

Prudes and Pictures

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Is the motion-picture debasing the public taste, or is public taste debasing the motion-picture? Does the child need protection from the cinema, or the cinema from the child? Is the film a villain, a victim, or just a moron? Opinions differ.

In any case, the motion-picture exists. Grown to a degree which makes it as much a part of modern life as is the daily press, of more national importance than the legitimate stage, it even compares with the church in the number of its devotees; and more than the church it stimulates public interest in its personnel and the details of its management. Foreign nations are worrying about the influence of American pictures upon their innocent populations, and if their complaints are justified, it would seem that the American movie is destined to upset the world as much as our part in the late war has upset Europe.

Whether the movie may yet be called an art is a question still under discussion. Those who are busy perfecting the craft have little time for academic argument; the point in which they are most interested is whether the motion-picture will be allowed to develop under conditions which will insure its becoming an art, or whether it is to be arbitrarily limited within such narrow boundaries as to drive from it those men and women of true creative force, without whose efforts there is little chance of the screen ever growing beyond its well-known and much-advertised infancy.

To-day the condition of the world in general, and of the United States in particular, marks a crisis in the age-old struggle between honest thought and prescribed belief; radicals tend to become too radical and those who would restrain them too tyrannous. Laws are passed by

minorities, or by bare majorities, which half the people resent, and the tendency of the more advanced group to cast aside certain early Victorian ideals is bitterly opposed by those safe, sane conservatives who dedicate their lives to making illegal any departure from their own personal standards of truth and morality.

History, as we know it, is largely a matter of patriotic propaganda; but the student who looks a bit beneath the surface begins to doubt that the world has made its best progress when its thought was legally dominated by its "upper classes."

It has taken us some centuries to break away from chivalry; a system which found it desirable to put woman upon a pedestal rather than grant her equal social rights. We have not yet discarded economic theories which permit the chosen few to own the earth and charge the rest of the human race for its use. Many voices are interpreting the word of God, each claiming to possess the only authentic version; and throughout the land proper authority must pass upon all published thought to certify that it is the same kind which mother used to make.

Into a world so constituted enters a new art under the guise of entertainment; an art so broad in its appeal, so potentially powerful in its effect upon the mass, that it is at once recognized as a social force, then feared as such, and immediately harnessed to the chariot of convention lest it be dangerously stimulating to new ideas.

Much has been said and written of the effect the motion-picture has upon our national life. The movie has been accused of debauching the young and has been held largely accountable for whatever criminal tendencies any of us may possess. The very idea upon which censorship is based is that an audience cannot see upon the screen anything illegal, immoral, or disgusting without being them-

selves irresistibly drawn toward immorality or vice.

But to hold this view is to confuse cause and effect; for, like the stage, the screen can only influence public thought if it is in basic agreement with popular ideals.

Drama, on the screen or on the stage, is primarily an effect of public thought rather than a cause of it. A picture to succeed must reflect the life and ideals of its audience; it must formulate public opinion before it can form public thought. That is why the screen can never be a menace to the righteousness of the nation. The public is not easily influenced away from its ideals. This is not to say that the American people as a whole is quite as prudish as its leading bigots, though it is content to accept a somewhat narrow conception of what is "proper" or "improper," and tends to put its faith in blanket rules by which every individual must be judged. America sees its moral values in black and white, so whatever is not pure white is, necessarily, jet black.

This point of view, however, is intrinsic in the public. It is not the result of any law or regulation; it represents the native decency of the race. Even the efforts of the puritanical, through blue laws, have not been able to drive this race into any great degree of immorality. The American people is a clean people and will never tolerate anything really indecent in its theatres or on its screens.

It has always been futile to tell the public what it may or may not have in the theatre. The people have always demanded what they wanted—and have always got what they demanded—and they have never wanted drama which disagreed too much with their own sense of life's values. It has always been most unprofitable to present plays whose ideals varied from those of the audience. Even the so-called "indecent" plays on the New York stage, if really indecent, die quickly. Big cities may furnish for a few weeks an audience of the morbidly curious, largely people from out of town who vote for censorship at home and come to Broadway for moral relaxation. But the country as a whole does not like these plays. And this is even more true of the screen, whose larger audience is, in

proportion, more characteristically American and much simpler in its tastes.

This larger public needs no protection other than its own power to reject pictures which it disapproves. Yet it is this public itself which has caused the motion-picture to be bound by all those limitations and restrictions which are making development of the art so difficult.

The operation of censorship, important as it is in itself, has even greater significance when we realize that censorship is in fact the delegation of public taste to a small committee; the voluntary abandonment by the public of its right to approve or disapprove its own entertainment. It robs the producer of the personal audience-reaction to his picture, which is the only compass by which he can safely steer.

It is useless for makers of pictures to complain of the censors' arbitrary acts as long as the public consents that these few men and women shall stand as an artificial barrier between producer and audience; and it must be admitted that censorship exists largely because the public is too lazy to chaperon its own children, and because it is content to have its thinking pre-digested and stamped with an official seal. Food for thought, like food for the body, must be examined by the proper authorities and found pure before it can be sold.

Under such safeguards as these it is idle to speak of any evil effect of the motion-picture upon the public mind. To the student, indeed, it would seem that the boot is on the other foot; that it is rather the influence of the public upon the motion-picture which is to be deplored. If there is any answer to that much-agitated question, "What's wrong with the movies?" let us not condemn too hastily the rash soul who ventures to suggest that the fault may lie with the public. When we consider the outside pressure brought to bear upon those who make pictures—the enforced limitations; the legal, moral, social, and political inhibitions; the rules, regulations, and restrictions under which producers are forced to work—we can hardly blame the producer who cries despairingly that instead of the motion-picture making criminals of the public, it is the public which is making an artistic criminal of the motion-picture.

Many people are willing, even eager, to cure the motion-picture of its ills; they have various operations to suggest, which might be entirely successful except that the patient would undoubtedly die. For the cultured layman, in considering the situation, does not see that the problem has its roots in the fact that motion-pictures *must* be popular if they are to live. The more an art depends upon public approval, the more it has to reflect the ideas and ideals of the public which supports it, and not the ideas of the intellectuals who know what the public *should* think rather than what it *does* think.

The theatre has never been a good place in which to introduce new problems or new philosophies. Not until the public is already thinking about a subject can it be successfully used as a major motive in the theatre, and this is even more true of the screen. Neither is this the fault of the dramatist nor of the picture-producer; it is the will of the people, and makers of motion-pictures are servants of the people and must give satisfaction or take their notice.

And the public gives picture-makers only one general order—that it be entertained. It does not demand to be educated, neither does it clamor to be improved; least of all does it desire to be reformed. But it does want to be interested and amused, appealed to through the emotions and not through the intellect.

This order, simple as it is, gives the producer plenty of latitude; for entertainment may be vulgar or refined, coarse or exquisite, humorous or merely funny. Commentators on the films are frequently misled by the success of a crude picture into thinking that crudity is the cause of its success. But an equal success may be scored by a beautifully delicate piece of work; which is fair ground for the conclusion that if the entertainment values are there, if a picture is humanly interesting or amusing, it will succeed either with or without artistic treatment. It is well to note, however, that the greatest successes of the screen have been among its most artistic efforts.

But the producer, though limited by the imagination of the majority, is prevented from stimulating that imagination

because of various rules and regulations which the public itself has sanctioned in order to eliminate the danger of new thought. The world seems terribly afraid to think—it is so much easier, so much safer, to believe.

Thus it is that the artist is hampered by limitation of theme and of treatment. He is constantly tempted to produce a story in which he sees great values, and then, having to meet the limitations which the public imposes, he is forced to spoil the very story he delighted in; to rob it of its major values, and put upon the screen an empty husk, having certain superficial points of similarity with the original subject, but with its very soul removed. This is tragic, because the picture is frequently worse than if the producer had chosen an inferior story in which such value as it had could be retained upon the screen.

In the case of that excellent German film, "Variety," the original version showed a man, fascinated by a siren, leaving his wife and child and devoting his life to the alluring charmer, who in turn betrays him. He reaps the reward of his infidelity and is punished for deserting a faithful wife to follow an unworthy paramour.

In order to make this story offend American sensibilities as little as possible, the wife and child are eliminated from the story; the siren is shown at the beginning firmly bound to the hero in lawful wedlock, and the poor hero has to suffer for resenting the unfaithfulness of his wife. This distortion is for the purpose of legalizing love scenes between the man and the woman; scenes which could not well be omitted if there were to be any picture at all. The world is full of people who think it is more delicate to use perfume instead of soap.

The frequently demanded "motion-picture for the few" is no answer to the problem. Motion-pictures "for the few" would probably be even more unimportant than drama for the few. For drama at least may have a value as literature which, up to now, the motion-picture has not. Indeed, the problem lies in the very fact that the motion-picture, to be important, must be considered in terms of the mass—or not at all. Motion-pictures

for the few would be easy to make but highly unprofitable. Nothing is easier than to please the discerning few; nothing more difficult than to satisfy the unthinking many.

As if it were not enough that the producer be bound by the prejudices, convictions, and conventions of the adult mass, he is also compelled to confine his vision within the mental boundaries of the child. For the American child is the ball and chain on the leg of the American movie. His is the velvet hand in the iron glove. His interests are watched by groups of earnest souls like those who are striving so valiantly to prevent such works as "An American Tragedy" from reaching the screen in any form. Through these guardians the child imposes a tyranny of innocence upon an art which yearns to talk to grown-ups. And the general public seems not to care that the tender fingers of youth have grasped the windpipe of the cinema and are slowly choking it to death.

"Except ye be as little children," say these self-appointed arbiters of public morality, "ye may not enter the kingdom of the movies."

The effort to keep all motion-pictures suitable for childish consumption is depriving the fledgling art of its life-blood. It closes the door to consideration of adult aspects of life and denies artists the right to use virile, or even mature, treatments of situations in which the laws of human nature might conflict with those of good behavior. In dealing with elemental facts the lion and the lamb are indeed forced to lie down together so that a little child may lead them.

Under this system of adapting life to the infant mind, few masterpieces of world literature can be shown in those proportions which made them masterpieces. And possible masterworks, which might be created for the cinema, are inhibited before their creation by the knowledge that any deviation from the beaten track is forbidden. Right must be one hundred per cent right, and wrong one hundred per cent wrong, and that's *that*.

The philosopher, as well as the artist, may wonder whether childhood is really made more beautiful by surrounding it with lies; whether the child must be

taught a set of false values in order to make him like the world. Granted that there are some subjects with which his immature brain is not ready to cope, it still may be doubted that the best way to make him appreciate truth is to start him off on false premises, idiotic falsehood, and maudlin sentimentalism. It should be possible to withhold some of life's facts from the young without having to fill their minds with "applesauce."

In such bondage, how can the art of the motion-picture develop? How could any art have developed under similar conditions?

Modern music had to throw off the strict laws of old-fashioned harmony before new harmonic values could appear, and create the need for new instruments which in turn produced even newer harmonic values.

What would the art of painting have become had the painter been prevented by law from depicting anything which could jar the propriety of the prude?

The motion-picture to-day is giving the people what most of them want, but the creative artist is forbidden to show them things which might help them to want something more advanced. The screen is forbidden to inquire into life—to seek truth. It is condemned to use its full power to substantiate a given hypothesis; it is forced to argue toward the fixed conclusion that whatever is right—is; that our laws are perfect; our social system beyond reproach; that, from President to policeman, all officers of the law are without fault or flaw, and that to question the justice, or even the wisdom, of any accepted tradition is to align oneself with those "Reds" of which no mention whatever is to be tolerated.

The screen is entirely closed to the subjects of politics, religion, sociology, and economics; it is held strictly to the obvious and forced to iterate and reiterate old thoughts, old opinions, old ideas. And for this the blame must be placed squarely upon the shoulders of the public itself, for censorship could not last a month except by popular approval or through public apathy.

The alleged danger of a free screen is more imaginary than real. Naturally normal laws of public decency are neces-

sary to prevent abuses; but these laws are broad enough to protect the screen from the autocracy of the puritan. And the normal pressure of its vast audience is quite sufficient to guarantee that the makers of motion-pictures cannot stray too far from popular ideals without dire failure as a result. It is quite unnecessary to entrust public ideals to a committee who may interpret them as expounded by the firesides of their own prophylactic homes. It is far better that an occasional nuisance be seen and then eliminated than that the whole subject-matter of the screen, its mentality and its artistry, should be forced down to a common level of obvious mediocrity.

It is true that freedom of thought upon the screen may be dangerous. Any force which can have such enormous resultant effects upon the world is dangerous if misapplied. But Nature has provided a safeguard in the mental inertia of the mass. It is hard enough to make people think at all, and it is quite possible that the world might progress farther through a period of wrong thinking than it would through an equal period of no thinking.

The public is very slow to depart from its mental moulds. It has always regarded any new idea or philosophy with the utmost suspicion; and it needs no protection from those who might use the screen in an attempt to tamper with its beliefs or its morals.

Meanwhile the path of the new art is being made extremely difficult by those into whose regulating hands the public has delivered it.

One flaw in democracy is that bureaucratic government is frequently more tyrannous than government by tyrants who are experts. Democracy fosters the idea that official position implies qualification, instead of making qualification the reason of official position. It becomes an easy step from legislating matters of right or wrong to legislating matters of good or bad taste.

How much the screen could be used as a force to help people think, if it were only allowed to do so! What other medium has such power to reveal the races of the world to one another; to express the greatest of all international truths, that mothers are mothers, fathers are fathers, and

children are children all the world over; that mankind is essentially one race of many colors, and that all human beings are alike emotionally, humanly?

What good might be accomplished were the screen made an attractive medium of expression for men and women of ideas! How little the damage done by an occasional vulgar film can be compared to the harm of limiting the whole field to moss-covered tradition and moralistic platitude!

Why not let the public become familiar with new points of view, new ideas, even new aspects of accepted morals?

If the motion-picture can ever mean to the larger audience what the stage means to its smaller public, we must do away with the bondage which keeps forcing pictures down to a common level of thought.

No art can develop in bondage, least of all an art so dependent upon public support as the motion-picture. It is a democratic art and can only grow in freedom, and freedom means the right to be wrong, to make its own mistakes, suffer from them, and grow through them.

The motion-picture has too many friends who desire to regulate it—to reform it. They are largely of two kinds: those who call themselves “the civilized minority,” who believe that nothing can be art which is popular; and those who consider an art’s only justification to be education or moral uplift. They mean well, but even with the backing of various clubs, societies, and associations they are quite powerless to dictate or even to influence the taste of the general public, and it is the taste of the general public which is really the “big boss” of the screen. There is no appeal from its decision and no success without its approval. Picture-makers know this, and the producers themselves, if freed from bigoted bondage, would do more to improve their pictures than all the organized efforts of those “little groups of serious thinkers” who are striving so hard to make the screen safe for all who agree with their opinions.

The best way to help the movie is to let it alone. At present it is in the position of a child with too many nurses. Every one seems to know what should be done to the pictures, but no one seems able to tell us what should be done to the public.

Whatever is wrong with the movies is not primarily the fault of those who make them; the picture-makers are doing their best to obey orders, orders issued by the general public, which knows pretty well what it wants and insists on having it. The minority may scream, but its cries are drowned by the rattle of half-dollars on the glass of the box-office window.

For pictures must follow public taste

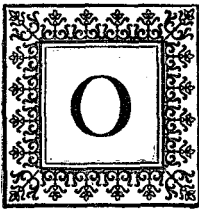
if they are to lead it; they must agree basically with public ideals before they can successfully suggest new angles of thought.

The service which the cinema is trying to give the public can be made truly valuable by freedom alone.

The American movie reflects the spirit of its people; it must be given liberty—or death.

Must We Send Our Doctors to the Almshouse?

BY FREDERIC DAMRAU, M.D.



ONE of the greatest of public misconceptions is that the practice of medicine is a highly profitable vocation. The average doctor lives in a house of respectable appearance, owns an automobile, and usually wears clothes of good quality. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that he is well-to-do.

The tradesman with the shifting scale of prices thoroughly understands how to handle the doctor who comes into his shop. He treats him as a man who can afford to pay. "Doctors make easy money, so here's my chance," is his slogan.

I have a friend whose wife takes great pride in introducing him socially as "doctor"; but when he accompanies her to purchase a fur coat or an evening gown, the astute little lady tells the salesman that her husband is a waiter. Then she is able to negotiate a substantial reduction below the asking price.

Few persons realize what actually takes place within the walls of the average doctor's home. They see him only in a professional connection, when his office must be showy, when his automobile must be pretentious, and when his tailoring must be perfect. These qualities are all essen-

tial to the physician's success. If he is deficient in them, his patients soon lose sight of his professional prowess and patronize a doctor in whose waiting-room they may be seen without jeopardizing their social prestige.

To obtain the degree of Doctor of Medicine is a costly undertaking; to maintain the establishment necessary to practise medicine is still more expensive. After graduation from high school, two college years are required to qualify the candidate for entrance to the medical college. Then follow the four years or more of grind and hard work, to be finished off by a hospital internship of from one to two years.

Full of ambition, the youthful follower of Hippocrates fills his waiting-room with superfluous chairs; they are seldom needed. The long vigil for the first patient begins. One morning a sickly looking man strays into the office, but he is only trying to sell the doctor an expensive system of medical volumes. On the next, a young lady enters and tries to obtain his subscription for some worthy charity.

In the meantime expenses accumulate, as they have a habit of doing. How are they met? Some doctors inherit money; others marry it; but the average doctor borrows it during the first five years of his practice,