



IDEAS ON FILM

Eyewitnessing the World of the 16 mm. Motion Picture



World of Witness

EVER since its first appearance nine months ago *SRL's IDEAS ON FILM* has carried on its masthead the words "Eyewitnessing the World of the 16mm. Motion Picture." The term "eyewitness" was no casual choice. It was meant to denote a quality of surpassing importance in a world where almost all experience is second-hand—where the breakfast-table argument and the office job are real, and everything else must filter in through the screens of movie, radio, and press.

Film had this quality of eyewitness long ago, then lost it, and today is starting out on a voyage of rediscovery. Fifty years ago, when the Lumière brothers were sending out their first cameramen to distant parts of the world, the instructions they gave were vividly clear. "Open your lenses on the world," they said, "surprise nature in the act." And in surprising nature the cameramen startled their audiences too. The story has been too often told of the cries of alarm which greeted the train that seemed to be rushing out from the screen into the theatre itself. People were carried away. They weren't simply seeing a spectacle. They had become a part of it. They were eyewitnesses.

Of course the movies soon grew up. They began to appeal to more sophisticated audiences, with more jaded tastes. Their makers discovered that the camera could as easily become an instrument of illusion as a mirror of reality. With the aid of rapidly improving technical tools they were able to create a lustrous world of make-believe, to which color and sound track added the final perfection. The actors no longer wore the expressions of real life, but simply put on masks by which they signaled a change of role while retaining the unchanging characteristics that had made them into stars. At the same time directors discarded Griffith's rough-hewn cross-cutting and Chaplin's profound sense of irony and pathos. All this was too disturbing to an audience. What they wanted was "to get away from things." And this the movies were ready to give them. The Californian monotony was complete.

Now the wheel has taken another turn. The war jarred people out of a sense of unending routine. Its seismic

graphic tremor was felt even in the centers of movie production. Naturally, Hollywood, remote from the battle lines, scarcely felt the shock. Its epicenter proved to be in a country which had been reluctantly driven into war and had seen itself smashed under the heel of contending armies. It was in Italy that the new style of film was born. We saw it first in "Open City," then in "Shoeshine," "Paisan," "To Live in Peace," and "Tragic Hunt."

These films were at heart films of eyewitness. They seemed to carry the spectator out of his seat and into the chaos of life. They looked at the world with irony, humor, and a bitter sense of human injustice tempered by a knowledge that things have often been thus before, and will be so again. To accomplish this effect the directors often abandoned their studios, preferring to shoot on location, in the places where things actually happen. If one character is jostling his way through a crowd (a real crowd, not a group of extras) trying to catch up with another, the audience does not know whether they will meet or miss. In the Hollywood film, the plot dictates the situation, and the audience is always ahead of the plot. But in the eyewitness film the plot emerges out of the situation. It is touch and go. Even the director does not know exactly what will happen.

Moreover, the characters are apt not to speak in dialogue smoothed to a fine polish by relays of well-paid phrase-turners. Their speech will be rough and abrupt, they may repeat words or stumble, as people do in real life. (And if all this sounds tough on the actors, is it not significant that Ingrid Bergman has left Hollywood for six months to make a film with Rossellini, who has a script of only a dozen pages in his pocket?) The camera work will probably have a drab, plain quality, as if the film had been exposed to actual wind and atmosphere, not delicately pampered in the artificial sunlight of the studios.

What emerges, however, is an experience—rough and brutal sometimes, but also tender and moving. Above all, real. The Lumières would have been happy, for the cameras

have rediscovered how to surprise nature in the act. It is in this spirit that a few American cameras have already started to turn. Meyer Levin's "The Illegals" [*SRL* Aug. 21, 1948], the story of the immigration into Palestine before the new state was born, overcame almost hopeless technical imperfections by its burning sincerity. "The Quiet One" (*SRL* Dec. 11, 1948) is an even greater achievement. It speaks with confidence and a deep sincerity of people whom we have thoughtlessly banished from our care and conscience in the jungles of what is in fact Harlem, but might be the slums of any industrial city, inhabited by any race, white or colored.

BUT in all this, where is the significance of 16mm.? These are 35mm. films, appearing in the theatres. The significant fact, however, is that not a single one of them has been bought for distribution through a major circuit. Only "The Search," a moving account of life in Europe's DP camps, got off to a rousing start in New York because the critics praised it so highly; when it started its general release MGM dropped it like a hot potato. Wherever there are art and specialized theatres, the eyewitness film will reach at least a limited audience. Outside this narrow field, the resources of 16mm. must take over, if the distributors will but widen their release policy and make the films available on both gauges at once. Hollywood still pampers and spoon-feeds its moviegoers on the theory that their stomachs will stand only a milk-and-water diet. It may well be the 16mm. film which will give back to the movies that shock and impact which first jerked them into popular favor.

Nor need this wait upon the distribution of a few masterpieces such as those we have mentioned. In an article in this section Julien Bryan, well-known traveler and lecturer, tells something of how he has brought the sensation of eyewitness—the feeling of "I have been there"—to audiences up and down the country. For long the entertainment film has been an escape from life, the documentary film a dry cataloguing of the facts of life. Here is a third kind of film—the film of witness—which is no substitute for experience, but an actual transfer of experience from screen to audience.

—RAYMOND SPOTTISWOODE.



16mm. Julien Bryan, who wrote the article printed below, is a well-known explorer and lecturer with film, who was graduated from Princeton and Union Theological Seminary, then decided to make social work his career. As a result, his journeyings across the world have brought back much more than the usual traveler's tales; his primary interest has always been in how people work and live. Director since 1945 of the International Film Foundation, founded by a grant from the Davella Mills Foundation, Mr. Bryan still finds time for travel. Last year he returned from a long trip in Eastern Europe.

Face to Face

A FEW months ago in Warsaw I was asked to show a documentary film before a group of twelve- and fourteen-year-old boys in the Central YMCA. It was a dramatic setting—a devastated city, a badly damaged building, and more than one hundred youngsters who had somehow survived the war.

These youngsters, living as they did behind the Iron Curtain, had some curious ideas about the United States, in spite of the fact that they were YMCA members.

I spoke briefly to them, and then showed them a twenty-minute documentary which I had made several years ago. It pictured an average day in an elementary school in Mt. Vernon, Ohio.

The boys sat transfixed throughout the picture. After the lights were turned on, there was a question period. I supposed they would be very curious about American games and about a school play which had been photographed as part of the film. But nothing of the sort. Out came the first question: "Mr. Bryan, in your pictures you showed boys and girls just like us. Is it really true that boys and girls in America are good children just like us?"

The discussion flowed on for a good half hour. It was in no way political. But a profound new idea had just penetrated the Iron Curtain and the minds and hearts of one hundred small Polish boys: the idea that children in America were like *them*—were good children and could be their friends. They had, in fact, been transported to America by means of films, and they had been eyewitnesses to what went on in an American school.

This was something that lectures and reading had been unable to do for them. They had read plenty of stories about the United States and had heard any number of lectures, but they had also heard plenty of criticism of the United States—criticism which had influenced them to the point where they honestly believed that almost all

American boys were bad boys. In a few minutes a film had dramatically shattered a false belief.

Naturally, I am not suggesting that the mere showing of a film will always cause a "conversion" to the point of view it expresses but, even in the face of powerful prejudices, a film can raise questions in the mind of a spectator. For example, a few years ago in Russia, while I was working with an UNRRA mission, I showed another American film called "The County Agent," made several years ago for the State Department for their use abroad. A high Russian official

was fascinated by the film, especially by its photography and music. But the thing that impressed him most was the portrayal of living conditions on American farms—the farms were large, and the farmers lived in comfortable houses, and every farmer owned his own car. This last idea particularly seemed to stump the Russian official. After the showing, he took me aside privately and said, "It's a good film, but those farmers' cars now . . . you lent them to the men just for the picture, didn't you?" It was too much for him to believe.

Obviously, the film could not change this man into a believer in democracy, any more than my words and arguments could have, but it did make a deep impression on him. In spite of himself and his Party-line training, he had become an eyewitness to the American scene. His party had told him how the American farmer had been exploited and oppressed, but this simple documentary film showed him without fanfare or propaganda a side of life in the United States of which he had never heard. His mind, I think, wanted to believe it. His Communist Party training made him doubt.

But if this high Communist official believed even a little of my film,



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imagine the eagerness with which such documentaries would be seized upon and believed by non-Communists in Eastern Europe.

FOR instance, some months ago I arranged to show several films on American education before a group of teachers and educators in Prague. It was a cold day and the building unheated. To my amazement, more than two hundred Czechs turned out, and all of them were deeply interested in the films. A lecture on American education at such a meeting would have been of some value, but, thanks to film, these Czech educators had paid a visit to a classroom in an American elementary school. For a moment they had been able to identify themselves closely with American teachers and their work. When the lights went on I could see that they had been emotionally stirred—not by any words of mine but by the things they had seen on film.

Months later I was again in Prague. President Benes had just died, and the country was in deep mourning. The Czech people seemed to know that this was a great turning point in their history. Tens of thousands of them stood for eight or ten hours in line, waiting for their turn to view the body of Benes—old men, soldiers, women, workmen, little children stood silently weeping. Whatever these people were, they were not Communists. Thousands of patriotic Czechs were clearly as sincere and devoted believers in democracy as any of us in America.

I was deeply moved as I watched this spectacle of widespread national grief for a man who was not only a beloved leader but a symbol of democracy to a freedom-loving people. I wanted other Americans to see this historic event as I saw it and felt it then, and so I took pictures of it—with a 16mm. camera.

A few weeks ago a group of wealthy and influential men met for dinner at the Waldorf. They called themselves the Circumnavigators' Club and were holding a formal banquet in honor of Juan Trippe. Toward the end of the evening I showed them the Benes pictures. They were deeply moved as they watched it, as I had been at the time of the event itself. For the moment, they, too, were there at Benes's funeral. They, too, were weeping with the Czechs. They, too, were seeing the death of a democracy. But the film had not only moved them. It had made these smart, able businessmen identify themselves with the Czech people. National, geographical, and social barriers were forgotten. They saw the Czechs as human beings like themselves.

The eyewitness and identification appeal of the 16mm. film makes it of tremendous importance as a tool in the promotion of international understanding, and, unlike the Hollywood or theatrical type of film shown in commercial theatres, it can be courageous and controversial. Hollywood still deliberately avoids most controversial issues. It has a long list of taboos. It is brave after an issue has long been decided or after it has become "safe." It never dared to touch Hitler and the Nazis until 1938, although 16mm. films were doing it without fear. Today 16mm. films can still take courageous stands on a hundred controversial subjects: religion, sex education, Russia, and displaced persons. These are subjects which Hollywood cannot or will not touch.

Through the use of this kind of film television can become alive and vital and exciting, e.g., a forum type of program can become an hour in which twenty minutes are allotted to the showing of films that will furnish eyewitness material as a background for intelligent discussion. It will become more exciting than a mere radio broadcast of four voices debating an issue, and it will not be an unimaginative telecast of four faces talking monotonously on a television screen.

But wherever 16mm. film is shown,

whether on television screens or on the small screens of school, library, and church, it can perform one of its greatest services in creating better international understanding of people and their problems. I see this as a kind of two-way understanding: films about us and our life going out to the screens of the world, and films about other countries, including Russia and her satellites, being shown here.

Films can go even further in promotion of international understanding, however, in interpreting to us the work of our United Nations. I refer here not to the newsreel shots of Vishinsky attacking the democratic way of life or of ourselves defending it, but rather to the positive and unfortunately little-known work that UN has already done and is trying to do in many countries of the world today; the work of the committees on health, on human welfare, on agricultural problems and flood control, and on all the other problems that face us not only as individual nations but as one world.

Eyewitness accounts on film of these activities would be absorbing in themselves. Moreover, they could help create in ourselves and in our neighbor nations the atmosphere of faith which is necessary if the only organization we have that can prevent wars is to survive and do its job.

—JULIEN BRYAN.

Film Bookshelf

FILM FORM: Essays in Film Theory. By Sergei Eisenstein. Edited and translated by Jay Leyda. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1949. 279 pp. \$4.50.

By turns savagely polemical and whimsically humorous, following every twist of the Party line and lashing out against the mediocrities of the newer Soviet film makers, Eisenstein's last book, like all his writings, is on fire with imagination. It should be read by all who can swallow their political prejudices and enjoy a rare feast of good film writing.

Eisenstein died only a year ago, yet already he seems to belong to the remoter past. Though only thirty years old when the sound film arrived, his immense contributions to the cinema had already been made. In "Potemkin," "The General Line," and "October," his three silent films, he had carried film form forward with giant strides. Such an intricate and subtle mosaic of shots had never before been conceived, even in the fertile mind of D. W. Griffith, whom Eisenstein greatly admired. A new film language was born. But with the coming of sound, Eisenstein's inspiration seemed to flag. In his three sound films he added little to what lesser men had accomplished, and in all his writings it is to the achievements of the silent cinema that he harks back.

Eisenstein was by far the most widely read and traveled of all Soviet film makers, and he was equally at home in American, English, French, and, of course, Russian literature. He also had a lively appreciation of the qualities of American life, and his best essay in this book is on "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today." He also greatly extends the conception of montage, and discusses film language and structure.

Jay Leyda, well-known authority on Eisenstein's work, has done an excellently thorough job of editing and translation. Rather disingenuously, however, his introduction omits all reference to the bitter quarrels with the Soviet State which were inevitable in a man of Eisenstein's energy and imagination, and which clouded his latter years. —R. S.