around every American fireside, bar and soda fountain, these are already part of our national folklore.

In Cinerama, paradoxically, the illusion of reality is so great that it is accepted as such, as an illusion — and simple faith is withheld. The stars would have to adopt an almost impossible kind of acting, more stylized than the postures and grimaces of the silent films, in order to attain an equal magnitude.

And yet the potentiality of this new medium as an enlargement of experience is almost without limit. By the time the Russians invent Cinerama, we shall probably have been among the planets, at the bottom of the ocean, on top of the Himalayas, and in the boudoirs of screen beauties still unborn. On the arc of Cinerama, as it spreads, the daydreams of the second half of the twentieth century may be given a local habitation and a name.



» All works of taste must bear a price in proportion to the skill, taste, time, expense and risk attending their invention and manufacture.

Those things called dear are, when justly estimated, the cheapest: they are attended with much less profit to the Artist than those which everybody calls cheap.

Beautiful forms and compositions are not made by chance, nor can they ever, in any material, be made at small expense.

A composition for cheapness and not excellence of workmanship is the most frequent and certain cause of the rapid decay and entire destruction of arts and manufacturers. — *Josiah Wedgwood*

# The "NEW" Soviet Anti-Semitism

By Victor Riesel

HIDDEN SOMEWHERE in Canada under the alert protection of the Royal Mounted Police is the Soviet code clerk, Igor Sergeievitch Gouzenko, undoubtedly unaware that he not only broke the famous Soviet spy ring, but also casually tossed off the first hint of a globe-rattling story which was not to startle the world until seven years after he turned the Russian embassy secret police files over to the Canadian authorities.

Gouzenko, who arrived in Canada two years before he and his wife and little son, Andrei, hid in a neighbor's apartment while NKVD killers ransacked his home, told the Mounted Police sometime in the course of endless questioning that as early as 1943 he had come across internal Soviet directives ordering the exclusion of Jews from certain strategic positions and their diminution in other departments.

Exactly seven years later to the day, Rudolf Slansky, Dr. Vladimir Clementis and nine other prominent Czech Communists were in a "Peoples' Court" confessing in Soviet robot fashion to "high treason"

and "admitting" they were "Zionist, Trotskyite, Titoist enemies of Stalinism." One of the defendants, Gen. Karl Svab, formerly chief of Czechoslovakia's own version of the MVD, told the five-man court that he had "protected a Jewish bourgeois-national plot." Another defendant was one Otto Katz, himself one of the original couriers linking the Canadian spies with Americans and the Mexicans who still keep open the underground route to Prague and Moscow.

A few days later, after the secret police had forced the wives and children of the accused to write to the Peoples' judges demanding the death sentences for fathers and husbands, the prisoners were hanged in Prague's grim Pankrac prison.

The Soviet Union's first public anti-Semitic trial was over.

It was Russia's loudest pronouncement to the world that it now was ready to wipe out the 2,700,000 people of Jewish faith who had found themselves behind the Iron Curtain after the war. These were the hostages which had kept Jewish leaders across the world silently or-