

Circus

WE were lunching in Hollywood, at Levy's place, a favorite of the movie actors, and newly decorated in the style of a ship, waves, masts, nets, sails and so on, and not unattractive. My host, an actor and writer of scenarios, far along toward the top of his profession and an able man, opened the talk by asking me a question.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of the movies?"

I tried to make an honest answer.

"I don't know what I think of them," I said, "I don't think I understand them."

The look in his eyes showed that he thought me merely trying to be effective, which obliged me to set about making myself clear.

I explained with plentiful modesty and considerable humility over such an injection of theory into a friendly conversation, that we have to begin with the principle that every art has its own terms, can be judged by itself. Before we can judge an art at all we have to know what it consists of and is driving at; we have to know the rules of the game. What this self is in the movies I don't know. I know the terms, not words, not sound, but rhythm, visual motion; as an art the moving picture must work in terms of that. But what could be the ideal in such an art, what it leads to, remains to be seen. It is not photography, it is not theatre. Certainly at present most of the movie is mere photographed theatre, with hints now and then—in moments of Charlie Chaplin's pantomime, for example, or in the more abstract *Caligari*—of something that seems to work in its own terms, to be complete in itself, to be essentially the moving picture and no other art. For my part I do not know of course just what is the form of this art, provided it is an art yet, or gets to be one. As an art the moving picture baffles me, I don't know what it is driving at, precisely.

So I said, but I began to feel like a professor making a lecture, and left off. My host looked at me quietly; and more quietly, I could see, in his own mind he classed me.

"Oh," he said, thoughtfully. "Well, you see we tried that high-brow stuff and the public won't have it, like *The Doll's House* for instance—now that went to pot. They wouldn't come."

"But a photograph of an Ibsen play, what has that to do with the art of—" I began, but gave it up. There was no use, no ground to go upon. It had not occurred to this man that the moving picture need be anything but the photograph of a play. I dropped the matter and began to ask amiable questions. I asked about the new divorces, the managerial favorites among the leading ladies, the cost of various films, the salaries, how much did *Foolish Wives* cost, and how much did they cut of this film, the censors? Ah, that—my companion knew everything. This was the friendly and right ground, and we talked the hour out happily.

My host was called away then to the studios, where they were having a shipwreck, and I sat over my coffee. I looked about at the company, nearly all movie people. Now and then there was an interesting and picturesque face, and now and then an achieved interesting picturesqueness. Now and then there were actors' faces in the old style, the pronounced features, chiselled mouths, clear nostrils. There were cultivated but glum faces of men half or wholly sold out for the reputed fortunes paid by

the pictures to their editors, press agents, and dramatists. There were lounging negligée young men, and bobbed haired young ladies, and ladies in the style of Vogue covers and oftener in the more vampish and lush manner of the popular newsstand magazines. There were a few gentle and slightly bewildered faces too; and here and there a wisp of a dream in someone's eyes. But most of them had about them that peculiar adequacy that one sees in the Pullman travellers between New York and Chicago, alert, complete, empty faces, grown-up children, oddly sophisticated in their ways about, and as oddly innocent of contemplation and scope. Looking at these movie people and listening to their talk you get the impression that they have no idea but that of what will go, what, as they put it, the public will stand for. Whatever the ideals may be that they come with, whatever great thoughts of art or theories of art, seem to all appearances to be lost in the scramble at Hollywood. The successes that break through now and then with little innovations teach them nothing. You've got to make it go, you've got to give the public what it wants; that other stuff—whatever it is—has been tried; we know.

And yet I could not blame these men and women very much. For that day and the day before I had seen the studios working. I had seen the actor led into a scene, directed by the director to act for a minute, half a minute, three minutes, told what to do, photographed in that blinding light pushed close up to his eyes, and then directed off the scene. And presently another bit, and so on all day, bits, odds and ends, scraps, patches, the whole studio lounging with players, ready to go on for their moments and to be wound off by the camera in the blast of light, a shipwreck here, a mediaeval castle there, here an apartment with a real clock and curtains, there a desert island with palms, in this corner a great ballroom built at absurd expense, in that corner a lady in prison, made up very sad with her blackened eyes and straggling hair, behind a yard of bars, waiting for the camera man and now doing a jig as she waits, holding on to the bars. How any effects of acting at all can come out of this is a wonder. And it is easy to see how almost any artist would degenerate under such intervals, sitting about waiting, smoking, singing to an old square piano where someone is playing jazz, cut off from any profound mood, half idle, half acting, half individual, half director, and most of the matter to be acted rot and more rot and rot again, with only a touch now or then of the divine human thing that emerges in spite of all from the humanity of the people themselves or from the miracle that is glimpsed in the human life portrayed, however foolish the intention of the whole may be. No wonder they speak not of the art but of the picture industry.

In the midst of which thoughts, and all unfairly, then, my thoughts went back to another world I used to see. Signor Rei's people who came every spring after Easter to Palermo to make the Circus, as Severino, my boatman used to tell me, and who were, God knows, Signore, and also Santa Rosalia, the best circus company in the world, at least they were better than the crowd from Trapani or that Messina compagnia of dogs. I used to see these people in a tavern down near the Marina, and talk with them a little, though most of what I knew I had from Severino himself.

The Signor Rei had been a count, it was said, Severino told me, at least he had been a bandit once and once in prison, from which through his bravery he escaped, with

the help of God, though he had left all that long ago, and was a good man. His circus had its home in Catania. Berti the harlequin was also a fine fellow, though he carried a knife at his waist under the red scarf and might use it. His amante was the bareback rider, and bellissima. Her father, the animal tamer, used to beat her when she was young but loved her very much now, her name was Pia but they called her Perla Bianca on the bills. There were many others. Botti, I remember especially, who was very fat, the buffo of the clowns, and loved a little girl with red hair. I used to sit in the wine-room and watch them out of playing hours, the lights darkening the shadows on their grave faces, darkening their black hair too, shining on their white teeth when they laughed suddenly, and putting a beautiful pallor like ivory on their smooth skins. They used to sing, and sometimes there was a waltz with everybody clapping. Now and then there was a row, fists on the table, great roaring voices and silenzios, and sometimes blows, but always settled and ended with glasses of wine all round. There had been a stabbing one year, Severino said, jealousy it was, the Colombina was very beautiful; that was bad, but there is a man's honor of course. They were a fierce beautiful people, as Severino said.

I sat there in Hollywood in the midst of that movie world, thinking of those people far away, under that bright sky, among flower gardens, sweet walled orchards, and little ancient farms with white farmhouses, those strong shadows, strong smells, those rocks and songs and violent storms and cataclysms of nature; I thought of their voices, their vivid bodies, their sudden moods, their power, their abundance and vitality and their passionate loves. I could see again the ring of them standing at the edges watching Maestro Rei when he made his address to the audience, the thunder of applause, the rushing forward to kiss him when he came off the scene, to take his hands, to throw arms around his neck and say bravo molto bravo. I remember how they played, the go they had, the heart, the gay pulse, the volume, the wild accuracy of everything they did. How little they knew, these Catania circus people, of the world, of business affairs, of competition and making a go of it. If they knew what their public wanted it was because they knew what they wanted themselves. These people have risen from the sun, the earth, blood, bread, water, wine and an old past. However far in art they may get now as they are, brutal as they may be or childlike or simple or crude or even criminal, they have at least the sources of art within them. They have the elements at least from which all art grows. They have vitality, abundance, power, clarity of mind when they think at all, ferocity, simplicity, and warmth of emotion, tragic directness, courage and impetuosity; which are the sources of all art.

Beyond these people in Sicily, beyond such beginnings in the soil of human attributes, the mind goes on into a profounder beauty and into those nobler patterns in art that emerge from these elemental sources, and are nourished by them, to discover at length a lasting and austere perfection. Beyond these people in the restaurant at Hollywood the mind can go no further. Life here seems to spring from automobiles, divorcing, big business, bathtubs, estates, speed, action and competition. There is something strangely baffling in all that. If art emerges from life, from deep or at the least from elemental living, what art can come from this? If life feeds on art and grows by it to something richer and more replete with its own matter, what life could feed on this? There is something about this smart, youthful completeness and vacuous adequacy that seems to end the matter.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Again Notwithstanding

SIR: "Is there anybody on this planet, now, at the end of the first half of 1922, who sees the problem of sex in its true relation to all other problems?" asks P. L., covering two books on sex by Havelock Ellis and Miss Maude Royden respectively, in the New Republic for July 5th. He thinks that the will to break through the silence of sex is necessary, but he also believes it possible to think "too much" about sex, even while thinking of it "clearly" and "unselfishly." The writer wishes he had been forearmed as a young man against this very possibility. His position is in two ways challenging.

In the first place, is it possible to think "too much" about anything? Achievement in any field would deny this. Real progress occurs only after months and years of intense preoccupation with one subject. The point is, to think to a purpose. Most people confuse mere feeling with thinking, true introspection with introversion. An emotional conflict acting as a magnet for images of sex is not in any way a thought process. We need to be taught what thinking is, and then it will not be possible for us to think "too much."

In the second place, suppose the statement can be made that sex is out of proportion in the scale of interests? Is this true for everybody? The time when a human being feels that a subject is out of scale in the world is the time when either he knows a good deal about it himself, has a working knowledge so to speak, or he has failed to "handle" the subject, and wishes it dropped out of sight. Distinctions on the basis of the two sex groups, though generally treacherous, are sometimes sound. P. L. writes as a man. He has perhaps had exceptional opportunities.

A teacher of girls, in school and college, with my own education similarly conducted, I hazard the opinion that here, at least, sex is thought about "too little." Really *thought* about. The taboo of twenty years ago has been broken through for the students. But the teachers of young women, it must be remembered, belong to the older generation. At what point in her life does the girl receive the results of any scientific thinking about sex? Possibly at the end of her senior year in college when she is completely "set"—and, at that, the subject is presented incompletely. The chapter on sex is still omitted from one edition of the leading textbook in social psychology "at the request of the women's colleges." The whole trend of education for women is to suppress sex completely. If the people and the books for which a girl has respect never mention sex—novels are not explicit—the girl unconsciously feels that sex cannot be very important, that it is a simple matter easily handled when she marries, that it is something to be ashamed of. She is at the mercy of good or bad fortune in external circumstances. And she may develop an attitude that will make her inaccessible to marriage.

Many a woman wishes that she had been told by the wise people to whom she looked in other matters—and no one is a greater potential hero-worshipper and imitator than a young girl—that she must think about sex, and think to a purpose; that married or single sex is a problem to be handled, that she must give some time to it at some period in her life, working objectively, and that knowledge counts there, as in any other field, for "success," as the books say.

Writers on sex do not fail to call our attention to the frigidity of women. The difficulty is psychological, and in the situation; the kind of education has played an enormous part. That the situation is real, so much more real than anyone believes, is apparent to those who know educational places for girls. In this respect, the girl who goes to work in a cannery at fourteen has the advantage. She has the rough laboratory of life for a partial education.

It is perhaps not inapposite to note that of the two writers covered by P. L., the one opening up "a wider prospect, a more varied world of sex" is Havelock Ellis. Of the woman we read: "Miss Royden is a Christian, and a believer that renunciation, even life-long renunciation, is often necessary and may be rich, human, full of love, creation and power." Nothing could be truer. Nevertheless, it is fatally easy for frigidity to find refuge in high ideals, as happened in the case of Miss Sinclair's heroine, Harriet Frean. This trend will even seek out a good moral situation in which renunciation alone is possible. It is better to be bored by too many books on sex than to treat it as though it did not exist. Man is still very much at the mercy of what he actually sees and hears about.

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